

Traces of Grace

An Autoethnographic Exploration of Faith as Embodied Knowledge



Rita Isdal Cunningham

Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
University of Bergen, Norway
2021

UNIVERSITY OF BERGEN



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Year: 2021

Title: Traces of Grace

Name: Rita Isdal Cunningham

Print: Skipnes Kommunikasjon / University of Bergen

*May the words of my mouth
and the meditation of my heart
be pleasing in your sight,
O Lord, my Rock and my
Redeemer.*

Psalm 19: 14

Acknowledgments

Where to begin saying thank you to all those who have, in one way or another, granted me support and encouragement, on my long journey towards the completion of my PhD thesis? I start at home. First, to my family; my husband John and my eldest daughter Malene; thank you for accompanying me to London, to live for six months, while I was conducting my fieldwork. To travel back and forth between England and your job in Norway, as you did, John, to ensure our family's economy, takes its toll; I am greatly indebted. And being willing to start a new school as a 16-year-old, in a foreign country, takes courage; I am proud of you, Malene. To our two youngest children, Erling and Hannah, who were too small to have a say in the decision to move; thank you for your joyful presence, and for being the main 'facilitators' for our immersion into the family-oriented church environment of Green Forest that we became a part of. And for all the years since then, my dear family; thank you for your love and support in every way.

To everyone whom I met whilst in the field, who contributed to my work through welcoming me and my family into the fellowship, taking me to meetings and church services, small groups, and informal gatherings in private homes and cafés, who graciously shared from their lives with me, in interviews and conversations; I cannot begin to tell you how indebted and grateful I am to you all. This work is founded upon your contributions and willingness to let me participate in your lives. I hope I have done justice to your stories and perspectives, forgive me if not, and any misinterpretations, misunderstandings, or deficiencies in my text, I assume full responsibility for.

Regarding the part of my work related to the actual writing of the PhD thesis, I remain indebted to my faithful supervisor, John Chr. Knudsen. What can I say? You are the only one who 'fully' knows, what I have been writing all these years. As you would be the first to understand, words cannot express...the depth of my gratitude. So, I simply say, thank you, John, for always being ready to read my text, for believing in me, and through your feedback, always making me feel like I have something to say, and that I can do this! Your support has been invaluable.

I would also like to offer my gratitude to the Department of Social Anthropology and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Bergen. Thank you for your patience and the generous extension of my study rights, allowing for the submitting of my PhD thesis years after its due date.

Finally, to those of my friends who have read and given feedback on any of the earlier chapters, thank you! And to those of my friends who provided me with accommodation in relation to necessary travelling in Norway, thank you! No one mentioned, no one forgotten, but everyone deeply appreciated.

Halsnøy Kloster, 14.02.2021.

Rita Isdal Cunningham

Abstract

In my PhD-thesis I explore the embodiment of the Christian faith and spirituality, from the perspective of faith as an embodied knowledge, incorporating my own spiritual seeking in the endeavour to understand other people's spiritual seeking and experience of faith. What does it mean to seek God for a Christian believer? How does the phenomenon of seeking God manifest itself in the lives of different individuals belonging to the same fellowship? What does it look like when a church is seeking God and how does the church cater for the individual manifestations of seeking? These are among the questions that the present text investigates. One of the most essential markers of direction for me, has been the desire to grasp, and describe *what* it is, what *sense*, that invests an experience, an emotion, a reflection, an event, with an air of the spiritual. Within the church fellowship where I conducted my fieldwork, several people had become increasingly concerned with the issue of the spiritual gifts in church, especially the gift of prophecy. My search to understand the significance of the prophetic thus runs as a scarlet thread throughout my text.

The church at the centre of my inquiries is a local corps within the Salvation Army in London, situated in an area I have called Green Forest. The name I have given the church is Green Forest Community Church, GFCC for short, but often referred to as simply 'the church' or 'church' by its members. In addition to portraying this church and a number of its members, I also attended the charismatic meetings held in a big church in Central London, at Marsham Street, which a number of the members of the Salvation Army church in Green Forest regularly visited, during the period that I was in the field. Throughout my thesis, I share field extracts from the meetings at both Marsham Street and Green Forest. This context of actually and metaphorically travelling between two churches of apparently opposite and contradictory profiles, sets the scene for the explorations of the Christian life that my fieldwork offered. The travelling back and forth between different churches and different spiritualities also became symbolic of the interviews, discussions, and conversations that I had with people from GFCC, often weighing one church or one type of spirituality against another. Through negotiating different aspects of their Christian walk and faith, people drew a portrait of the Christian fellowship to which they belonged, coloured by their experience of how this fellowship managed to relate to their present realities of needs, hopes and desires. As such, people's portrayal of church also reflected their search for recognition, care, and direction.

The work that I present in my PhD thesis is a continuation of the work that I started during my master's thesis. When I came to London for my first fieldwork in 1998, I involved myself as a volunteer in the Salvation Army's work for people who were homeless. I was open about my own Christian faith and was welcomed into the Christian fellowship. On my second fieldwork, I engaged with many of the same people that I had met on my first fieldwork and continued to attend the church that I had become a part of back then. The theme for my master's thesis revolved around narratives related to the relationship between people's Christian faith and the motivation or conviction that had influenced their commitment to working for people in as vulnerable a life situation as being homeless (Cunningham 2003). My choice of subject related to my desire to discover the calling narrative that may have started and shaped the Christian life journey of people deeply involved in social work. The idea of a calling narrative still constitutes a foundation for my explorations in relation to the Christian life and is captured in my PhD thesis in the concept of seeking. *Spiritually seeking*, seen as the desire to seek God and live the Christian life, to know oneself and the plans God may have for one's life, is often framed by an experience of calling; having been called by God or seeking a calling from God. In my master's thesis, I related the concept of calling to the taking up of a particular type of work, a vocation. In my PhD thesis, the idea of calling also incorporates other aspects of life, such as people's understanding of themselves as well as God, suggesting the connection between a sense of calling and an existential dimension related to questions of identity such as "who am I" and "who is God".

These themes guided me through the field and through the writing of this text. Endeavouring to understand different aspects and contexts for the longing for the practicing of the prophetic, I ventured into a landscape of seeking God, encountering not only other seekers, but also my own seeking, needs and desires. The questions I asked others often reflected issues that related to my own personal life. One of the subjects that especially concerned me personally when I was in the field, was the biblical concept and phenomenon of grace. This subject will appear in my text throughout my thesis, signifying various aspects of my own spiritual seeking, as well as representing the interweaving between my academic and spiritual journeys, positioning my work within the genre of self-reflexive anthropology called autoethnography.

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1

The body seeking

*Faith is the assurance of things hoped for,
the conviction of things not seen*
(Hebrews 11:1)

Author in the text

In my PhD-thesis I explore the embodiment of the Christian faith and spirituality, incorporating my own spiritual seeking in the endeavour to understand other people's spiritual seeking and experience of faith. When I was writing my application for the PhD position, I dreamt one night that I was doing a PhD: I was going to write about people who were patients at the psychiatric hospital in the small, rural area where I grew up, focusing on the experience of being a patient at this hospital, from the patients' point of view. To avoid being associated with a person of authority by the other patients, I would have to be admitted as a patient myself and live amongst the other patients. The only problem was the question of what I should tell my friends and acquaintances 'on the outside'? Should I say that I was only admitted as part of my research, or should I let everyone think that I was 'properly' admitted, as a patient myself? The underlying sense in the dream seemed to suggest that it would be the latter option; accepting other peoples' perception of myself as a psychiatric patient, that would yield the truest experience of what it was like to be a patient in a psychiatric hospital. This option was clearly the most challenging choice to make, since in a sense it involved letting go of myself, letting go of the image of myself that I would have most preferred to present to others: Myself as sane, and in control of my life.

To me this dream seemed to bear a message concerning the actual PhD that I was planning, not because of its psychiatric theme, but because of the issue of personal involvement and visibility in an academic work. As I was formulating my research plan, the dream became one of the guiding voices in terms of the level of my own participation and engagement in the

field, as well as in my text. As I acknowledged the gentle bidding of the dream, I also encountered my fear. The dream made me aware of my fear of being personal, of being too personal, too private, and not knowing exactly where the line was. Perhaps it was even a fear of being myself. The fear of being too personal reflects a well-known fear from within the discipline of anthropology that has tended to associate textual visibility with the danger of self-absorption and the loss of sight of the culturally different other. Of course, as the anthropologist Ruth Behar points out, the anthropologist's visibility must be essential to the argument, lest it becomes a decorative flourish; the exposure of self is for drawing deeper connections between one's personal experience and the subject under study (Behar 1996). In this perspective, my fear of being too personal is understandable. From the prefaced pages of *The Golden Notebook*, Doris Lessing gently ushered me on, saying; "At last I understood that the way over, or through this dilemma, the unease at writing about 'petty personal problems' was to recognize that nothing is personal, in the sense that it is uniquely one's own. Writing about oneself, one is writing about others, since your problems, pains, pleasures, emotions – and your extraordinary and remarkable ideas – can't be yours alone. (...) Growing up is after all only the understanding that one's unique and incredible experience is what everyone shares" (Lessing 1971:13). Reading about other writers' self-involvement in their texts, like Behar and Lessing, have been important elements in my process of coming to terms with and justifying my own involvement both in the field and in the text.

However, although I found epistemological justifications to continue my work, I felt uncomfortable. It was as though there was a faint voice underneath the discussions about self-reflexivity telling me that I had left something out, that I was not yet at the core of the matter. As I dug deeper, underneath the surface, I realized that the most pressing issue was not whether to conduct a self-reflexive anthropology for its own sake, to justify the genre. What I came to acknowledge, was that the issue in the dream was not merely about textual visibility per se, but about a much more deep-seated issue, which also shines through in my dream. In my childhood and youth, perhaps even to some degree today, being admitted to the nearby psychiatric hospital was tainted by a sense of shame; it was almost like a taboo in the local community, made worse by the fact that 'everybody knew' about a person's hospitalization. By feeling that the dream was bidding me to accept the prospect of others' perception of me as a psychiatric patient, it was bidding me to face and counter a shame that I carried with me. I was fearful of revealing my true self, of being exposed, of coming out, of standing up, as nobody other than myself. The issue of fear in me on a deeper level related to shame. Particularly in relation to the writing of

my ethnography, I realized that my shame and fear related to my living of a Christian life and my openness concerning my faith in this regard, within an academic environment. In terms of the writing of my PhD-thesis, this was the object of my shame, that I needed to address to continue my work in the truest and most appropriate approach regarding my material.

This inner process of scrutiny thus coloured my ethnographic process by leading my enquiries towards the personal aspects of faith as a practice and existential perspective on life. Being true to my material came to involve offering the reader insight into my engagement in the field and make it a part of my plot to share glimpses into the faith formational processes that the Christian life involved for me. Not just because herein lay my shame, provoking my ‘academic’, yet real fear, but because it is a way to understand on an existential level what it may have meant and cost, for those whom I met, to be committed Christians. The desire to understand the existential depths of spiritual life is what in my view validates the choice to show in my text how I became grounded in the field. Not only as a pair of observing eyes, taking in that which moved before my retina; but with the full capacity of my body being in this world, interacting with my own questions of faith, as well as those of others.

My Christian faith as entry point

In many ways, my PhD-thesis is a continuation of my master’s thesis. When I first started planning the work for my Master, some ten years before commencing my PhD, I focused my anthropological interest around ‘the inner life’, using concepts such as ‘self-confidence’ and ‘insecurity’. My own experience of feeling that I sometimes belonged in the former category, self-confident, and that I at other times identified more with the latter, insecure, intrigued me. My first academic ambition was hence to write about these experiences and the contexts in which such experiences might occur, to move me closer to an understanding of my insecure self. However, finding a satisfying ethnographic context for exploring this inner landscape proved difficult with these variables, and I abandoned my ambition in its first outlook. A while later, I combined a growing interest in the connection between spiritual life and social work with my initial ambition of writing about the inner life, and suddenly a research plan, which could more easily be connected with a specific social area and a cultural group started to form. It was at this time, that the question of whether I was a Christian or not, had become urgent to me. I had grown up with the Christian faith and considered myself a Christian. In my adult life I had never, however, been part of a Christian fellowship, nor been interested in leading what I

felt was considered 'the Christian life'. I wanted to 'live my own life', which to me seemed different to 'the Christian life'. I had no difficulty stating to others in a conversation, for instance in the wee hours of a party, when conversations were light as the summer's breeze, that I was a Christian. In this manner, my faith was always present to me, at least as an intellectual awareness. Yet, for some reason, I more and more began to question how sincere I was in my claim to be a Christian. It was as though I felt a nagging awareness that my faith did not really transmit from my head to my lived life, or perhaps more accurately from my head to my body. I asked myself, did I really believe there was a God? Confirming that I did, why did he not matter more to me, influence my life more? I asked.

A number of Scripture verses from the New Testament were playing on my mind at this time, leading me to ponder the possibility of there being any 'practical and embodied truths' embedded in the words of Jesus. The first of these verses, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest", found in Matthew 11:28, made me wonder what kind of rest Jesus was talking about. Did his rest refer to a future 'other-life' in the presence of God in heaven, or did it represent an existential, lived possibility on earth, in life here and now? In the latter case, how and where was this rest to be found? Two other verses also captured me during this period, the first from Matt. 7: 12: "So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you (...)". The second one was from Matt. 25: 40: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me". I wondered what it would be like to live so sacrificially as to do to others what one would have liked for oneself. And the thought of doing for the least of men, as though doing it all for Jesus himself, inspired a desire to explore contexts where such scenarios might be played out. Thus appeared before my inner eye, the image of the uniformed Salvation Army officer, who not only stood on the street corner singing hymns, but who also bent down to greet and offer help to the homeless person leaned up against the wall beside him. In this way, the nascent spiritual awakening that I was experiencing at the time influenced the theme for my master's thesis, through the ensuing decision to write about the Christian faith of members of the Salvation Army. This choice also related to my desire to know more about the living of 'the Christian life' that I had rejected for so long, and to know more about what characterized a 'Christian life' deeply ingrained in social work. My interest and queries into the Christian faith, from a personal as well as academic perspective, was inspired by some phrases that I was well familiar with from some of my previous Christian

influences: I wanted to know what concepts like ‘living by faith’ or ‘living by grace’¹ entailed. My choice of theme for my master’s thesis reflects the start of my personal journey of moving from an intellectual awareness of faith to a more experiential understanding, where different elements of the spiritual walk was to become embodied in me through my own experience, inviting new perspectives and a new way of living my life.

As I have written these recollections and reflections into my PhD-thesis, I recognize that my interest in Jesus’ rest, referred to in Matt. 11:28, has resemblances to my interest in the concepts and experiences of self-confidence and insecurity. These were concepts inspired by my desire for and seeking after a state of rest and the secret of resting in a sense of security and self-confidence, a state of peace. Remembering my initial ambition in relation to my master’s thesis has brought back to me the continued importance of the concepts of ‘self-confidence’ and ‘insecurity’ for my PhD-work as well. These concepts continue to hold value for my work but have been ‘transferred’ into concepts encapsulating the spiritual dimension, through the notion of faith as the embodiment, to various degrees, of trust and confidence, not only in myself, but in God. Hence, through the concepts of self-confidence, insecurity, and rest, my work takes its vantage point in the inner life as the ground for the spirituality and Christian life that I wish to explore and describe. In retrospect, as my work is nearly finished, I see that a condition of feeling a lack of security and self-confidence in my own personal life at the time of commencing my master influenced what I needed and sought after from God, emphasizing the connection between the personal and the spiritual.

To show some of the steps of my understanding of various existential aspects of the Christian life, I will introduce, in the following subheadings, a few significant early events from my first fieldwork. In different ways, these events positioned me in terms of experiencing God in a more intimate way than I had before, through opening me up to a personal and deep-seated longing that I was not aware of beforehand. Through these events, my approach to the Christian faith started to change from an intellectual stance toward a more personal one, as God appeared as someone who not only watched me from above, but who also intervened in my life and was interested in doing so. The experiences I am about to share affected me on a deep personal level, formed the basis for my spiritual orientation during my first fieldwork, and continued to do so when I arrived to conduct my second. These incidents also represent my own encounter with the experience of the prophetic at a very early stage of my work. On an epistemological level,

¹ Å leva i trua eller å leva i nåden.

the experiences made me reflect upon what type of knowledge was invested in them, a knowledge that was already held by the others present, and led me to the process of thought, which years later culminated in a proposal for a PhD-position.

In a dry and weary land where there is no water

When I went to London on my first fieldwork in 1998, I joined as a volunteer at three different establishments of the Salvation Army that provided services for people who were homeless. I was working alongside people who were members of the Salvation Army, carrying different titles based upon the organisation's system of rank, and Christians belonging to other denominations, as well as people with no claim to any religious faith. Due to the focus of my thesis, I naturally spent more time with, and got to know better, those who were Christians. My first engagement as a volunteer was with a middle-aged female major in the Salvation Army called Jean, whom I started doing street work with, in the evenings. I had been open about being a Christian myself with her, without going into detail about the condition of my commitment. It was in fact the first time I had presented myself as a Christian to other people. Jean must have assumed that I belonged to a Christian fellowship in Norway, and one day she invited me along to a devotional gathering for those who were Christians within the work force. These devotions took place every Friday at the main coordinating office, where all the staff involved in the homeless services met. I accepted the invitation, thinking the meeting would grant important insights into aspects of the Christian faith that these workers shared. Unexpectedly, the meeting turned out to be less of a ground for observation, than for participation. I refer from my fieldnotes:

I had imagined a room with chairs in rows from back to front, myself sitting safely towards the back, taking in, observing the others, making notes. Instead, I found myself in a room with a big table in the middle and chairs around it, where we sat down, facing each other. I sat down next to Jean. We were a small group, seven women altogether. I had met four of the others briefly earlier, in an outreach centre in a different part of London, where they worked. A girl called Suzanne, whom I had met a few times before, was leading the devotion. She read Psalm 63 as an introduction. The first verse of this psalm, which I had never heard before, read:

*'Oh God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you,
my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.'*

Suzanne continued to read two or more verses of the psalm, but I did not really hear the words. After she had finished reading, she started to talk about how she believed this psalm could speak into the situation or reality of being involved in social work. Suzanne said she felt the psalm writer expressed a sense of desperation that we all, as helpers, could relate to, through the commitment to try to offer help to people in need. She urged us to bring our desperation to God, and to cry out to God for help through our own prayers, because without God the work would yield no results, she said. I could not grasp what she was saying after this, I could not link her message to the psalm, and I could not relate the psalm to the work situations. I could no longer follow her words, her trail of thought. It felt like fragments of words from the first verse she read were surrounding my mind, like multiple sounds from a surround system. I tried to concentrate, but Suzanne and the others seemed far away, and I an outsider in a distant land. A strange sadness crept over me, and it seemed to spread throughout my entire body. I felt immensely sad, without being able to understand why, since there was nothing within my circumstances to predict this condition of up surging tristesse.

Suzanne then asked us to sit together in twos and threes and pray for each other, and the sadness started to manifest itself in tears, equally incomprehensible to me, their owner, and impossible to suppress, however desperate and panic stricken the attempt. I succumbed to my tears, and although trying to keep my head down, I could not hide the stream gushing from my eyes or stifle the snuffles of my nose. I was sitting together with Suzanne and Vicky, a friend of hers from the outreach centre. The three of us forming a little triangle, I felt at least somewhat shielded from everyone's gaze for the time being. My two prayer mates could not avoid noticing my tears however, and concerned for my wellbeing, started praying for me and for my homesickness, knowing I was a foreigner. I am not homesick, I thought to myself. At the same time, there was an element of a sense of homesickness in me, in the emotional state of being that I was experiencing – although there and then, I could not determine what I was longing for. There was a strong sense of missing something in me, yet I did not know what I was missing.

On a social level, and hence on a methodological one, the experience at the devotions became a defining moment to me. In a weird sense, the incident, that had made me feel 'different' and 'out of place' in the actual situation when it happened, in the aftermath made me

feel part of a fellowship with the others, who claimed to have experienced similar emotional outbursts themselves. Some of the others, who had not been in the ‘prayer-triplet’ with Suzanne, Vicky, and myself, tried to comfort me after the prayer session had ended, by addressing the sense of shame it seemed they anticipated I would be feeling, due to having broken down crying in front of them. “Don’t be embarrassed!” one said, “I know how you feel; it happened to me once”, and another: “It just shows that you are open to God”. I understood these confessions as expressions of empathy towards me, regarding my suspected embarrassment concerning my involuntary display of emotion; they knew how I felt; it had happened to them too, and they wanted to tell me that it was okay. What exactly had happened to them no one said, or in what way their experiences resembled mine. My concern was in any case directed towards what on earth had just happened to me! The others seemed to think that my emotional display was really a good experience, because it showed them that I was open to God, and by this description they related the experience I’d had, to an ‘intervention’ by him. It was the first time I had been moved so deeply within a religious setting, and the first time the interpretation of one of my experiences, had so clearly been related to God by the others present. The others’ feedback also expressed an idea and belief often heard within Christian fellowships, that God looks to a person’s heart, and is interested in the innermost concerns of a person’s life.

On a personal plane, the words spoken from the psalm obviously hit me on a deep level. I must have felt spoken to, and I must have felt that the words from the first verse of the psalm were applicable to me. The meaning of the experience in terms of how the words in the psalm related to my situation, my mind did not instantly grasp. My body seemed to react almost immediately though, as if the sensory apparatus of my body responded independently of my understanding, as if finally allowing my soul to speak of a hidden sorrow. There must, however, have been a form of knowledge starting to grow from within the experience, quietly rising like the tide, of a presence, a certitude in my being, that I could only understand as God: An assurance and conviction, like the one referred to in Hebrews 11, that opened this chapter. Perhaps since the words from the psalm were not spoken by Suzanne with the intention of ‘transforming me’, I had been able to receive them non-judgementally at that time, as words genuinely spoken, the message of which a different part of me than my mind recognised and spontaneously responded to with grief. The incident came to represent my own distance despite my newly re-found faith, to God as a living reality. The new knowledge of myself that I eventually felt I had acquired, having been seen for *what* I was spiritually speaking; ‘thirsty’, or for *where* I was at spiritually; ‘in a dry and weary land’, in a way brought God to me as a

person and a reality whose presence in my life I needed and wanted to acknowledge. It was a knowledge of God as present in my life that I had not had since I was a child. Through this incident, I became aware of myself, learning something about how I was really feeling deep down. In another way, the experience made me aware of God as someone who *saw* me, someone who called me and pulled me closer. The experience constituted a turning point in terms of my understanding of God as reaching out to me, in turn encouraging me to reach out to him in a new way.

An element of appropriation

What happened to me at the devotions I have just described, was in surprisingly obvious responding to my desire to gain a better understanding of the Christian faith as experience and embodied knowledge. Through my spontaneous reactions to hearing psalm 63 read out at the devotions, I encountered the Christian faith as experience. The event was one of the first indications to me of a particular type of encounter experienced as a spiritual moment, where one had the sense of God's presence, and through which one arrived at the conviction that God was real and speaking through the experience. I later came to see that herein must lie the essence of what to live by faith or to live by grace involves, which were the 'grand expressions' of Christian living that had captivated me. The experience convinced me that God was not like an ornamental Buddha figure on the bookshelf, but a person, a living being whose presence acts, intervenes, inspires, embodies, connects, restores. It was an essential incident for my personal faith.

When I later came to the point of writing about this incident, it was the event as a revelatory moment of understanding, which took hold of my attention. By accident, I came across a section, in one of Søren Kierkegaard's books, where he seemed to address this kind of moment and encounter. Kierkegaard referred to the moment when a new understanding hits one, as an element of appropriation², an instance of acquiring a form of knowledge that brings inner conviction. In his book "The Concept of Anxiety" (1844), he likened preaching with art, in the same vein as Socrates considered conversation an art form. Kierkegaard's claim was that the preachers' conduct regrettably often resembled the sophists' way of argumentation, trying to convince the audience to accept a proclaimed truth by rhetorical means. Socrates, on the

² Tilegnelsens moment ("Begyret Angest" 1844)

other hand, asked people questions to encourage them to think for themselves, thereby allowing understanding to erupt from within the person, as well as allowing personal understanding to count. The perception of knowledge or understanding as erupting from within the person at a specific moment resonated with me. Kierkegaard thus gave me a vocabulary through which I could understand what had happened to me at the devotions, as a new form of knowledge dawning, being birthed, within me. Rather than seeing knowledge as merely passed on intellectually, as a ready-made product, his perspective emphasized the significance of personal experience, and related the acquiring of knowledge and understanding to instances of personal revelation. Another aspect of the kind of revelation described by Kierkegaard, which became visible through my experience at the devotions, was its grounding in the present moment; signifying the happening of an insight or understanding about what *is*, or about what and whom you *are*, in the tense of here and now. This perception on an unexpected insight erupting from within a specific moment managed to grasp what I felt had happened to me.

I watched a film portraying the poet Allen Ginsberg's writing of the poem *Howl* a few years ago – many years after the devotion-experience. In this film, Ginsberg spoke about the experience of being moved or arrested in the moment, by for instance a painting, a piece of music, or a poem, etc. The eruption of this form of knowledge was in Ginsberg's view like being spoken to by an eternal truth; like receiving a prophetic word that on a deep level applied to your life. The word 'prophecy' in this respect did not indicate a prediction of something that was going to happen in the future, but the expression of a truth that had value in the experience of here and now, shedding a light of truth on the present, revealing present circumstances, for a particular person. What Ginsberg said in the film resonated with my own experience from the devotions. The words that had moved me from the psalm had come to represent a truth to me about myself, about a spiritual condition of being in a 'dry and weary land where there is no water'. In this respect, my emotional outburst at the reading of psalm 63 constituted my first experience with the influence of the prophetic as a certain form of knowledge residing in everyday life. Epistemologically, the wondrousness of the episode caused me to linger with the moment, with moments like these, as important objects of study in my pursuit of grasping embodied faith as a form of knowledge.

Faith as embodied knowledge

My exploration of faith as a knowledge emanating in and from the body in responding with the world here and now, has been inspired by the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his phenomenological method (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Whereas Kierkegaard inspired my subject matter in terms of ‘circling in’ the moment when something happened, phenomenology offered a broader framework of a philosophy of being, through its perspective of the world as always ‘already there’, as an inalienable presence, before reflection begins. Phenomenology states that we are in the world as bodies, not minds separated from the body, and that the subject’s awareness of his or her own reflections primarily reveals him or her in a historical situation, i.e., in the world. Phenomenology is not mainly interested in what the world is as an idea, but seeks the essence of the world, i.e., looks for what it is as a fact for us, in our experience of the world, emphasizing that any thematization is always based on our being in the world (Merleau-Ponty: 1962: xiv-xv). Phenomenology offers an account of space, time, and the world as we ‘live’ them and seeks a description of our experience as it is ‘when it happens’. Phenomenology studies essences, for example the essence of perception or the essence of consciousness. Understanding humankind and the world requires that the investigations start in the ‘facticity’ of these essences, according to Merleau-Ponty. All our knowledge of the world, scientific knowledge included, is gained from a subjective experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless, Merleau-Ponty says: “All my knowledge of the world is gained from my own particular point of view or from some experience of the world” (Ibid:viii). We cannot separate ourselves from the world and obtain knowledge of the world as mere detached observers: Who we are, our history and the way we are positioned in life’s various situations and contexts, will always colour our vision and our knowledge of the world. Of course, considering the nature of our existence in the world implies the significance of interpretation, of analysis and of language in *rediscovering* the world. “Our linguistic ability enables us to descend into the realm of our primary perceptual and emotional experience, to find there a reality susceptible to verbal understanding, and to bring forth a meaningful interpretation of this primary level of our existence” (Ibid: 188).

Drawing out elements from what may be referred to as primary experience, involves selecting aspects from this totality of which to focus one’s attention. The problem with language, which is a part of this process, is according to Merleau-Ponty, that it causes a separation between the world as the ‘real’, and the descriptions of this world. Merleau-Ponty

refers to language as the field of ideality, in contrast to the field of facticity, which is the world at the instance of our engagement with it. He holds that our existence is too tightly held in the world, to be able to know itself as such at the moment of its involvement. When one experiences the world from the 'natural attitude', one takes the world for granted, without thinking about and analysing it (Merleau-Ponty 1962). In this mode, we encounter the lived world as it is to us at that specific moment, taking in its images, fleeting sensations, plays of colours and light, in the stream of consciousness. Catherine K. Riessman, compares this engagement to the feeling of being at one with the world at this point (Riessman 1993). Merleau-Ponty claims that we cannot subject our experience or perception of the world to philosophical scrutiny, without ceasing to be identified with that act of positing the world, or without drawing back from our commitment with the world at that particular moment. Being engaged in a commitment with the world, actively engaging with the world in some form, without judgment, is hence different from stepping back to gaze at the world and ourselves or others in the world. As soon as we stop to consider our experience and our perceptions, we have moved from the fact of our existence to considerations of its nature. This procedure enables us to think about experience, and not just live it. What we draw from an experience is therefore not the experience itself, as it is in its fullness, but a meaningful interpretation or way of relating to the world. Merleau-Ponty's description of experiencing the world from the natural attitude is a useful perspective for understanding the facticity and reality of a religious or spiritual experience, like my experience at the devotions, as a primary and non-judgmental perceptual and emotional experience, preceding a secondary analysis. Religious experience can thus be related to both as facticity and reality, i.e., as it is as it is lived, and as ideality, i.e., as it appears later when reflected upon. William James, in his famous work on religious psychology, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, said about the sense of reality surrounding religious experience: "It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call 'something there' (Ibid 1902:58). James considered experience the backbone of religious life, rather than theological philosophies, creeds and theories, and the fruits of such experience to the individual was what interested him the most.

To judge and decide academically or scientifically what the object of faith really is, i.e., whether it points to a divine being or not, is of course impossible, due to the nature of the spiritual realm as out of reach of deduction or scientific investigations. Being neither a philosopher or a theologian but an anthropologist, what is relevant to me is the description of lived life in relation to a perceived and experienced beyond. Whatever 'it' is, it *is*. Whether 'it'

is in the ‘real’ world, or in an imaginary one, it *is*. In my text, this is the pattern of description and analysis of religious experience that I will adhere to.

Facticity and ideality

An example of the moving between the facticity and the ideality of the world has been given by the anthropologist Hanne Müller. Exploring embodied and intellectual knowledge, Müller describes them as contrary, yet complementary forms of knowledge and learning. By using her own inner experience as the main anthropological gaze and voice, hence method, she shows how engaging with her whole body enabled her to move beyond what she considered the limitations of intellectual knowledge, due to the latter offering a mere external gaze (Müller 1996, 2000). By using the senses of her body, a different kind of knowledge emerged, emanating from her inner experience, which she subsequently termed an inner gaze. Müller describes this process as the way knowledge sinks itself into the body, becomes embodied, and once mastered, becomes tacit, and hence difficult to account for. Marcel Mauss makes a similar point in his article “Techniques of the body”, where he describes the emergence of the practical knowledge of the body through repetition. He talks about the techniques of the body, manifested for instance through different cultures’ different swimming techniques. Referring to the body as man’s first and most natural instrument, by and upon which education and adaptation to the bodily techniques required by any given society rest, Mauss suggested that even the mystical states related to various religious habits at the bottom were techniques of the body (Mauss 1934). Both Müller and Mauss provide phenomenological accounts of the journey of knowledge, from the body as being in the world until the mastery of various bodily techniques.

Müller’s work aimed at establishing some kind of meeting point or intersection between intellectual and practical knowledge. Grasping the process of embodiment through language before the knowledge became tacit or transferring the tacit knowledge of a practical skill into language, was essential to Müller. The word tacit she uses in the same way as Michael Polanyi, in his work on tacit knowledge or understanding as a form of bodily knowledge situated beyond what words can express³ (Polanyi 1966). According to Polanyi, we can know more than we can

³ Polanyi’s enquiries focused on aspects of our knowledge that we hold tacitly, but cannot always put our finger on verbally, like the inability to describe the physical features of a particular human face, which we still recognize as known to us when we see it.

tell. In Müller's own work, she set out to explain the experiential steps in a process of learning how to weld, to become a welder, but found that the instructor tacitly holding this knowledge was unable to tell her exactly how she should do it. She therefore had to simply throw herself into the practice of welding, immersing herself in the action of it and learning by doing. By turning away from the external gaze and towards her own inner experience, Müller learned to weld through relying on a process of association that went on in her own body. She recognized the forming of a bubble appearing in the melting metal, which reminded her of the bubbles appearing in a pan of eggs at home just before reaching its boiling point, allowing her to estimate the remaining time. Upon asking the instructor if the appearance of the bubble may indicate the right moment for moving the rod, the instructor was then able to recognize and confirm this observation as correct. The bubble functioned as a marker for Müller to make an essential step in the process of learning to weld. Müller showed, through her meticulous depiction of how she, without previous experience and without the aid of an existing vocabulary for explanation, learned how to weld through attending to the language of her body at the instant of her engaging with the world, which at that point consisted of welding. The bubble became a shared sign, as language is, but in this case an iconic rather than verbal sign.

One of the reasons for my interest in Müller's account of how she learned to weld, in part through the sight of a bubble as an analogy to her private experience of the bubble, is related to her reference to the bubble as a sign, an icon, through which Müller found a language of representation for her experience. By relating the knowledge of the body to non-verbal signs, Müller was referencing a terminology used within semeiotics, by Charles Sanders Peirce, who developed a comprehensive classification of signs, which he applied to his perspective on reality. It is not my intention to employ the various sign types from Peirce's semeiotics in my work, but I wish to borrow from him the usage of the category of firstness, a category which Müller also refers to, because this category can be closely linked to sensory experience as it first appears or can be felt, in the body. Previously in my text, I have referred to the concept of Merleau-Ponty's primary experience, which I find can be likened to firstness. As I have previously shown, the first impression of a sense experience and how such an experience finds interpretation within a religious framework is part of my field of interest in this thesis. Valentin Daniel, whom Müller leans on for her use of sign theory, has made extensive use of Peirce's semeiotic sign theory in his own work, and I will refer to his work to explain the elements of semeiotics that I am interested in here (Daniel 1987). Daniel outlines this theory by referring to Peirce's definition of a sign: "A sign, or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody

for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign which it creates I call the *interpretant* of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its *object*” (Ibid: 14). As we see, a sign is always part of a triadic structure where an initial sign creates an equivalent sign in the mind of a person, i.e., the first sign’s object, which can then be related to its interpretant. Because the sign comes first, it is often named a First, whereas its object is called a Second. In a similar vein, the interpretant can be related to as the Third. The sign itself can be of different kinds and qualities; it can be an artefact as well as an event. The object needs not be a material thing, but a meaning towards which one’s attention is directed. The interpretant is the locus of interpretation, “that by which a sign is contextualized, that which makes signification part of a connected web and not an isolated entity” (Ibid: 18). Firstness represents the first sign, also called a representamen, by Peirce.

It is this process of becoming aware of something as a sign of ‘something else’ so to speak, and the journey towards an interpretation that I am particularly concerned with, since sensory experiences and their interpretations are part of my data material. Some of these experiences may appear to be very sudden and have a strong impact on the body, like my own experience of a sense of homesickness at the devotions described earlier. Because the sense experience I had could be associated to homesickness, it was natural that it was this feeling which led me to an interpretation or establishing of a meaning for the experience: namely that my sense of homesickness was linked to a longing for God. One could say that the experience of my tears was a prophetic truth or sign pointing to a state of my inner life or relationship with God at the time, making it clear to me where I was standing in relation to him. Strong sensory experiences in emotions and thoughts may seem to appear suddenly and out of nowhere. Sense experiences can however most often be traced to a context, which we are able to know and understand. Establishing this context is what I am trying to do by way of sign theory. As Daniel says, Firstness designates that category of pure quality or even a pure qualitative possibility considered in abstraction from everything else, like my experience of sudden sadness at the devotions. Secondness represents sheer existence, brute fact, or actuality, that my breaking down in tears, as if being homesick, may have been a representation of. Daniel goes on to describe Thirdness as a gentle force that mediates First and Second, bringing them into significant relationship through its interpretation. The sense of homesickness, or the association made between the sadness I felt and the fact that I was far away from my home, was what prompted me to think of my sadness as an expression of homesickness, which due to its lack of

relation to an actual desire to return to Norway, I related to a desire and longing for something I associated with another home and another father, namely God. It was as if that ‘gentle force mediating First and Second’, making me aware of my longing for God, became felt and understood by me as the voice of God, a sign of God’s presence in my life.

Becoming aware of God through different kinds of experiences that can be said to represent a First or Firstness, can be seen as moments in which God comes to be felt as real to a Christian. But for this to happen, there needs to be a third correlate in the process of signification which makes the perceiving of an event as spiritual and God-related a likely interpretation. The context of a faith community where there is openness towards relating to sensory impressions as part of a communication with God, may or may not be essential in this process of mediating meaning through language and culture. For me, the others’ conceptualization of what happened at the devotions as both God’s intervention, as well as me being open to God, certainly played a part for my integration of the experience. The issue of understanding and creating meaning thus also points to the importance of language for being able to grasp and interpret the world. For me, embarking on a journey where I wanted to grasp the essence of living by faith, of living by grace, involved starting to speak a new language, like learning the movements of a new dance, where listening to what the body was saying guided my steps. Like an intimate dance partner, the voice of my body became an intuitive part of the rhythm and momentum of my life. The knowledge of myself brought to me through my tears at the devotions surpassed my pre-understanding of what ‘living by faith’ really meant.

I had never imagined that seeking God would open me up to my own inner landscape in this way, and that knowing God on a deep level was intuitively interwoven with knowing myself. Paying attention to the knowledge of my body subsequently became a natural part of my research process. The comparison of spiritual life with a dance came forth through an article by Trine Ørbæk, a dance instructor within higher education. Ørbæk investigated the personal and embodied learning process that she went through in relation to her recent separation from her husband. Presented as a turning point analysis, she showed how her experience and understanding of this event changed when narrated in new ways, in her case through dance. By using improvised movements in her dancing, rather than choreographed ones, she discovered and explored how her life experiences were grounded in her body. Through dancing, her body expressed what her intellect could not at the time and allowed her to dare to go deeper into the specific experience of the world that she as a body suffered at that particular moment in her life, but that she had been unable to verbalize, and therefore did not pursue (Ørbæk 2013). Like

Hanne Müller, Ørbæk focuses on the language of the body, as well as using her own body as the main narrator and gaze, drawing on the message retrieved from the body for the direction forward. These aspects are elements in a phenomenological investigation. In my case, my fellow seekers and I were all as if engaged in a dance, listening with our bodies, minds, emotions, and spirits for the voice of truth that would enlighten our walks and guide our steps. In this quest, we were all journeying together, and my task as an anthropologist has been to understand some of the moves and insights influencing the rhythms of the others, through engaging in the ‘dance’ myself, trying to understand the impact and significance of the sense of the presence of God for the maturing of the Christian life.

Purpose and calling

The experience I had at the devotions created in me an awareness of the reality of God. Despite the empirical data I have provided, the experience is of course not scientifically verifiable since science is not the frame of reference. Rather, the frame of reference for my experience is provided by the Christian faith and the fellowship of believers. Within this frame of reference, my experience may be termed an ‘initiating experience of spiritual renewal’, representing as the term suggests, the start of a new dimension of the Christian life. According to Christenson, the editor of a book on charismatic renewal in the church, an experience of this character often has far reaching consequences for most aspects of a person’s life, the continuous dimension of which may be called ‘life in the Spirit’ (Christenson, Simonnes & Engelsviken 2018). This concept is another way of phrasing ‘to live by faith’ and ‘to live by grace’. Another aspect of such experiences highlighted by Christenson, is their influence on a person’s active Christian life, in terms of service. Interestingly, the next stage of my spiritual journey from my first fieldwork, involved an encounter that directed me towards new ways of living my life, not only spiritually but also socially. Picking up some loose ends, I will go back to my childhood to bring with me some threads that may shed some light on this process, before I start describing the encounter I am focusing on:

When I was growing up, I would sometimes borrow books from my grandmother, who was a devout Christian woman. These books were mainly about missionaries in other countries, who had received and responded to a calling from God. I was captivated by the experience of being called, and for a period, I would reply to the question of what I was going to become when I grew up, by saying missionary. I never particularly wanted to go to Madagascar, though

– where it seemed to me God called most missionaries to go. As I grew older, I let go of the idea of becoming a missionary. As I was writing the next incident that I will share into my text, my earlier preoccupation with the idea of being called to become a missionary came back to me. I recognized that there were aspects of calling and purpose present in the experience from my first fieldwork, in terms of how I saw my personal story and myself afterwards. The incident happened shortly after the devotions, in connection with my involvement as a volunteer at Gethsemane Gardens, one of the outreach centres run by the Salvation Army. At this point, I was getting to know some of the people who worked there better, Suzanne in particular being one of them. I refer the story from my fieldnotes:

Suzanne finished work at the same time as me one day, and we decided to go for a coffee. After a short walk – that must have taken double the amount of time one would expect, due to Suzanne stopping to share a few words with rough sleepers sitting in doorways along the street – we finally sat down in a café, ready to enjoy a chat over our large lattes. The conversation soon took a turn towards Suzanne’s faith and some of the visions for her work. She told me how she felt she had been called into this line of work. One day many years ago, she had walked along the streets of London, noticing all the people who were rough sleepers and homeless, and she exclaimed to God “God, what are you doing for these people?” The answer she felt coming back to her was “What are you doing?” Since then, she had been committed to the work. She told me she was looking to set up a house for homeless people and live there herself, as a way of teaching people from the streets to live a more structured and established life. She said she believed that God wanted her to set up this house, although the thought of how few people she would actually be able to help, sometimes discouraged her, as did also the fact that realising this project seemed to take a lot longer than she had anticipated. One reason for why she still considered the house project as part of God’s plan for her, she related to an image that had surged up in her mind; it was the image of a funnel, filled with loads of people. After considerable effort, a few of them managed to squeeze themselves through the funnel. Suzanne said she understood the image to mean that although those pushing through might be few, they were nevertheless important. To her, the image represented God’s response in terms of the doubt she felt concerning the project, and she experienced it as God telling her to move ahead with the plans. She was at present on the lookout for a house that could serve this purpose, she said. Before the realization of the house plans though, she thought it would be a good idea to first share a house with Christians like herself, who would commit themselves to praying for

the establishing of the house for homeless people. She said she had asked one of the other girls at work, Vicky, to move to the same area as her and share a house with her. – Surprisingly to myself, I felt a slight sense of envy at the mentioning of the shared house, feeling mysteriously drawn to the thought of living in this house myself.

Suzanne went on to talk about a prayer group that she was part of, with a number of other people from her church. One evening quite recently, they had prayed specifically for Suzanne's house project, and in this prayer time Aaron, one of the others, had felt that he had received a prophetic word from God for Suzanne. "Aaron said that he felt that the next six months would be a time of preparation for me, and that God was going to send people to help me!", Suzanne shared, with a glimmer of expectation in her eyes. When she said this, something strange happened in me; it was as if I was seized in my chair, in the moment, by a sudden warmth washing over me, spreading throughout my body from a source deep within. I felt spontaneously struck by what Suzanne had said about God sending people to help her – as if a form of lightning had hit me. It was such a strong, bodily sensation that I was immediately stopped, pulled out of the listening mode that had been my role up until that point in the conversation. The incident did not stop me from listening, but caused me to listen to another voice, so to speak, a voice unfolding in my body, telling me that I was one of Suzanne's helpers – or that I at least wanted to be one of her helpers.

Seized in the experience, my expression must have given me away; one of wonderment at what had happened, as well as an increasing sense of light-heartedness that made me giggle, feeling unburdened and cheerful. Suzanne smiled at me. "What is it?" she asked me. I told her what had just happened. It felt strange to more or less say that I felt I might be meant to be involved in her project, but that was how I felt. Suzanne listened and then said that it was good: "This could mean that there is sense in my plans". We had to break up at this point, since I had to go and do street work with Jean in another part of London. I felt a little shaken up, and at the same time happy and uplifted. It felt as if I had been given a promise that I would become a part of something, and this sense of promise filled me with expectation and a sense of purpose. I could not wait to tell Jean about what had happened to me! However, all she said was "Is Suzanne still thinking about setting up the house? I thought she had let go of that project. I don't agree with it"! With the feeling that rather than sharing a 'defining moment' in my own life, I had revealed 'sensitive information' about somebody else's, I was firmly brought down to earth again.

In contrast to the experience of being moved to tears at the devotions, where my awareness became directed towards a new understanding of God as real and myself as needing and wanting him, the café-experience and its successive events brought me into a framework where I had a particular role to play, other than the role of anthropologist. The feeling that I would be a helper of Suzanne, gave me the sense of a particular purpose, although how that would pan out in terms of my role, I did not know. In retrospect, knowing what I now know, it seems the calling may not have been to enter a different type of work than the one I was engaged in already. The experience at the café established me in a new context, the context of a new relationship that would grant me many of the insights I was looking for in terms of my academic as well as personal interests. More than being directed at the rendering of a specific service however, my role as a helper to Suzanne, in the end seemed to be a pure gift: The gift of friendship between Suzanne and myself.

House- and church fellowships

A few months after the experience with Suzanne at the café, I moved in to share the house she had talked about that day, with her, Vicky, and another friend called Debrah. It turned out that the house they were sharing had a fourth bedroom that also needed a lodger. Because of what happened at the café, Suzanne thought of me. I happily became a part of the shared house, with the intention of aiding Suzanne in accomplishing her vision, whilst at the same time immersing myself deeper into the field. I started to attend the services at Green Forest Community Church, the Salvation Army church to which Suzanne belonged. I soon felt that I became a part of the church in my own right, and not just as a visiting friend of Suzanne. The way I was welcomed into the church, and the new friendships that I made through the house- and church fellowships, became vital settings for the formation of my faith in the months that followed. I even ended up extending my fieldwork in order to spend more time with all the people I had started to get to know, which I felt I needed in order to learn as much as possible about the social work, faith and life in a Christian fellowship. For all our good intentions however, the house never came to be the hub of creative ideas aimed at establishing a set-up for a house for people who were homeless. We were too preoccupied with our own concerns for that ambition to withstand the pressure of four different personalities with different issues coming together to live under one roof. Still, in retrospect I greatly value the house fellowship and the friendships with my flat mates. We shared the real life of joys and sorrows, just like any other dysfunctional family. It

was great! As Suzanne summarized her insights from that year: “At least I have realized that living together with people who have just come off the street, may not be a very good idea!” Suzanne thus abandoned her intention of sharing a house with formerly homeless people, and her vision started to take a different form. In this respect, I guess one could say that we were ‘helpers’ of Suzanne, however in a different way than intended and presumed!

For me, the house fellowship continued to teach me what I had already started to acknowledge on the evening when I met up with Jean, a few hours after my ‘being-struck-by-lightning-moment’ with Suzanne at the café: Jean’s dismissal of Suzanne’s vision taught me that people have different ways of creating meaning from and hearing God speak through lived experience. What moving to Green Forest and becoming a part of the house fellowship and the church provided me with more than anything, was a context for my spiritual seeking. The feeling that I had experienced during the café visit with Suzanne, that I was meant to be one of her helpers, had connected me to her house fellowship as well as to the church in Green Forest, giving my seeking of God a direction and a sense of purpose. As it turned out, just like with Suzanne’s vision to her, my perception of my role changed during the year of ‘house fellowshipping’ in Green Forest. During this year, my friendship with the others in the house and especially Suzanne deepened, and we came to rely on each other as more than mere flat mates. We were each other’s best friends, we were ‘soul-sisters’, and we were spiritual companions.

The new context that I found myself in after moving to Green Forest also dramatically changed my understanding and expression of my faith and Christian life. From my former conception of a Christian as someone who owns up to her faith in the sense of ‘public’ confession, as a ‘coming out of the closet’ experience, after I moved to Green Forest, I gradually took on a new orientation in my faith. Faith became the horizon for my understanding as well as my experience; it became the main colour in my space of vision, and informed my thinking, my feeling, and my action, as experiences of what I felt were divine encounters inspired a search for the meaning, or the purpose of different experiences. My understanding of what it may entail to believe in and trust in God, was changing towards a more intimate and personal relationship with God, greatly inspired by the spiritual life of those around me, in particular Suzanne’s way of pursuing her faith. Following my new way of relating to God, I felt that life became full of adventure and expectation, in the discovery of ‘hidden’ meanings with the potential to speak to me personally. What I did not know at the time, was the fact that by internalizing this manner of creating meaning, I was entering into a type of self-imposed spiritual lifestyle of constantly

searching for meaning and purpose, finding after a while that seeking God in this way was actually quite exhausting. Under the next subheading, I will describe the process through which my awareness of a condition of fatigue came to fruition.

Fatigue and reorientation

It seems that my first fieldwork coincided with a stage in the life of the church in Green Forest, where there was a particular focus on seeking God, both on a personal level and in terms of the vision of the church. Unbeknownst to me at the time, this process of seeking a more intimate and embodied way of relating to God seems to have corresponded with a bigger movement happening within the worldwide church cross-denominationally. In a conversation from my first fieldwork, one of the church members told me that the evangelical focus of the church in Green Forest was part of a bigger charismatic awakening that had originated in the USA in the 1960s. Tanya Luhrman, who writes about evangelical Christianity in the USA, points in her work to a change in what people wanted from religiosity and faith dating back to the 60s. In this period the desire to experience the presence of God became more pronounced within evangelical and charismatic churches, emphasizing the experiential dimension of people's spiritual life as increasingly important (Luhrman 2004, 2005). This turning towards a more charismatic spirituality has become known as the charismatic renewal, and it took place within all the big historical churches, first in the USA, thereafter, spreading to Europe and other parts of the world. The charismatic renewal was a movement that happened within a variety of different churches, but which never aimed to break away from the theological and clerical traditions to which each branch of the movement belonged (Christenson, Simones & Engelsviken 2018). According to the person I spoke with at the time, the charismatic awakening within the Christian church was still very much taking place at the end of the millennium, and within the context of the Salvation Army, the church in Green Forest stood out in terms of its openness to certain of the charismatic expressions of spirituality, particularly the prophetic. I had never experienced a charismatic church before, and it took me a while to realize that Green Forest was indeed characterized as such. Not being all too familiar with church life outside of Sunday school and various Christian youth activities, as well as the odd meeting and happening at the local chapel (bedehus) at home during my upbringing, I did not know what to expect in a Christian congregation. The fact that one could hear from God through words of knowledge and experience a sense of his presence, I did not link to a charismatic spirituality. I just lived it

and liked it. However, as much as I appreciated the excitement of the Christian walk that I had embarked upon since moving to Green Forest, there was also another side to my newfound spiritual life and the ways in which I understood and pursued this life. My new focus carried with it the possibility to become too eager and too concerned with ‘hearing God’ in my body as an all-consuming perspective, which seeped into every area of my life and being, swallowing me up, separating me from the life that I had lived before. Being ‘new’ in the pursuit of Christian living, my new way of life had brought its own challenges.

A return to Norway for Easter gave me the opportunity to see my life in the field in a different perspective, yielding new insights through a more distant look back. I went home to my parents for the Easter holiday. My dad and I went to church one day, the ‘good old’ local Lutheran, protestant church of Norway. It was years since I had been to church in Norway, and the experience of this church was very different from what I had grown used to over the past six months. The members of this congregation were mainly older people, solemnly attentive to the service. The atmosphere, as I experienced it, was one of apparent separateness, not of fellowship, as nobody seemed to engage with each other or acknowledge each other’s presence through a nod of the head, a smile, and eyes meeting eyes. It felt a little odd, if not wrong, to me. Yet maybe it was this silence, this absence of engagement with others, which allowed the space for the experience that I had next. As I went to sit down, after having gone for communion, walking down the aisle to my seat, passing all those to me grave looking faces, wishing the service were livelier and the people friendlier, a sense came over me: I felt so distanced from Jesus! I had a vague feeling of not managing to genuinely grasp him, despite all my seeking after him, and despite the inspiration from the fellowship in London. My focus on him seemed to be lost so quickly, and I had to pull myself back into an attentive mode. For a split second, I suddenly felt so tired of trying to seek him in the right way; I felt tired of trying to anticipate the will of God. I thought to myself that I could not take it any longer; I needed a break. The image of a child’s confidence flashed before my eyes, and I thought that this was what I needed; to put my trust in God, the way a child unquestioningly trusts its parents, rather than trying to understand everything in the attempt to predict meaning and to gain control, to do the ‘right thing’. Sitting in the church pew that Easter day in Norway, without being surrounded by people whom to me represented the particular way of seeking God that I had grown accustomed to over the last months – I suddenly felt alone, as though I only had myself to rely on – my old self – or perhaps...*only* God? Stripped of the sense of other people’s attention and possibly affirmation, I felt robbed of any sense of fellowship. However, in this

church environment, nobody expected anything from me but that I sat still and listened. Perhaps because of the absence of the people from the church in London and their social knowledge of me as a person eager to seek God, I lapsed into recognition of a different condition, simmering underneath all my efforts to live the good Christian life. One of exhaustion and fatigue from constantly trying to improve myself, to become a better person, and not the least, closer to God. Through this personal revelation or acknowledgement, I realised that my interpretative, possibly ‘control-freak’ approach had turned into a Ping-Pong quest of trying to establish what was to be considered a sign from God, and what was not, all for the sake of making the right choices for the living of my life. It was my first religious crisis, which according to Martin Ski follows the maturing of the spiritual life of the self (Ski 1979). In my case, I believe it was the perception of grace, which was at stake and in need of renewal.

The Easter holiday became a much-needed space of retreat, providing a window out from the life that I had been practicing over the past six months, a way of life that despite all the excitement and joy, suddenly felt somewhat entrenched. By returning to my home place, I felt that I became ‘my old self’ again. I saw whom I had become in the field in a different light, recognising how certain aspects of my spiritual walk had led me to ‘walk away’ from the more laid-back version of myself, who would have worried less about what was ‘right’ according to a Christian perspective all the time. The experience in the Church of Norway, fuelled with the spiritual extraordinary through being revelatory and bringing awareness, pointed to my efforts to become something other than what I already was. The experience felt like a ‘jolting back’ to myself and to my life, to the person I had been but perhaps had left behind. It felt as if the spiritual life I had tried to live in London was the crossing of a river by walking on stepping-stones. Because I was so afraid of falling, falling out of the will of God, I had kept looking down to watch my stride, in order to get over quicker, instead of lifting my head and taking in other aspects of the world around me as I walked. The insight that came to me in Norway made me raise my head a little, and take in other aspects of my surroundings, making me aware of a different perspective of and approach to faith than the one of seeking spiritual victory in terms of hearing God accurately and acting accordingly. Becoming acquainted with a spiritual lifestyle so different from how I had previously conceived of and lived my life, had made me stretch for a new and what felt like a more exciting way of experiencing life and faith, where ‘taking action’ in some manner was a vital ingredient. I had stretched for and made an effort to live this new life with a perfection that nearly wore me out, because at heart, I had never been the ‘active’ type of person. I was more of a ‘contemplative’ one. The Easter experience invited

a different view both of myself and of God: God, whom I felt had revealed my fatigue to me, obviously knew how I felt deep down and cared enough to communicate this to me. Concerning myself, I could see that I had understood my new lifestyle as involving thoroughgoing scrutiny of meaning and self in a lifestyle focused on ‘doing’ – and that this life was too stress enhancing for me.

In retrospect, I think the story of my fatigue might represent one of the pitfalls of the Christian life, which was discussed among the other believers at times, during my first fieldwork. Within the Salvation Army, due to all the rituals and regulations, it was considered a danger to be making the Christian walk into a strategy for *doing*, focusing on one’s own actions towards God, rather than a perspective on *being*, focusing on receiving life from a gracious God. Ironically, I seemed to have had more grace towards myself before entering my ‘new Christian lifestyle’, than in the first period after.

Grace as rest

A new understanding of grace features as the concluding element to the story of my fatigue. During that Easter time, a few days after the church visit, I was reading the Bible, at the same time as I was pondering upon the discomfort that I had experienced in relation to trying to be ‘a good Christian’. I was reading Paul’s letter to the Romans, and I came upon chapter 10, where the verses from 8-9 suddenly stood out to me: “*But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: **That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved**”* (Romans 10: 8-9, my emphasis). After I had read these words, I thought to myself, *I am doing these things*, and suddenly I was filled with relief. It was as if the insight dawned upon me, that what this meant for me, in my life here and now as a believer, was that I was okay. The only spiritual victory worth fighting for had already been won by Christ over 2000 years ago, through the sacrifice of his own life and body for the sake of humanity’s reunion with God. Therefore, really, I could relax; I was good enough; no need to stress, trying to reach salvation, reach God, through the perfecting of myself. What grace as experience offered me, at that present moment, was a haven of rest and repose, impregnated with a peculiar power of quietening the worries of my body. In hindsight, I see that the rest that I had been craving at the onset of the work on my Master, was nothing short of the grace and mercy of God of which the Gospels speak, and so without knowing it at the time, both through

my personal process and through the process of my work, I had been moving, in existential terms, in the direction of grasping and receiving grace. In terms of theological concerns, the understanding of grace was always what drew my attention the most.

Huge as the realisation of my salvation as a grace to me through Jesus Christ had the potential to become for the living of my life and for my faith and confidence; it was lost again. There were still times when grace seemed out of reach to me, as though it resided in the room next door, only to vanish as soon as I entered, regularly allowing me to slip back into the habit of earning grace, the habitus that I was, after all, most imperceptibly resident in. There remained a difficulty in managing to grasp and capture the grace, the ultimate love that the gospels portray through the story of Jesus in my own body and not merely as a text, i.e., to embody the sense of total acceptance and reconciliation with God in my subjective human body. My spiritual walk thus incorporated a perpetual exercise in losing sight of grace (Jesus), losing my rest and starting to act, only to find it (him) again. What remained as a constant since the epiphany at reading Romans was, however, the awareness and conviction of grace through Christ as the most vital, radical, and unchanging aspect of Christianity.

Working on my PhD years later, my conceptualization and understanding of grace as a haven of rest, a sense of acceptance and reconciliation with oneself and God, stood before me as the innermost purpose and core of the Christian faith. Grace as rest, whether seemingly fleeting at times, was always there in the background, for me to receive, again and again, when I awoke to its ever-present call. The impetus of this seeking of grace, of love, of wholeness, as a way of life, as a process, immersing me in situations and moments providing forms of embodied knowledge, has driven my text, and moved it forward. Embodying, incorporating, internalizing, and incarnating grace surely signified the highest existential meaning and worth to the individual believer? I pondered. In the same vein as repetitive traumatic *experience* may create *expectation* of trauma, which again may create a sense of *reality* informed by trauma, would it not be possible to exchange grace for trauma? Or at least invite God in to reside alongside trauma, affecting it by his grace? Could seeking God and the presence of God be the process through which grace may be experienced, over time expected, and gradually allowed in as an ever-growing part of reality grounded in rest? Instrumental and simplistic as my reasoning may seem, this thought process was fluttering at the back of my mind, as a question rather than a research formula, as I pondered the essence of faith and as I entered the field for the second time. Jumping ahead now, to the stage of writing post-field, my pondering upon grace and a random online search for books on it, one day led me to Tilda Norberg's book called

Consenting to Grace, with the subtitle *An Introduction to Gestalt Pastoral Care* (Norberg 2006). This book became a response to my ponderings regarding grace versus trauma, or simply grace in relation to life's reality of the shifting seasons of suffering and sorrows, peace and joy, and the intermediate phases of ordinariness.

Norberg starts her book, which includes an autobiographical account of how she found her vocation of becoming a joint Gestalt counsellor and a Methodist pastor, by referring to a terror she experienced at the age of 16. Waiting in the airport lounge for her parents to return from a trip, she watched as their plane crashed and exploded right before her eyes. Her parents and the rest of the passengers were instantly killed. Listing the terror, nausea, and merciful numbing shock seizing her body at this instant, Norberg then shares, in her book, an encounter with Jesus, happening in the midst of the terror inside of her and the shrieks at the airport. Through this encounter, Jesus, whom Norberg claims to have seen with her physical eyes, repeated over and over, in an audible voice: "Don't be afraid; I'm always with you." Describing the mix of conflicting emotions that she went through in that moment; terror and peace, horror and joy, dread and ecstasy, shock and certainty, Norberg then concludes: "Finally, deep peace emerged dominant in this emotional firestorm, and then a strange and inexplicable joy. (...) I also knew with certainty that he (Jesus) would always be with me, just as he had promised. And, since the shock and agony of seeing the still-burning plane had certainly not gone away, it was also clear to me that this promise did not mean that I would have a trouble-free life, but that Jesus would always be there." Norberg's book is firmly grounded in real, lived life, and the relationship with Jesus that she describes throughout the book is founded upon the perspective that Jesus does not necessarily take away all pain, but through Norberg's experience his presence with the sufferer in the pain yields relief, and sometimes healing. She describes the transformative experiences in her own life as a movement of grace. Norberg says that her recognition, of peace and joy existing alongside terror and suffering, became influential for her later choice to work with trauma survivors as a counsellor, and as a pastor invite Jesus into the worst moments of people's lives, with their consent. Norberg's perspective on Christ as a companion in people's lived lives, resembled how many of my participants had expressed their relationship to Christ. Although I am not describing people within a context of counselling, like Norberg, I have often found her reflections helpful for my understanding of my own material and will borrow her perspectives from Gestalt Pastoral Care⁴ when I find it applicable.

⁴ Gestalt Pastoral Care is the name Tilda Norberg has given to her ministry of Gestalt counseling and Christian healing.

Perceptions on grace

My journey into a more embodied understanding of grace as the most essential aspect of the Christian faith and walk involved learning to relate to biblical concepts regarding for instance piety and holiness, not through preconceived ideas, my own or others, but through the internal gaze, as living realities rather than intellectual possibilities, in the lives of the people I met and my own. But first, these concerns led me to inquire into the concept of grace from a perspective of church history.

In the dictionary, the word grace is described as “a manifestation of favour, especially by a superior” (www.Dictionary.com: 07.09.2011) or an act of grace as “favour, goodwill, something freely given, not taken as a right” (Hornby 1974: 374). These definitions underline that grace is a favour given, not as a reward or a merit, but as a gift. Christoph Schwöbel, Professor of Systematic Theology, says that within the Christian tradition, the concept of grace sums up the relationship of the triune God with creation. According to him, the Old Testament interprets grace as God’s motive for the election of and covenant with Israel, expressed in his faithful maintenance of the covenantal relationship, and by a gratuitous gift of affection, mercy, and compassion. Grace also includes God’s forgiveness for the violation of this relationship by man. The fundamental manifestation of grace in the Old Testament is the *torah*, the law given in the covenantal relationship. In the New Testament, the definitive manifestation of grace is found in Jesus Christ, revealed through Christ’s crucifixion, death, and resurrection, which harbours the atoning power of liberating humanity from bondage to sin and death. Making atonement⁵ for every wrong in the world, Christ’s sacrifice made man’s reunion with God possible: The reconciliation of imperfect with perfect love. This action is what the Bible calls justification of the sinner, through which redemption is brought. Grace understood in this way encompasses according to Schwöbel both universal and personal dimensions, in so far as it includes the whole of creation and its history, as well as constituting the renewal, transformation and perfecting of each individual person. In the New Testament, Christ has thus become the content and medium of God’s grace, as opposed to grace in the Old Testament, which was obtainable only through following the Old Testament law, which was God’s voice to his people (Schwöbel 2000).

⁵ Compensation, amends, penitence, punishment, reparation, recompense...

Although God's ultimate expression of grace in the New Testament is linked to Christ's sacrificial act on the cross through which man's salvation⁶ depends, different churches have however interpreted grace in different ways, especially in terms of man's role in grace and hence for salvation. Throughout history, the interpretations of the significance of conduct or action have varied over time, and between different church denominations, meaning that the question of 'Christian behaviour' is closely related to varying concepts of grace within different traditions. Schwöbel corroborates this perception; "Christian doctrine, worship and life are shaped in all their dimensions by the way in which grace is understood. Since the concept of grace determines our understanding of divine action and its relationship to human action, it is a highly contentious concept. The history of Christian doctrine and pastoral practice could well be written as a history of debates on the interpretation of grace" (Ibid 2000:276). The Catholic Church for instance, emphasized human co-operation as a preparation for grace and salvation (Torrance 2000). Their view of grace rested upon God's promise to reward through the sacraments, as well as through the efforts of the pious soul. The Catholic Church thereby encouraged voluntary acts of devotion for salvation, as well as endorsing the tradition of papal indulgences, which was a means for people to 'buy' their way out of purgatory, in a way buying grace (Cameron 2000). In the 16th century, this tradition led to the schism between the Protestant and the Catholic Church, as the reformer Martin Luther, seen as the founding figure of the Lutheran churches, opposed the tradition of indulgences (Collinson 2000). Luther considered the indulgences an abuse by the church, made possible because of the Catholic belief in the human co-operation in grace. Luther believed that one cannot earn grace, it is freely given; grace is God's work alone, humans cannot contribute anything to their salvation, apart from trusting in God. At the heart of Luther's doctrine of justification, there is hence a precise distinction between God's work and human action. It is through the work of- and faith in Christ that the sinner is considered justified before God in Luther's perception, and the Reformation theology on justification thus rests on three 'onlies'; by grace alone (*sola gratia*), by Christ alone (*solo Christo*) and by faith alone (*sola fide*) (Schwöbel 2000).

⁶ The Bible teaches that if there is to be reconciliation between man and God, there needs to be atonement for the sin, for the imperfections that causes separation between man and God. In the Jewish tradition, this atonement was accomplished by sacrificing flawless animals, as depicted throughout for instance Leviticus, the third book in the Old Testament or the Torah. This atonement applied to the Jewish people and those who converted to Judaism. When Christ, according to the New Testament, gave himself as a flawless human sacrifice, the atonement for sin applied to all of humanity.

In my mind, churches representing a view of grace relying on human behaviour had possibly contributed to a mind-set of constant attempts at self-improvement. The dividing lines between churches holding to a more 'Catholic' perception of grace and those leaning more towards the Lutheran perception, proved to be less clear-cut than my minor education in church history suggested, however. According to Trond Enger, Professor of Theology and Religious Education, a development in piety grew forth within the Christian environment from the 16th until the 18th centuries, originating from a reform movement within the German Lutheran church. What bound different strands of pietism together, was a personal experience of God known as rebirth, the consequence of which being commitment and growth in individual holiness (Enger 2000). Holiness was thus a goal for the pietist Christian walk. The pietistic movement heavily affected how the churches presented grace and salvation as closely related to a personal growth towards holiness, putting the emphasis and the responsibility on the individual. In terms of the concept of grace, the necessity of a continuous growth towards holiness in one's personal Christian life, was strongly emphasized (Schwöbel 2000, Torrance 2000)). Pietism put its stamp on church life throughout the Lutheran world, and outside of Germany especially influenced Scandinavia. The pietistic movement can also be traced to the Salvation Army, as the movement in Anglican England found expression through the Puritans and the Methodists, the latter from whom the Salvation Army has its roots. In a general sense, the pietistic movement became translated into puritan ethics and lifestyle, which affected the whole of western society. Lifestyle concerns were thus not only a matter of interest for the Catholic Church. Within the Salvation Army the focus on growth within their perception of grace, is also witnessed, for instance in the articles of faith, and the doctrines of the Salvation Army contain a strong focus on discipline in terms of how a Christian is expected to live his or her life. To become a soldier within the Salvation Army for instance, a contract of eleven commitments, also called articles of war, or the soldier's covenant, involving a number of lifestyle requirements, has to be signed (Begbie 1926, Coutts 1997, Rader 1998). To me, such commitments and requirements seemed to put an oversized focus on lifestyle, and the responsibility for salvation on the individual, rather than grace gratuitously given by God.

Holiness and wholeness

The Christian life is sometimes referred to as the holy life, or life of the holy, and the word 'holy' may be translated as 'perfect'. As I expressed through my encounters with church history

and different concepts of grace, Puritanism and holiness ideals provoked a sense of resistance in me. I believe I was intuitively resisting the command to be perfect, which I had associated with the command to be holy. In my living of the Christian life and in my seeking of God, which took a new course during my first fieldwork, I harboured a subjective and personal need to understand grace as embodied knowledge rather than intellectual. It was as though my entire inner being was desperate to ‘appropriate’ grace, but my efforts to ‘earn’ it through pursuing the Christian life, as ‘a good girl seeking God’ to become more ‘holy’, had been meagre nutrition for my soul. The fulfilment of and resolution to my personal need for grace, I had not found in a religious lifestyle seeking perfection, seeking to do ‘everything’ right. Experiencing the grace of receiving the revelation of my salvation of no effort of my own, as I was reading Romans, constituted a moment of receiving the rest that I believe Jesus referred to in Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”. In other words, these Scripture verses encouraged me to leave everything to Christ, all my worries and striving regarding my life and my salvation. It seemed a completely different perspective on holiness than how I was used to conceive of it, and I felt strengthened in my conviction of how specifically puritan Christian beliefs and ideals might hinder a spiritual orientation and embodiment of realizing the love of God. I was not fully aware that I was thus entering a very thoroughly debated theological issue concerning teachings on holiness and justification. I was walking in convictions provided through my encounters with the world I was living in, rather than the in-depth study of theology, proceeding as the social anthropologist that I was, immersed into her field. I have decided to keep it that way. Finally, what I did come to realize to the defence of holiness, was that rather than project all my negative connotations into the concept, I needed to rephrase and ask, from a perspective of experience, what qualities of faith or of the knowledge of God were invested in a lifestyle choice of pursuing ‘holiness’. What qualities may be invested in the life of the authentic pious person, the ‘committed Christian’, who through a more ascetic lifestyle expresses their seeking of God in terms of *lived life*? Without realizing it at the time of my first reflections upon holiness, I had already found my answer in a book that I discovered at the end of my first fieldwork, in the autobiography written by St. Thérèse of Lisieux (St. Thérèse 1996), who, as a punch of irony to me, was a Catholic.

St. Thérèse was one of the sisters at the Carmelite convent in Lisieux in France from 1888-1897. Becoming terminally ill at the age of 24, she was asked by her elder sister, who was also the prioress at the convent, to write down her childhood memories. Through these memoirs, St. Thérèse’s mission became the publication of her writings, in which she expressed her ‘little

way', her teaching, as she had lived it out in her own human experience. "I feel that my mission is about to begin, my mission to make God loved as I love Him, to teach souls my little way". Asked what this little way was, Thérèse answered: "It is the way of spiritual childhood, the way of trust and absolute surrender". What Thérèse was referring to, was a condition and orientation in life of surrendering to God in everything, desiring his way rather than her own, and trusting in God above all. From the first pages of the book, I was totally captivated by the heart and spirit of Thérèse's longing for God, which was always full of love and joy. Thérèse referred to herself as 'a little one', wanting to speak through her words to other 'little ones'. I identified as 'a little one' myself, allowing the words of Thérèse's descriptions of spiritual childhood to enter deeply into my heart. I was not aware of this fact when I read the book the first time, but Thérèse is describing the way of holiness, through her way of love, trust, and absolute surrender to God. A few extracts from the book shows the poetry and love with which St. Thérèse lived and wrote her life:

"Springtime story of a little white flower written by herself and dedicated to the Reverend Mother Agnes of Jesus: It is to you, dear Mother, to you who are doubly my Mother, that I come to confide the story of my soul. The day you asked me to do this, it seemed to me it would distract my heart by too much concentration on myself, but since then Jesus has made me feel that in obeying simply, I would be pleasing Him; besides, I'm going to be doing only one thing: I shall begin to sing what I must sing eternally: *"The Mercies of the Lord."*

"This is the mystery of my vocation, my whole life, and especially the mystery of the privileges Jesus showered on my soul. He does not call those who are worthy but those whom He *pleases* or as St. Paul says: God will have mercy on whom he will have mercy, and he will show pity to whom he will show pity. So then there is question not of him who wills nor of him who runs, but of God showing mercy."

"I wondered for a long time why God has preferences, why all souls don't receive an equal amount of graces. (...) Jesus deigned to teach me this mystery. He set before me the book of nature; I understood how all the flowers He has created are beautiful, how the splendour of the rose and the whiteness of the lily do not take away the perfume of the little violet or the delightful simplicity of the daisy. I understood that if all flowers wanted to be roses, nature would lose her springtime beauty, and the fields would no longer be decked out with little wild flowers."

“And so it is in the world of souls, Jesus’ garden. He willed to create great souls comparable to lilies and roses, but He has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets destined to give joy to God’s glances when He looks down at his feet. Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be.”

“Just as the sun shines simultaneously on the tall cedars and on each little flower as though it were alone on the earth, so Our Lord is occupied particularly with each soul as though there were no others like it.”
(St. Thérèse 1996: 13-14)

Upon rereading Thérèse’s autobiography, I felt as though she was speaking directly into the situation of my misconceptions of holiness, appealing to a deeper state of understanding in me. I found in Thérèse’s text that the walk of holiness is not about asceticism for its own sake, as it had appeared to me, but about nurturing a personal relationship to God, where one seeks to hear and understand his voice and will for the very particular contexts of one’s own life and being, not for one’s own ‘perfection’, but out of his love. A small irony that had appeared in my pursuit of holiness or wholeness, confusing me at first, was the encounter of my own sense of insufficiency, attacking my self-esteem in its first blow. Continued upon as a spiritual journey, however, grace gently ushered me through the broken, scattered pieces of self, towards an esteem of divine proportions, un-conditioned by the efforts and successes of my self-perfection, reliant instead on the grace of God. At some point, I cannot remember when, only that it was after my first fieldwork, I came across the passage from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew, where he requests perfection from his followers: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). Variations upon this verse can also be found with the wording “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2). In the concordance the meaning of the word perfect in this context is explained by wholeness (Bibelen Ressurs NB 88/07: 2011), or by being wholehearted (Bibelen 1978/85: 2000). Both these concepts refer to a whole and undivided love for God and for one’s fellow human beings, as exemplified through the verses from Matt. 5: 43-48⁷. The call for perfection is thus

⁷ “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy’. But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt. 5: 43-48)

understood as a call upon the believer to act in love in a wholehearted manner towards every person.

The words wholeness and holiness are etymologically related, and the word holy derives from the same root as whole (Cresswell 2010). Mary Douglas also draws the conclusion that holiness is exemplified by wholeness. In her famous work *Purity and Danger*, she shows how the demands for purity in the Old Testament is related to the demand for order. One is not to mix different classes of objects, because it leads to disorder and confusion. Following up this thought, Douglas mentions various examples of behaviour classifying either holy or unholy acts, with a reference to order: “Pursuing the idea that the holy is order, not confusion, we recognize that the list promotes lawfulness and honesty as holy, and objections and fraud as the opposite of holy. Theft, lies, false testimony, (...), all kinds of divisive enterprises like speaking badly about the deaf person (all the while smiling at him), at heart hating one’s brother (whilst speaking kindly to him), these actions represent clear antagonisms between the existent and the apparent. (...) Being holy means to be whole, to be one; holiness is unity, integrity, perfection both in the singular individual and in the species” (Douglas 1997: 67 (my translation)). References to holiness as wholeness, related to undivided love to God and one’s neighbour, coming from a pure heart, can be found throughout the New Testament. Holiness in the Early Church, characterized through the ‘saints’ in the local churches, was defined as ‘purity’, ‘wisdom’ and ‘innocence’, witnessed through “a holy life consecrated into the holiness of Christ, lived out in the mutual love, fidelity to God, and hope for the Kingdom (of heaven) which is the foundation of the church” (Davies 2000:302). There is a stark contrast between the New Testament perspective on holiness and the general notion of holiness, which developed in the post-biblical period, which was bound up with the dominant ascetical and spiritual ideals of the day (Ibid 2000). Holiness as wholeness, wholeheartedness, order, unity, and integrity at once become more timeless and present to the lived moment, independent of cultural and historical boundaries and limitations.

Wholeness is a central concept to the Gestalt approach, which very simply put, assumes that each person’s being is constantly stretching toward healing and growth. Tilda Norberg points to the perception within Gestalt theory that there is an innate wisdom encoded into each person, guiding his or her way toward uniquely individualized wholeness (Norberg 2006). The word ‘Gestalt’ roughly translates from German as ‘an organised whole’, and Gestalt theory accordingly looks at the interdependent parts that make up a particular human being’s situation, constituting a ‘whole’. The growth towards wholeness is expressed through the body as needs

emerging, one by one, where the most important need will be experienced as urgent⁸. The term homeostasis describes the state in which every need is satisfied, and the person is at rest – until the next need arises. All the interrelated parts in the process of searching for wholeness, be they physical, emotional, social, or spiritual, come together in the drive for homeostasis. Norberg, uniting Gestalt with Christian Spirituality, relates the idea of the search for wholeness as inbuilt in us, to a perspective on grace as built into our human condition, not in terms of a search for ‘human perfection’, but in terms of a call towards wholeness as a gift granted. In her words: “Gestalt recognizes emotional and physical healing as a natural process, and a Christian perspective says that the Holy Spirit is intimately and personally involved in this process. Put another way, human nature compels us to strive toward wholeness, and God’s nature offers ways for this healing to occur. I have come to believe that Gestalt Pastoral Care invites nothing less than cooperation with the great ongoing Christian story of creation and redemption”, she says (Ibid 2006: 26).

After reading Norberg, my mind pondered the thought that if my whole being was yearning for wholeness in every area that was broken, and grace as a need was inbuilt in me, then grace must also be a process, rather than only a once in a lifetime treasure found at the moment of salvation. Within this perspective, my resting in grace had to be temporary, if I continued to be in a process of growth, since complete wholeness remained unattainable. If homeostasis signified the state in which every need is satisfied and the person is at rest – until the next need arises – there would throughout my life, appear blockages to my growth process, indicating natural obstacles in my being’s stretching for healing. Norberg thus offered a perspective on my sense of feeling the loss of grace, that I referred to earlier⁹. Acknowledging this fact as a condition of life itself, also offered, in its own peculiar way, rest. My seeking of grace, both as a concept to understand and as a phenomenon to experience and embody, was at the same time a seeking of the presence of God as love, and a yearning for wholeness in my life.

⁸ An example may be the death of a loved one, which brings forth the need to grieve the deceased. The impulses pushing forth from inside the body may be seen as a stretching of the whole being toward resolution of the pain. In the case of someone trying to avoid their grief, trying to avoid crying, for instance, this need remains unresolved. Such unresolved needs are called unfinished business within Gestalt.

⁹ My articulation ‘losing grace’ must not be misread as a perspective upon salvation; I refer to a sense in my body, not a belief that I could lose grace in terms of salvation.

What is faith?

As I described at the beginning of this chapter, my personal Christian journey started with questioning the authenticity of my faith, pondering upon some of the words of Christ from the New Testament. This recollection brings me to the question of what faith is, or what it shall mean to me in this thesis. I opened the chapter with a phrase from Hebrews describing faith as ‘*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*’ (Hebrews 11:1). To me this definition of faith points to believing in and having confidence in something that cannot be verified by sight or any of the other senses, being certain of something one does not know by the common means of knowledge. In this respect faith remains a mystery. An example of this mystery of faith is expressed in *The Confessions*, an autobiography of thirteen books, written by the church father Augustine, bishop of Hippo from AD 397-430. In a small piece of text from this work, Augustine reflects upon the insufficiency of the senses in providing all our knowledge of God, as he endeavours to understand how it is that he can know God and have a sense of union with him:

“But what am I loving when I love you? Not beauty of body nor transient grace, not this fair light, which is now so friendly to my eyes, not melodious song in all its lovely harmonies, not the sweet fragrance of flowers or ointments or spices, not manna or honey, not limbs that draw me to carnal embrace: none of these do I love when I love my God. And yet I do love a kind of light, a kind of voice, a certain fragrance, a food and an embrace, when I love my God: a light, voice, fragrance, food and embrace for my inmost self, where something limited to no place shines into my mind, where something not snatched away by passing time sings for me, where something no breath blows away yields to me its scent, where there is savour undiminished by famished eating, and where I am clasped in a union from which no satiety can tear me away. This is what I love, when I love my God.” (Augustine 1997:242)

In this quotation from *The Confessions*, in chapter 10, Augustine points to traces left by sense-impressions received through past experience, finding that his knowledge of who God is cannot entirely be explained by experience. Later in the chapter, Augustine points to aspects of his memory – or what he calls *memoria* – that cannot have been deposited there by any sense-experience, such as his intuitive recognition of the principles of mathematics. Augustine comes to believe that the soul is in habitual contact with the world of intelligible truth here and now, meaning that truth is available not only through past experience, but also through the present.

The perception and belief that God is in the present equals Augustine's theory of illumination, through which Augustine describes the realm of truth that the mind is capable of knowing, and this is how he explains how the mind can have an inner knowledge of God (Ibid 1997: 26). Whilst portraying God as *something limited to no place*, there is a perspective of the present in Augustine's text. Grounding the knowledge of God in the here and now, yet nuancing this knowledge by emphasizing the fact that sensory experience alone does not account for the knowledge of God, Augustine leaves the mystery of how he may know God intact. What remains is the fact of his relating to God as a reality.

This reality in which God is perceived of and accepted as present, is part of what I am relating to in my thesis. In this respect, it is irrelevant what I as anthropologist or Christian may judge the belief in a beyond, or the experience of the beyond to be *per se*. Neither God's existence nor his non-existence can be verified or falsified, and it is not for me to explain faith or God in this text. The more important question for me can therefore not be what faith *is*, but what faith is *to someone who has faith*, i.e., faith as present, as lived. Reading about the way Thérèse lived her life seeking to surrender to Jesus in all things reminded me of the spiritual life of the people whom I met in the field. Through sharing my Christian walk with my closest friends there, I learned about their longing to capture the whisper of God concerning their personal circumstances, seeking, and heeding what they felt was his counsel. My anthropology reflects my journey towards God as a person, as my work and spirituality moved from trying to understand faith and God, to gradually become more turned towards relating to God as a person. This journey is what ultimately makes it possible for me to better understand and describe psychological, social, and spiritual aspects of what it meant to be a Christian, the way my friends in the field endeavoured to.

2

A different story of church

*Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders
and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.
All the believers were together and had everything
in common.*

Acts 2: 43-44

As I said in chapter 1, in my PhD-thesis I explore the embodiment of the Christian faith and spirituality, incorporating my own spiritual seeking in the endeavour to understand other people's spiritual seeking. In the previous chapter, I highlighted my individual and personal experience related to the onset of a life of faith or the Christian life, which I started during the process of the work on my master's thesis. Given this previous journey of rediscovering my faith through an experiential and body-centred process, for my PhD-thesis, I wanted to understand more of the phenomenon of faith as embodied knowledge. The connection between the personal and the spiritual dimensions of life played itself out and entered my awareness when I was on my first fieldwork. However, the idea and understanding of this intricate link did not fully mature until the work on my PhD-thesis. As I became more acquainted with the context of the fellowship, i.e., the Salvation Army church in Green Forest, to which many of the people that I met belonged, my focus expanded. My gaze was moved from the individual's personal experience and seeking of God to the incorporation of the dynamics of existing within the framework of a fellowship, sharing place with many others of different, yet equally convicting experiences. I realized that what I had been writing towards all along, without always fully understanding my material, was not only the individual and his or her embodied faith, for its own sake. Seeking God within the framework of a wider Christian fellowship meant focusing on the relationships and the aspect of relating, to oneself, to God, to one another and to the fellowship.

When my second fieldwork started, I was still in a position of seeking, although at that point I had several years' experience of journeying with faith behind me. My personal seeking

at this time related to a sense that I was missing something in my life that I could not quite define, and it felt as though there was an existential recognition awaiting me, which would be crucial for a sense of fulfilment in my life. I was still looking for a sense of assurance, not only of who God was, but also an assurance of who I was. In terms of faith, I think I was seeking a depth, a space within me where God and I could meet, a space where I could be brutally honest and yet totally accepted. Seeking God or being spiritually seeking have been key words for my circling in of my subject matter. At times when I have hit a stage of confusion as to what I was writing about, I have reminded myself that my explorations started out in the experience of seeking God and the desire to understand what such a journey involves. Early on in my second fieldwork, I was not fully aware of how central my own seeking would become to my work, since I was not entirely aware of what I was seeking. All I knew when I returned to Green Forest, was that I had changed. The sense of my spirituality as well as the sense of belonging to a tight Christian fellowship had changed. For some inexplicable reason though, I seem to have believed that the people and fellowship of my old church had not. Yearning to get back and continuing the story of my spirituality and sense of fellowship from where I left it when I moved from Green Forest the first time, I soon learned that the story line had changed also for many of those who had once been my friends. There was a different story unfolding within the fellowship of church, than the one of spiritual excitement and fulfilment that I was expecting to find. This ‘other story’, in a sense ‘forced itself’ upon me, soon becoming an important part of my interest and focus in the field. As I gradually became aware of, many of my participants’ spirituality was not always characterised by a sense of fulfilment. And as I had experienced, this fact was problematic to others too, and led to various means of reflecting upon the issue of a sense of lack, as well as attempts at alteration of the situation. The theme of this story, that in so many ways expresses itself in my text, is ‘relating’.

In this second chapter, I explore the issue of relating to church through certain aspects of the experience of belonging and the experience of feeling estranged to church. I start by focusing my attention on what I felt unfolded in my body, as I took part in different settings related to the Christian fellowship. This highly subjective process, then widens out towards a gaze including the others who were engaged in the church fellowship. I identify two orientations connected to relating to church in this chapter. The first orientation relates to the issue of ‘how to enter in’ and asks questions about ‘what’ one is trying to enter in to. The other orientation depicts almost the opposite, the experience of not feeling a part – and tries to understand what this experience involves and what responses may be related to it. These orientations will be

visible currents in my text throughout my thesis. Before immersing myself in this material however, I will draw a picture of the church in Green Forest that I was looking to become a part of again, as this church had appeared to me on my first fieldwork.

Green Forest Community Church 1998

The church that I started to attend for the first time during the early autumn of 98, was a corps within the Salvation Army (SA), situated in a locality about 25 minutes out of central London. I call this place Green Forest and the church Green Forest Community Church (GFCC). Most people who were members of the church often referred to it as merely ‘church’, and so will I. Thus, whenever I use the noun church without an article, I mostly refer to this church. Of course, ‘church’ was referred to with an article as well, and the context will show whether the reference was to the church in Green Forest, any other particular church, or the church as a term for the worldwide Christian church in general.

When I first came to Green Forest and started attending the church, I participated in a course called ‘Roots’, which was aimed at newcomers to the church. In the course, we were given a booklet written by the founders that gave an insight into the church’s vision and values, beliefs, history, and goals. The information about the church that I present here, is mainly drawn from this booklet¹⁰. The church in Green Forest had been formed in 1994, only a few years before my first arrival. The church was founded by a group of young people who originally had belonged to several other corps within the Salvation Army. Some of these people had been involved in the youth work within their former churches but had experienced a decline in the number of young people attending. I have been told by several people who were involved in these early events, that there was a growing sense of disillusionment with the SA amongst them at the time. There were different situations within different corps, which caused a sense of dissatisfaction with the existing church structures that the founders felt. The Roots booklet reports a growing sense of discontent which culminated in a desire to do something new. A group formed, which consisted of young people from different corps with similar desires to see a change. As they saw it, they faced the choice of either breaking free from the SA altogether, or forming something new within the frames of it. In 1993 the decision was made to start a

¹⁰ As this booklet was written by the founders of the church, with the name of the church on the front cover, I will not be able to list this booklet in my bibliography, for reasons concerning anonymity.

youth club in the old Salvation Army hall in Green Forest, where there had used to be a corps in the old days. A non-alcoholic bar for young people was set up, which soon attracted a large following among the local teenage population. This work grew, and by mid-1994 had progressed from just having a teenage focus, as relationships were being built with people of all ages in the community. To find out what God wanted them to do further, the group of people who had initiated the youth work at the bar, decided to go away for a weekend and talk and pray together for clarity. They had been 12 who went away. They had taken some time to pray in twos, for two hours, and when they all gathered, the story goes that they all amazingly felt the same thing: They felt that they should stay within the Salvation Army, but that they had to move away from their former corps, as well as move away from mainstream Salvation Army church ways. They were going to start a new church, or a church plant, and decided to start having Sunday meetings in the building that they now used as a youth bar. In September 1994, the very first meeting was held, whereas the first public church service was held in January 1995. As the congregation outgrew the size of the old SA hall, it moved its Sunday services to a local secondary school in September 1997. This is where I first became familiar with the church, one year later.

Since the founders all came from various older, long established corps, whose structures and church life they had experienced as unfulfilling in terms of their perception of what church should be, the new church was ready for leaving the old ways behind. These old ways may have been associated with the most well-known Salvation Army characteristics, such as the uniforms, brass bands, tambourines, songsters and soup stands, to mention a few. In the Roots booklet, in a section about the church's Salvation Army heritage, it is written:

“Here at GFCC being part of this particular denomination (SA) means putting our Christian faith into action. We aspire to be people who grasp the vision and passion of our forefathers, rather than be the perpetuators of outdated modes, methods, and techniques” (Roots 1994: 24).

In the paragraph below this statement there is a citation from a book by Phil Needham, a Salvation Army leader, who writes: “When traditional programmes that were once effective for the cause of Christ become stale and lifeless, they should be abandoned. When rituals lose their ability to evoke the meaning of the Gospel and to challenge participants to respond to God's call, they should be abandoned”. On the following page of the booklet, there is a diagram

portraying a statistical overview of the development of the SA in terms of their work. According to this diagram, the SA was at its peak in 1933, and then started to decline. The different time periods have been given labels according to what type of institution the SA is suggested to have represented at various times. In this vein, the SA is described as a *movement* from 1875, i.e., when it was first founded by William Booth, till the beginning of the 1900s. In the next period which lasts till the 1950s, the SA has become a *machine*, a term reflecting the efficiency of the church in terms of bringing people to Christ. Between the 1950s and 1975 the SA has dwindled into a *museum*, only to reach its final stage as *monument* between 1975 and 1994. I guess this state was among the aspects the new church set out to change.

Judging from these paragraphs it seems obvious that the founders of the new church were uninterested in perpetuating the established and stale form that they considered the SA to have taken in recent years. Performing old and empty rituals for the sake of upholding a tradition was not on their agenda. They considered many of the activities offered by the SA and the set forms of church services, as outdated and representative of the impression that only superficial cultural aspects had survived over the years. The fervour and intensity with which the early Salvation Army had tackled the problems of the day, by preaching the gospel in radical terms to those who were destitute, had somehow been lost, they felt. Yet, to leave the SA did not seem right to them: “Our desire is not to perpetuate a movement for the sake of it. However, many of us sense a deep call from God to stick with this movement and be a part of God’s new revolution” (Ibid: 24). In addition to wanting something new, the church founders wanted to go back to the roots of the Salvation Army¹¹ and live radical, transforming lives. The word radical has a double meaning; it means *going to the root*, as well as *thoroughgoing* or *extreme*, especially as regards change from accepted or traditional forms (Dictionary.com). In this case, both meanings were relevant, as the roots that the new group of people wanted to go back to, were per definition considered to have been somewhat extreme as well. What they found by going back to their heritage from the founders of the SA, was a similar desire in them to go back to the roots, even further back in history, to the days of the very first Christians, i.e., the early church. This is a description of the early Salvation Army characters that I found in the Roots manuscript:

¹¹ See for instance Agger (1997), Arnroth (1994), Borgen (1993) og Molland (1976).

“They reclaimed the fighting faith of the early Christians, they aspired after their courage, their fervour, and they despised the lukewarm, wishy-washy religion of polite society. (...) Their exploration of the NT (New Testament, my addition) led them to see the primacy and priority of mission. The church was people called for a purpose, not a club, not a high-minded discussion group, or social action group” (Roots 1994: 26).

It seems that the part of history that the new church wanted to identify with was particularly related to attitudes about what church should and should not be, even to the extent that the common perception of church could be abandoned. The name *Salvation Army* was from the beginning of its history seen to incorporate a certain attitude about church: “Army is about mobilising forces for a task. (...) Army is about relevance to the prevailing culture. To become an Army in Britain in the 1870’s is to leave ‘church’ behind, to forget ‘church’” (Ibid: 26). The Salvation Army has a long tradition of social action; the association of moving militantly forward being ingrained in their very name. Extreme as it may sound to the regular church goer to leave church behind, in the next paragraph chosen to represent the selected SA heritage, the founder William Booth, in a letter to one of his officers in India, seems modest rather than extreme – at least seen through a 21st century lens:

“You must display that principle of adaptation which is a fundamental principle with the Army everywhere. In order to conquer you must stoop, becoming with the Apostle all things to all men, in order that you may win them to your Master. That must mean, if anything at all, that to the Indians you must be Indians. Imitate their example, travel over the same course. Go to the Indian as a brother, which indeed you are, and eat and drink and dress by his side. Speak his language, share his sorrows, and make him feel that you have come down, if it is a coming down, to act after the fashion of Christ. (...) Go, my comrades, and pray and look about you, and thus acquaint yourselves with Indian modes of thought and feeling and action, and then adapt yourselves to them, so far as such adaptation shall be consistent with the doctrines of the Bible and the principles of the Army” (Ibid: 27).

Added as a final remark by the writers of the Roots manuscript: “The challenge remains the same today” (Ibid: 27). Perhaps it was necessary because of the particular weight of history, that in order to move the Salvation Army forward, a group of people would break away from

the most traditional outlook of the SA, to bring it more up to date with ideas and sentiments of the new millennium. One expression of this attempt is perhaps to be found in the name of the new church: “Green Forest Community Church. The Salvation Army in this area”. The focus for the church was the community around it. Then its adherence to the SA was stated, as a second part of the name; an addition to their identity. The founders of the new church wanted to see changes for good in the communities where they lived. *Community* thus became a key word, as can be seen in their vision statement: “We are a group of Christians who are committed to God and each other. Our vision is to develop a church for the community in the Green Forest area” (Ibid: 1). This vision is twofold in that it focuses first on the establishment of a group of Christians committed to each other through building up good and strong friendships/relationships after Jesus’ example: Jesus shared his life with 12 friends, the disciples, and was “constantly to be found in other peoples’ houses for meals, parties and relaxation” (Ibid: 2).

For GFCC this commitment to fellowship meant putting a focus on people, not programme, as well as striving to work together in unity and harmony. The commitment to each other was further seen as part of the church’s commitment to God. As for the second part of the vision, it was built upon a desire to reach out to the actual area surrounding the church, thus being visible as church and Christians in one’s local community. Partly this desire was based upon the founders’ previous experience of church being somewhere that one had to travel to, i.e., not being situated in one’s own immediate neighbourhood. The perception was that a church not actively engaged in its own local environment would become increasingly concerned with merely looking after its own interests. This was not the vision for the church in Green Forest, and for the sake of this local commitment, members of the church were encouraged to live in the local community and engage with the people there. The desire to be a church for the local community was also based upon the belief that the church cannot exist in isolation from the world, and at the same time remain as the people of God: “A church out of touch with the world is out of touch with God” (Ibid: 3). Just like Jesus was in the world (John 1:10), the church should be in the world too. The vision for church life was clearly inspired by the early church, which was constituted shortly after Jesus’ ascension into heaven (Ascension Day) and consisted of the disciples and all those who came to believe in ‘the way’, which was the term used in the first century for the followers of Christ. In the Roots booklet, there is reference to the Book of Acts in the New Testament, particularly Acts 2:42-47, as a powerful description of the church:

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”.

The conclusion to this description of the church as referred in the Roots booklet, was that “church here is characterised by a close level of understanding and attachment between its members” (Roots 1994: 4). The attitude of sharing, which comes across as an important ideal through this choice of scripture verse, was one that I both felt and saw when I first came to the church. I was being met with an openness and interest that was both touching and convincing, and dinner invitations to other people’s homes were common occasions. On a Sunday, for instance, many families/houses would decide to make extra dinner that day, and then ask people in church if they had dinner plans, and if not, they would be invited to their house for dinner. There are also other examples signifying an attitude of sharing, as for instance when I was moving to the area and lacked a bed. One of my housemates then asked around if anyone had a spare bed, and after a short while a bed was delivered to my door. Another aspect of the ideal of sharing is, as I see it, that it reflects a desire to create a community to which people would have a sense of belonging, through sharing not only visions and values, but also every other need that might arise, material as well as spiritual.

The corps in Green Forest was at the time of my first fieldwork seen as un-traditional in many respects, in comparison to the more mainstream Salvation Army congregations. Everybody was not positively inclined towards ‘the new member of the family’. I learned this when, on a few occasions, members from other corps in the SA described the corps in Green Forest as being very ‘happy-clappy’ in somewhat derogatory terms. These comments were based on the fact that the new church was seen as a tad more charismatic than the traditional SA had grown to become. Their profile as different could also be seen in their lack of stress upon, or even avoidance of, the Salvationist heritage through external symbols like the uniform. Rather than represent the Salvation Army by means of the uniform, the church endeavoured to

embrace people also from different denominations through the concept of a 'celebration of difference'. The 'difference' that the church represented was also expressed through an array of other means, from a church service that did not necessarily follow the traditional pattern of events, to the choice of speaker, who did not necessarily belong to the SA. The only person to wear the soldier's trousers and shirt was the envoy of the church, who was in the role of an officer. In terms of this role as well, the church expressed a different stance. The leadership in Green Forest had not wanted any officers to be the head of the corps as is common within the SA but chose a man from the initial group of 12 to serve as their pastor. The term envoy referred to his lack of formal education as an officer. Choosing their own pastor involved that the church set aside the existing rules of the Salvation Army, where a corps would normally have to accept as officers whomever the Headquarters assigned the task. The church sought renewal in terms of theology as well, and rather than merely preach Salvationist doctrines and articles of faith, looked to move with the spiritual atmosphere of the day, which applied to many of the evangelical, charismatic churches in general. Reflecting the Salvation Army's early days when their roots in Methodism were evident in terms of experiential faith, the fellowship in Green Forest sought to worship and live out their faith in God in a subjective and experiential way, being open to hearing from God through prophecy. They sought God and his counsel for both personal lives and for the role of the church in the local community. The actual church service was a place where one expected to hear from God, through for instance the speech, the worship, and the prayers. Although the identification with a more charismatic evangelical Christianity might have formed the corps in Green Forest in their early days, traits from the Salvation Army were still evident, and perhaps made them stand out in comparison to other evangelical churches of different backgrounds. In Green Forest one wanted to live simple lives. One wanted to be counter-cultural in terms of personal finance, embracing a simple lifestyle to express solidarity with people of less fortunate means. As a member of the church, one was also expected to give away one tenth of one's income to the church in tithing.

For members of the GFCC as belonging to the wider Salvation Army, it was important that one's faith had implications for one's social actions or lived life. Faith formed the basis from which social action and lived life sprang. Hence most people would have a social commitment that was either directly related to their work, or in addition to it. This commitment could be in relation to the church itself, for instance by being a member of the leadership team, having cell groups in one's house or being involved in the youth work within church, etc. I think the awareness that I gained during my first fieldwork of the connection between faith and

lived life, helped me understand a vital part of the traditional ethos of the Salvation Army. The connection between faith and social and personal commitment was a significant part of the Salvationist heritage that many of the people that I met carried with them.

“It's not what it used to be”

After I had completed my first fieldwork and left Green Forest to go home, I deeply missed the church fellowship and the friendships that I had made there. Although I had also experienced fatigue in relation to the Christian lifestyle that I embarked upon during my first fieldwork, the more lasting impression of life in the field was one of excitement. Green Forest represented a phase of my life where the nurture of Christian friendships and the experience of being a part of this church, brought to me a sense of meaningfulness in relation to faith that I had never experienced before. The open and welcoming environment of the church fellowship had nurtured my nascent and fumbling spiritual walk. This church became an important setting for my first fieldwork and influenced my faith through the fellowship it came to be to me, forming my expectations and probably constituting a reference point for what a church could and should be like to me ever since. I therefore happily and excitedly returned to London and Green Forest together with my family during the summer of 2008 for my second fieldwork, in connection with my PhD. I was accompanied by my English husband, whom I had met during the first fieldwork, and our two young children. With us was also my eldest daughter, who had been with me on my first fieldwork. During the time between these two organized fieldworks, I had visited the area several times, and had visitors in Norway from the church on several occasions. I had kept in touch with some of the people and kept up with news about the church. Hence, I had some perspective on the growth and development of both church and individuals that had taken place as time had passed. I knew for instance, that there was now a new officer in the church, since the former envoy had moved to another part of the country. Some of the people that I had shared a house with, and others that I had known and been friends with, had also moved away since my last time there. Others had started families and bought their first house in the nearby area. Quite early on in my second fieldwork I met up with two women who had children around the same age as my own two toddlers. This encounter suits to exemplify ‘the other story’ that I mentioned at the beginning and constituted one of my first impressions of a sense of sadness that some people felt, over changes that the church had gone through over a number of years. I refer from my fieldnotes:

I met up with Lizzie and Gaby today, for a stroll to the park with our kids. I knew Lizzie from my first fieldwork, whereas Gaby I had only met a few times on my visits back, since she had joined the church after I had left. Arriving in the park, our kids were immediately off for the playground, allowing us mums a chat on one of the benches. It was not long into our conversation of catching up, before they asked me what I thought about church, and how it was to be back. I cannot remember what I said, or if I got round to answering at all, before one of them continued: "It's changed a lot, hasn't it. It's not the same as it used to be." Not having been in the area or in church for such a long time, I was not really in a place to answer the question of what I thought about church so far. The comment drew a line between the past and the present, which I wasn't able to see clearly, but which impressed on me a sense of sadness and regret from the two women, that something had been lost from church which had used to be there. Lizzie referred to the place and state of the church as being in 'a period of transition', due to changes to both church leadership, as well as changes in the church program for reaching out to the world around. To be in a period of transition indicated to me the perception of a movement from something that had been, towards something new, which was still in the process of being formed. I asked if they would characterise the church as being charismatic, as it had been considered when I was last there. Lizzie answered spontaneously: "No, it is not charismatic! It is too academic", she said, shaking her head as to underline her regret. Gaby then mentioned the names of Tom and Simon and asked me if they had been around when I was conducting my first fieldwork. I confirmed that they were. These persons had been considered to have strong gifts within the prophetic area, and often spoke prophetically into concrete situations. Tom and Simon no longer lived in Green Forest. Gaby and Lizzie indicated that when these two had been part of the community, they had influenced the atmosphere of church by creating a stronger focus on the prophetic dimension of faith. There was a pause, as if we all needed to digest what had been said for a moment. Being mainly in the role of mothers, the time we had to pursue the conversation was minimal, and soon we were chasing children rather than thoughts.

Lizzie and Gaby expressed that something had changed in church, which made them feel as though church was no longer 'how it used to be'. It became clear to me, that there existed other stories than one of belonging to and thriving in church that I had anticipated to find. What had changed and how and why was not obvious to me, just that I heard them say that it felt as

if something was missing, and I got the impression that their sense of belonging to the church had also consequently changed. It was not the last time I would hear comments about a church that had changed, attached with feelings of regret. Neither was it the last time I would hear statements that expressed a longing for a greater presence of the prophetic aspect within church. In fact, several people said they missed a stronger impact of the practicing of the prophetic in the church in Green Forest. It seemed to me that people sought after the prophetic dimension both as an aspect of church life and as personal experience. Many described the church as having become 'a bit dry'. The issue of 'dryness' as an unwelcome aspect of the church, turned out to be a recurring theme in many of the interviews I did, as well as the subject of many conversations outside the setting of interviews. At first, such comments about church made me look toward church for an explanation, and as many of the people I spoke to, I started to wonder and ponder upon what church was doing wrong and what it should do, to become the church that people would feel connected with. With time and my recognition that the issue of dryness was more complexed than a one-sided influence from the church alone, my inquiries tried to explore the background for people's longing for the prophetic and the sense that church was 'dry', trying to get a clearer understanding of what people were concerned with when they brought up what was most commonly only referred to as 'the prophetic'. As a 'newcomer' to the church in Green Forest again, seeking to belong was a natural orientation for me, both socially and spiritually during my first phase in the field. In a sense, and unbeknownst to me at the time, I entered the fellowship of the church with similar anticipations that Gaby and Lizzie had expressed to me that day: The expectation of relating to church in the same way as I had been used to doing 'in the good old days'.

A sense of estrangement

I think I had anticipated that coming back to the church fellowship of Green Forest, a fellowship of people wanting to seek God and share the vision of being a church for each other and the community, would be like entering and reclaiming a type of spirituality that I felt I once owned, but which had since to some extent been lost. To me this spirituality was characterised by a focus upon seeking and experiencing God's direction and counsel in various ways, prayer and worship, as well as social commitment. These experiences had seemed a communal thing: We were all together in the business of seeking God, or at least that is what it felt like to me. I therefore found it surprising when I felt a sense of estrangement at the attendance of my first

service in the church in Green Forest on my second fieldwork, since these services had so often used to raise my emotions and make me feel engaged and energized. I refer from my field notes in August 2008:

When the worship started there was a new band from the one that had been there when I was last around, during my fieldwork in 98/99. Some of the songs were familiar to me from then, some I had never heard before, but none of them raised my heart or my voice like the old songs had used to do. I guess I am really just at a different place than I was when I left the church last. I have lived my life elsewhere, and am not a part of this church anymore, like I used to feel that I was. I am starting my fieldwork as an outsider again, and that is where I am seeing everything from at the moment: from a distance, from the outside. If I am ever to enter in this time, how is it going to happen?

This piece of text from my fieldnotes makes it clear that one of my ambitions was to ‘enter in’ to church life again. In retrospect I might say that ‘entering in this time’ was surely to happen differently than on my first fieldwork – if I ever gained a feeling of ‘entering in’ entirely on my second fieldwork. What was I referring to that I wanted to ‘enter in’ to? I think I was firstly referring to the experience of being in church in a manner that would make me feel as though I connected emotionally with the others, with being present in the church service, connecting with the message expressed as well as the forms of expression involved. Furthermore, my hope to ‘enter in’ also expresses my desire to feel that I was connected to and in tune with God. Experiencing a sense of belonging and becoming a part of something that I felt at that point was missing in my life, seems to have been one of my personal objectives for life in Green Forest. I wanted a fresh start for a focused spiritual life that would make me feel as though I was growing and thriving. Another experience of estrangement had also happened a few weeks earlier, as I attended a church service in a different part of England, in a church I visited on a family holiday. I did not have the same personal history with this church as with the church in Green Forest, and on these grounds the experience of estrangement was easier to dismiss:

As we took our seats in the church, I was ready to feel inspired by the atmosphere, being lifted by the worship and the preaching of the word of God, and of being in a fellowship of other believers. Strangely I noticed however, sometime into the service, that I felt a sense of distance

to most of what was going on around me. I heard what was being said, I took in visually various elements of church, but it was as if the service was not for me, it was for all the others; I was not a part. I 'knew' this was not true of course, but for some reason, it was impossible for me to tune in to the language spoken and sung and feel connected. As the others stood up to join in with the singing, I remained in my seat, not wanting to take part until I felt a part. I looked at the lead singers to the worship songs; their faces were full of expression that perfectly mirrored the theme of each song. From my distanced position, I started to observe with an unengaged body and a distanced gaze: I noted that the songs' lyrics revolved around praising God, using words such as Majesty, King, God Almighty, and themes concerning Christians being victorious, fighting in the battle against evil for the glory of God. They were songs intended to inspire for action. Now, sadly perhaps, incentives for 'action' have never inspired me. None of what was being sung resonated; it did not strike a chord within me. I felt far away from this scene. I could not help but wonder why. When all I wanted was to feel the presence of God, why did it seem to me I was experiencing the opposite? The only thing that 'spoke' to me, in the sense of creating some emotion within of slight excitement, was a phrase from one of the songs about the power of prayer; 'We see strongholds tumbling down and down and down and down...' I felt that all I took with me from the service was the sense of need or call to pray, although what I needed to pray about hid in a haze.

I was puzzled by the experiences I'd had in these churches from immediately after they happened, but even as I later started choosing cases for my thesis, I felt that my experience of feeling estranged in both churches, had some undefined significance for my work and for the questions that I wanted to pursue. I could not see for what reason, but the question of why I had felt so estranged remained with me and caused me to enquire about the causes. What was going on around me in these church services that I felt distant to? Why wasn't something more fulfilling going on inside of me? I was after all in church, seeking to be in the presence of God. Was God not there? Why was I not fully there, body, mind, and spirit? I launched into various explanations for my sense of estrangement, of both personal and social character, looking to the church as well as to myself, in the period immediately following the incidents, as well as in the initial writing phase. I first interpreted the experience of a sense of estrangement in church, as a distance to God, and thus as being essentially about my relationship with God. The sense of distance made me feel like I was out of touch with God, and immediately evoked a desire in me to come closer to God as well as to other believers, and to *experience* or *sense* this closeness

in my body. It was as if I could not stand the sense of feeling left outside, as if everything in me resisted this experience of loneliness. My first response to the incident evoked in me a moral incentive to try to correct myself, because it felt more ‘right’, according to my expectations of a Christian life, to experience belonging.

As I entered the final stages of writing, revisiting these experiences many years later to plot them into my text, I discovered upon rereading my fieldnotes, that I saw the experiences in a different perspective. The older, less anxious me looking back at those episodes, became more acutely aware of the inner, existential need that I was expressing; the need for closeness, the need for presence – from God and the world around me. What went on in the church services did not meet this need, because the services were not about meeting this need – which they knew nothing about. The church services were about encouraging the expression of Christian values and faith according to an evangelical perspective of church. If I had allowed myself the feeling of distance at the time, without feeling the need to ‘improve’ myself, or assess the qualities of the church in which these feelings arose, I might have learned sooner who I was deep down, and that my need and desire to belong to a fellowship of other believers, equalled a need to be seen and affirmed within a community of others, at the place where I found myself there and then. In a recognition that almost felt painful, I saw myself longing for a fellowship of friends, where I could feel the freedom to be myself, sharing my life as well as my faith with someone whom I felt understood me on a deep level. The perspective I gained from looking back, also made me recognise that Lizzie’s comment about church “It’s not the same as it used to be” might not have been about church alone, but also about herself and the place she was at existentially at the time. My hindsight, rather than illuminating only my understanding of myself at a time gone by, shed a new light also on the perspectives and experiences of others, and allowed me the possibility to consider whether other people’s sense of distance might have similar roots as my own. Might they also have been missing a sense of community, of being seen? As the context for my understanding of my own history changed, the scope for understanding others widened, broadening the context for their stories too. Epistemologically speaking, the subjective introspection regarding myself, arising from the exercise of retrospection, thus becomes a useful ethnographic tool, suggesting the familiar perspective that the route to knowing others also comes through knowing yourself.

A sense of belonging

I wish to present another encounter from the early phase of my second fieldwork, which expresses the sense of belonging and fellowship that I felt was missing from my first visits to church. This incident happened before the church visits, at an evening when I was in the company of some of my closest friends from my first fieldwork. I was together with Suzanne and Vivien, and we were catching up and sharing stories of what had happened in our lives since we last saw each other. What I want to focus on from this evening, is a story that captures how their faith was an active part of and a significant element in their everyday life and world view. I refer the event from my fieldnotes, written down shortly after our encounter:

Suzanne and Vivien took turns in sharing how they recently had been looking for a suitable property in which to set up a coffee house, which was meant to be a social enterprise offering internships to people who were homeless, as well as selling both coffee and fairly traded products. They had felt that God had led them into a specific geographical area, and as it happened there had been a restaurant for sale in this area. They visited the restaurant and spoke to the owners, sharing their interest in the restaurant for their own enterprise. The owners of the restaurant for sale had been keen to sell the restaurant to them, consequently making Suzanne and Vivien excited about the prospect of soon owning a place for their coffee house. A few days before they had visited the restaurant, however, an image of a crevice had surged up in Vivien's mind. Suzanne was the one who told this part of the story, and in her words "Vivien had a picture of a crevice". I did not reflect upon the formulation made by Suzanne at the time, because I knew that the picture was mental and not 'a picture on the wall'. I was used to both Vivien and Suzanne referring to images in their minds as 'pictures' carrying a symbolic meaning, and I was used to them referring more often to images or pictures than thoughts, when they were describing issues and situations that they felt that God was leading them into. Vivien continued explaining how she had felt that the image of the crevice meant something, because the picture gave her a sense of representing the falling into a gap, which it would be difficult to get out of again. She did not understand what the picture signified, or what it was referring to in the context of her lived life. Vivien had told Suzanne about the image, who did not either understand what the picture represented.

During the visit to the restaurant, Suzanne was talking to the owners on her own at one point, as Vivien had gone to the toilet. As they were talking, the landlord owning the building

in which the restaurant was, came up in the conversation in relation to Suzanne mentioning the lease. The owners of the restaurant strongly expressed that Suzanne and Vivien should not talk to the landowner, and in this instance, Suzanne 'just knew' that the lease was the crevice! She was keen for Vivien to hear about the lease as well, to see how she responded. When Vivien came back from the toilet, Suzanne got the lady who was talking to repeat the part of the conversation that was about the lease, to Vivien too. A little while later, Suzanne and Vivien left the restaurant, and safely outside, Suzanne said to Vivien; "I know what the crevice is", upon which Vivien responded, "So do I". As Suzanne had suspected, Vivien had picked up the same information or sense of warning as she did, when the lease was mentioned. They were both quite confused as to what this could possibly mean and felt a strong need to speak to the landowner himself. Before making any decisions about purchasing the restaurant, the girls managed to find the name of the landowner and went to speak to him. They introduced themselves and their interest in the restaurant and said that they had heard that the house where the restaurant was, was up for sale. To their surprise, this turned out to be a fact that the landowner himself was unfamiliar with; hence of course the sale's proposal was not accurate. Had the women pursued their plans for buying the restaurant, they could have ended up in a lot of juridical trouble, since the sale of the restaurant would have been illegal without the permission of the landowner. The purchase of the restaurant of course did not happen.

There was no real conclusion to the story in terms of for instance why, if that was the case, God had led the women into an area only to show them through a mental image to get out of there again. The story expressed a *how*, rather than a *why*, in terms of God's intervention. As I wrote the incident into my fieldnotes, I realized how much I had missed these types of conversations, the sharing of stories emphasizing faith almost as a tangible bodily experience. I was not only hearing stories about the way Suzanne and Vivien pursued their faith; stories that I could use in my thesis. I was entering in myself, engaging emotionally and mentally with a way of perceiving the world, with a way of being, where the presence and involvement of God was expected and almost taken for granted. Suzanne and Vivien expressed the form of spirituality that Lizzie and Gaby had been referring to, in relation to the prophetic. Lizzie had assessed the church as academic rather than charismatic. The term 'charismatic' is part of a church specific language that designates a spiritual approach drawing on the understanding that God is actively engaged in people's lives and concerns through the Holy Spirit residing within people and within the church. The charismatic spirituality reflects an experiential approach to

Christian life, where the body and the experiences of the body are central elements in the communication with God. This spirituality purports the belief that God has provided his people with spiritual gifts to build and strengthen the Christian fellowship. The prophetic is one of these spiritual gifts through which God speaks. In the story of Suzanne and Vivien nearly buying a restaurant, the picture of the crevice can be seen as a prophetic image, which lent them the guidance they needed to avoid a danger and walk away from the purchase of the restaurant.

That evening, sharing stories of faith and the Christian life with Suzanne and Vivien made me feel re-connected and reunited. Literally speaking I had been reunited with my friends, but I also felt re-connected in a different sense, as if I had re-found a part of myself that had been missing. I felt as if I had in some way come home. The stories expressing Suzanne and Vivien's faith felt like a revival of my own faith to me. I connected with the women's way of reading God between the lines of ordinary life, or even as the headline of life itself. In their company it was easy for me to believe and stretch toward a greater awareness of what it may mean to live an engaged Christian life, which was also one of the issues I sought to explore in my work – and which, frankly, was how I had sought to live my Christian life whilst on my first fieldwork. I realised that I had not engaged with God in this way for a long time. Being together with Suzanne and Vivien, connecting with the spirit of anticipation and excitement that their story exuded, opened a space of longing in me. I too wanted to live my life in the perception and experience of a God who intervened and gave guidance. I realized I yearned for a stronger sense of the presence and guidance of God in my life, and this yearning began to inform the direction of my seeking towards the experience of this feeling of belonging. There was a strong sense of freedom and sisterhood between Suzanne, Vivien, and me. We knew each other and appreciated being in each other's company. There was no pretence, no fear of condemnation or ridicule at revealing ourselves and our anticipation and exploration of God's purpose for our lives. We shared an open-minded fellowship where it was safe to express our thoughts and feelings and where we supported and affirmed one another. It was the easiness and simplicity of being with someone who cared for me as I was, someone whom I had missed more than I had realized. Embalmed in the sense of togetherness that I felt with the two women, was also a sense in me of the closeness of God, which I felt was a discovery of how essential my sense of belonging to a fellowship was for my relationship with God. It was as if the sense of belonging in that context yielded a sense of belonging in the world itself. No wonder then that experiencing a sense of estrangement in the church services later, made me feel that there was something wrong somewhere – either with myself or with the church.

Rereading my fieldnotes years later, there seemed no other meaning to the fellowship between Suzanne, Vivien, and myself than the sheer joy of being together, no hidden message pointing to how I should live my Christian life. I was simply relating, to my friends, to myself, to God. In retrospect, seen in the light of my experience of bonding with Suzanne and Vivien, Lizzie and Gaby's comments about how church had changed and that "It's not charismatic, it's too academic" stood out to me as a possible hint at the loss of a particular way, not only of expressing and pursuing faith, but of being together, which had used to be more pronounced before. Perhaps an experience of a lack of bonding or a sense of togetherness were some of the aspects that Lizzie and Gaby indirectly referred to in their assessment of the changes that church had been through.

Relating to God as a person

Relating to God and seeking his presence has always been a major part of the Christian faith as spiritual practice and perspective on life. Seeking to know God and have a sense of union with him has inspired religious life, theologies, and subsequent literature throughout the Old and the New Testaments of the Bible, as well as religious texts from the first centuries AD until our time. Various types of narratives reflecting the Christian life of individual believers are found in the works and autobiographies written by mystics and saints within the Christian church throughout the centuries. There are all sorts of approaches to the idea of, and the experience of, religious life. As an anthropologist, it is the spiritual life that I witnessed in the field, and that I took part in myself, that I am trying to capture; a spiritual life seeking to be in an intimate relationship with God. The description of this life could easily lean on William James' definition of religion. James focused on relating to God in his work on individual religious experience, and he states: "Religion, (...), shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine" (James 1902: xxi). James was not interested in inquiries into origins and beginnings to explain belief but emphasized personal religion and the qualities of relating to the divine: "In the more personal branch of religion it is on the contrary the inner dispositions of man himself which form the centre of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness. (...) The relation goes direct from heart to heart, from soul to soul, between man and his maker" (Ibid: 29)." Religion was for James related to human needs and wants and he described the intimate and personal relationship between God and the

believer, as that which lay at the heart of faith and religious experience. For me, borrowing James' perspective means describing faith as the engagement in a relationship with God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit, exploring how the confidence in God grows through personal experience and awareness, through seeking him. However, going further than 'the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude', I found that seeking God is not only seeking God; it is the seeking of relationship on so many levels other than the mere seeking of the spiritual dimension. Relating to 'men in fellowship', turns my gaze beyond merely individual experience, lingering on 'the other', as much as the self, in understanding the relationship with God.

Philosophers and thinkers have devoted time and effort to the question of how relating to God is possible at all. The Jewish philosopher Levinas for instance, expresses the contradiction of trying to grasp the ungraspable God, trying to 'see' the invisible God: We cannot see God, but we can glimpse his trace, his presence, in another's face, another's life, he says. "Divinity is a Third Person beyond being, which cannot be defined by Itself, nor covered up or uncovered; it can only be glimpsed in His profile, left by his *trace* in the face of *the other*" (Levinas 1996:72). Using the term Divinity, Levinas likens God with an absence that cannot be derived from the being of being itself. In poetic language, he describes Divinity as a meaning that cannot be reduced to meaning, the way meaning stands out to us in the world or is described through a phenomenological investigation. Poetically, Levinas relates the humanism of the other to seeing God, describing the relation as that which connects me to God, thus describing God through the aspect of relating to another. To my mind, this description somehow bears resemblance to Schwöbel's portrayal of Christ as the ultimate expression of God's grace in the New Testament, which I referred to in the previous chapter. Through Christ's actual human body as being in the world, relating to God in the flesh became the symbol of grace.

Martin Buber, another Jewish philosopher, also draws on the relation when he describes God. In the work *I and Thou*, his philosophy of being centres upon the perspective of an encounter and a life in dialogue. He connects the individual to *an other*, holding that humankind is always in a relationship to someone or something beyond him/herself. Buber considered the human I as two-fold: "There is no I in itself, only the I belonging to the primary word I-Thou, and the I belonging to the primary word I-It. When man says I, he refers to one of the two. (...) The primary word I-Thou establishes the world of the relation" (Buber 1992: 6). When we experience something, Buber claims that we are in the realm of I-It. Experience alone cannot bring the world to humankind. The world as experience thus belongs to the primary word I-It.

The world of the relation arises within three spheres, says Buber, life with nature, life with humankind and life with the spiritual realities. “In each of these spheres, through everything that becomes present to us, we look towards the outermost hem of the garment of the eternal Thou, from each individual Thou we sense a touch of it, in each Thou we speak onto the eternal, in each sphere according to its manner” (Ibid 1992: 8). When we are present with our surroundings, with people, Buber associates this presence with the presence of God as the eternal Thou. Concerning the sphere of life with the spiritual realities, Buber says that the relation is shrouded in clouds, yet reveals itself; it is without language, yet it creates language: “We sense no Thou, and yet we feel a calling. We respond – forming, connecting, acting: We utter the primary word with our being, yet remaining incapable of saying Thou with our lips” (Ibid: 8). In other words, Buber is describing our attempts at grasping God, as a mere *glimpsing of his trace*, as Levinas put it.

The primary words I-Thou and I-It are dimensions of relating; two primary attitudes a person can assume in relation to other individuals, their environment, and the world. Buber expressed that it is the primary word I-Thou, which brings true life of connection and fellowship to a person. According to Sills, Lapworth and Desmond, this is because he believed that the development of ‘personhood’ could only come out of an authentic meeting between two people, who encounter each other as openly and non-defensively as possible, in the full awareness both of their individual separateness and of their connection (Sills, Lapworth and Desmond 2012: 23). The I-It stance is, however, a necessary aspect of human living that we need to organise our lives. When we engage with another human being in an authentic, interested, and empathetic way, we are in the I-Thou relationship, whereas sometimes we need to relate to someone according to a particular role, as for instance a therapist to a client, thus being in the I-It relationship. I-It-relating may be based on our expectations of people, rather than a here and now experience of a person. Nevertheless, to be constantly in the I-Thou mode would be impossible, and strip away the opportunity for reflection about ourselves and the other in a given situation, which are activities done in the I-It mode. Acknowledging the I-It mode as a necessary foundation for my exploration of people’s relationship to and assessment of church, it is the I-Thou relation within the spheres of humankind and spiritual realities that I first look to describe. The relevance of Buber’s philosophy to my own work lies in the perspectives on a way of relating that brings about presence. These perspectives on relating, and the understanding and acknowledging of the difference between these two modes, will be important back drops for my descriptions of different situations and circumstances in the field, both

concerning the characteristics of relating to God, as well as the characteristics of relating to one another and the fellowship.

Going back to the first ethnographic case in this chapter, the trip to the park with Lizzie and Gaby, Lizzie described the church as being in a ‘transitional phase’ in terms of profile and direction. As I mentioned before, the sense of regret she expressed may have pointed to the loss of a sense of fellowship and togetherness, which she felt had been more pronounced within church earlier. What I came to realize later, was that Lizzie was not only referring to church, but to different groups within church, where in her view the academic strand had become more influential than the charismatic strand. Applying Buber’s terminology, what Lizzie and Gaby were expressing, was perhaps the diminishing of the I-Thou relationships, referred to through the term ‘charismatic’, to the advantage of I-It relating, represented by the term ‘academic’ within church. Lizzie’s reference to Tom as representing the period where church had been more charismatic, and the fact that Tom was recognized for his prophetic gifts, points to the prophetic as being a vital element within a charismatic profile. Tilda Norberg comments that through the increased awareness and discovery of themselves as well as of God that people experience through the prophetic, Christians often become aware of their longing for the church to act as both witness and truth-teller in their growth process (Norberg 2006). The judgment of church as too academic and the longing for a more charismatic church expressed by Lizzie and Gaby, may point in a similar direction. The reference to a time when people felt the church’s support through the prophetic to a greater extent, may on a deeper level speak of a desire for a sense of recognition, a sense of being seen for whom one is, and of being acknowledged for the spiritual resources one can bring to the fellowship.

The prophetic element was also an important quality of the evening I shared with Suzanne and Vivien. The significance of the instance of ‘seeing’ an object in the mind, the crevice, which they experienced as an instance of God speaking and giving guidance showed the women’s reliance upon the prophetic as an element of everyday life, not simply as truth-teller, but as the voice of God. Their world was one in which God was present and engaging, strengthening both their faith in him and their self-awareness, through an experience of God seeing them. Suzanne and Vivien’s story depicting the drama at the restaurant and God’s protective intervention, exemplifies God’s guidance in a specific circumstance. Wrapped up in a seeking of God thus reside the acts of seeking both recognition, care, and direction in one’s life here and now, of which the church forms a natural and desired part.

Through comparing the stories of Lizzie/Gaby and Suzanne/Vivien, I have tried to establish a link between the charismatic spirituality that some people were longing for and the I-Thou mode of Buber, and a link between two different stories from my data material. This link in its turn, leads me on a journey towards trying to understand the roots of a sense of difference and otherness that existed between various groups within the church. As my fieldwork progressed, it became clearer that there were different views among people regarding what should be the church's spirituality, teaching, and mission. Learning to relate to a sense of otherness was a work in progress throughout the fieldwork, where perceptions of difference was part of an ongoing discourse about the spirituality and theological outlook of the church. In relation to my understanding of this difference, my own discipline of social anthropology's concern and dealing with difference and otherness provides significant insights, and I now turn to a discussion of anthropological perspectives regarding these issues.

Otherness and difference

The issue of 'difference' and 'otherness' and the concerns with overcoming divisions between people, is firstly an important matter within the discipline of anthropology, not only as a focus in our cultural studies of others, but also in terms of the images we are creating of our subjects. 'Difference' constitutes an intrinsic part of the anthropological craft and mission. As put by Gupta and Ferguson in their edited book "Anthropological Locations. Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science" (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:2); "we are specialists in difference", referring to our specific methodology for uncovering and understanding difference. Yet, focusing on the 'difference' between ourselves as 'researchers' and the people we study as 'researched' helps us maintain the construction of the latter as 'other' than ourselves, imposing on our subjects the mantle of 'otherness', hence in addition making 'otherness' the main justification for anthropological study. Gupta and Ferguson are concerned with the anthropological discussion of the production and prioritizing of 'otherness' as a disciplinary criterion for 'worthy anthropology', and their discussion highlights the importance of bridging gaps between that which is considered 'other' and that which is not. As a result of their questioning of the production of 'otherness' from within the discipline, follows a critical survey of the traditional anthropological understanding of the 'field', and the common distinctions between the 'field' and 'home'. Traditionally these two constructs have been expected to be spatially separated, both geographically and practically, in terms of what type of anthropological work happens

where. The field constitutes the site where data are collected, and home is where analysis is conducted, and the ethnography is 'written up'. Whilst in the field, one writes fieldnotes that are often close to experience and containing spontaneous subjective reactions, whereas the analytic counterpart completed at home, in the form of ethnographic papers and monographs, is reflective, polished, and theoretical (Ibid 1997: 12). Gupta and Ferguson challenge this idea of the separation and 'purity' of the field in comparison to home, stressing how these places are nevertheless bound together in myriad ways, and debate the structures that define what has historically, politically, and geographically come to pass for a 'proper' field, and why. As a demonstration of this perspective, in her article in Gupta and Ferguson's book Joanne Passaro describes her fieldwork among people who were homeless in New York. As an American, her 'field' was not in a faraway exotic and unknown place, but in her own country. 'The field' was neither circumscribed by the borders, geographical, political, or religious etc., that anthropologists since Malinowski's time have liked to emphasize as surrounding and closing off a field area. Passaro met people who were homeless in different streets, shelters, and contexts, through exercising different roles, which implied the absence of the traditional perception and experience of fieldwork as a mere 'participant observation', where the anthropologist immerses herself in a 'different' culture, trying to live like 'the indigenous' people there. As Passaro had to admit to those who regularly asked her, she never slept on the streets herself and was not part of a 'homeless community' in this sense. Feeling the need to elaborate the perception of participant observation, she conceptualizes participation and observation as elements in dialectical tension, based upon her broad participation in various sites, from which her data were collected. The many and various sites she chose as parts of her 'field', afforded her what she refers to as different positionalities at varying points along a participant-observer continuum (Passaro 1997: 156). These positionalities are related, in different ways, to Passaro's identity as an American, acquainting herself with the lives of fellow-Americans. Although Passaro was not living 'the homeless life', she spoke to people in her own mother tongue, and could identify with women who were now homeless, but who had come from a similar background as herself. In this respect, the people she was writing about were both 'other' to herself, at the same time as they were not identifiable merely through their 'otherness'.

My ethnographic ambition has always tied a close link between the field and home, due to my participation in a life of faith. Although I went to a place where I had never been before on my first fieldwork, I was already familiar with, and drawn to, religious ideas concerning

faith and belief and the practical living out of these. The field was thus in many ways existentially close to home – and geographically speaking no further away than a two-hour flight. In hindsight, I see that my engagement with trying to understand the reasons and implications of people’s emphasis on their difference from others in church, became an essential ‘where’ or ‘location’ of ‘the field within the field’ for me. More than being related to a geographical area, this field consisted of conversations and contexts highlighting the issue of a sense of loss. My participation in the meetings at Marsham Street and the church services in Green Forest, as well as set up interviews and informal conversations with people in homes and cafés were of course bound by geographic circumstances. Still, the subject matter was highly existential, not only intellectually, but as a practice, a way of life that we were trying to take hold of and live. With their book, Gupta and Ferguson’s ambition was to bring new and better perspectives which also made space for alternative traditions of ‘field’ and ‘fieldwork’, such as for instance ‘insider/native ethnography’, as well as applied and activist anthropology, to mention a few, originally existing as heterodoxies within the ‘Mother-ship’ of orthodox anthropology. I cannot claim to be a native within my field in terms of biological heritage, but the faith I shared with my participants constituted a strong foundation for identification between myself and those whom I met in the field. Ruth Behar, in her book “The Vulnerable Observer” meditates upon the significance of identification within ‘native anthropology’, one of the heterodoxies in which scholars profess a personal connection to the places where they work. She states that the importance of ‘native anthropology’ is that it has brought about a fundamental “shift toward identification, rather than difference, as the key defining image of anthropological theory and practice” (Behar 1996: 28). She goes on to say that reflecting on biography and autobiography, as she has done in her own work, has led to important considerations on how to avoid objectivizing ones’ subjects and thus ultimately betraying them.

The epistemological discussions concerning otherness and identification, the field and home, are among the most influential perspectives upon my work and the approach that I have chosen. Aside from the methodological implications, these perspectives may also highlight how the production of otherness happens amongst those inhabiting the field. The production of otherness that Gupta and Ferguson pointed to as disciplinary conflicts within anthropology, makes me aware of how the surfacing of a sense of otherness and difference within the church in Green Forest also created distinctions between people in terms of considerations of self and other. As may happen within anthropology in relation to ‘researcher’ versus ‘researched’, the creation of this distinction brings with it the justification of a particular action. Within

anthropology the distinction justified a certain kind of anthropological study, whereas in the field, amongst those whom I am writing about, I may argue that the sense of distinction justified the attending of a different church, which seemed to express the qualities deemed as missing from the church in Green Forest. As the concepts of otherness and difference were assessed by Gupta and Ferguson, as well as by Ruth Behar and others, to be lacking in the ability to carry the discipline forward, the otherness and difference expressing themselves within church also needed a resolution that allowed the different strands within church to stand together, rather than disintegrate. The bridging of gaps requested by Gupta and Ferguson seems to me to reside in the conceptualizing of identification rather than difference, pointed to by Behar. In relation to the church that I am writing about, this identification, however, may not only have been required on the most subjective or individual level, i.e., within one's sense of personhood and self. It may have related just as much to the identification of the 'Mother-ship' itself as the right boat to be on. In some ways, I believe that the 'transitional phase' that the church was in at the time of my fieldwork, was a process of finding its identity, where the dynamics of juggling the balls of identification and/or difference, caused a chaotic rhythm for its members for the time being, a 'rocking of the boat', whilst in the process of finding themselves within the church. In this respect, the seeking of God not only relates to the finding of oneself, as an individual body within a Christian fellowship, but also to the finding and identifying of 'the Body of Christ' as a whole, a church body, to which one belongs.

Positioning in the field

For me, my identifying with others who were seeking God impacted on my positionality in the field. I came to be mainly involved with those who felt that there was something missing in church or from their own spiritual life, and who expressed this sense of longing and seeking most clearly. Journeying together with people between the church in Green Forest and the church at Marsham Street was a bonding experience, which led me to experience these people as fellow seekers. These were people I shared something emotionally deeper with, connected to an inner longing. To start with, the acknowledgement that I felt closer to some of the people in the field, felt problematic. As an anthropologist, originally, I felt that I needed to be neutral, because I was afraid of creating a bias towards some people, whilst potentially investing a perspective of otherness on some. The type of difference that I am referring to, is captured by the anthropologist Heewon Chang, who points to our common tendency to divide other people

into ‘others of similarity’, i.e., members of cultural groups that you yourself belong to, feel comfortable with, or share common values with, and ‘others of difference’, i.e., people belonging to cultural groups of different cultural standards than yourself. As anthropologists, understanding the impact that other people may have on us, through self-reflection and self-examination of our encounters with others, can help us draw nearer, even to those we would term ‘others of opposition’, through examining our preconceptions and feelings about others, she says (Chang 2008). The issue of otherness was always present in the field, as a social, psychological, and existential component, but then again, so was always the issue of identification¹². Most people expressed a strong sense of commitment to the church in Green Forest, and there seemed a deep sense of belonging to a community that despite ‘domestic’ disagreements, constituted home. The issues of difference and similarity were thus not always visible on a social level, on the surface, but were brewing underneath.

I had to acknowledge that my understanding of the church community of Green Forest could not rely on my subjective experiences of either belonging or feeling estranged, of similarity or difference. Neither could my understanding of others happen from a ‘neutral’ position, but from the position I obtained in the community. This position was among other things related to my friendship with Suzanne, Vivien and others, and my knowledge and experience, as well as appreciation, of their way of living the Christian life and of seeking God.

¹² On a practical note, the situation of ‘everybody knowing everybody’ has had certain implications regarding how I write about people. Since it was a church community of small size, anonymity for those whom I spent the most time with is almost impossible to achieve. I therefore made it clear to those whom I interviewed and spent time with, that if I included them in my text, they might be recognized by others in church. Most of them said they were okay with this scenario. A few times in interviews, some people chose to tell me certain things after I had turned the recorder off and stated that this part of the story was not for the text. I respected that. A strategy I have applied to try to hide people’s identity, besides using other names than people’s real ones, has been to change aspects of their personal history and family situation, as well as some details about certain events that I was told about, when I judged these changes to be of no importance for my analysis. In the same vein, I have sometimes presented a person with a different name for different occasions, when this person’s role in a specific situation would make them easily recognizable throughout my text. Regarding the people that I spent the most time with, the conversations between us are mostly presented as a retrospective recounting of what was said and done, rather than rendered as a transcript, like I do in interviews. This is because in most such situations, the occasion for the encounter was not an interview, just ‘hanging out together’, and I therefore did not record the conversations.

These friends were my entry points into the community, as well as into a type of spirituality, and formed my perspectives, my perceptions, and my empathies throughout my stay. From this entry point, I started to form my own role and identity. Through accepting others as well as myself as positioned towards one another through various degrees of ‘similarity and difference’, my awareness of the traits that were causing people to feel different to some, and more like others, was enhanced. As an ethnographer, it was helpful to recognize that I must allow myself the privilege of being positioned, both in my own body, as well as through my body, with different relationships and interests towards different people. Some bias towards certain people in the field may be unavoidable. The best one can do with bias, is to promote openness about it, and methodologically move forward with awareness of its impact on the material gathered.

Prejudice and pre-reflective gaze

The exploration of my own involvement as an anthropologist within a field to which I had a strong personal attachment, is a significant element of the ethnography that I am writing, placing my work within the genre of self-reflexive and even perhaps insider/native ethnography. One of my first encounters with self-reflexive ethnography, was through the seminal work from the 90’s, *Anthropology and autobiography*, a collection of articles edited by Judith Okely and Helen Callaway (Okely & Callaway 1995). The collection was not concerned with the autobiographies of the anthropologists per se but related to the anthropologist’s experience of fieldwork and other cultures, and how these relations affected analysis and writing. The foundation for an autobiographical anthropology was the perception and acknowledgement that the anthropologist’s ‘race’, nationality, gender, age, religion, and personal history would affect the process, interaction and emergent material, and the articles presented various examples of the interactions between the anthropologists and the cultures being studied. An underlying ambition was to discuss and counter the common notion within the discipline that autobiographical anthropology was merely narcissism. Since the publishing of this important book, the scope of both anthropological fieldworks and texts have kept expanding, experimenting more freely both with autobiographical content and positioning towards the cultures studied, as well as genres of text. Different arguments have been raised to challenge the assumptions of what makes ‘proper’ ethnography. Ruth Behar points to how anthropology as a discipline has tended to focus mainly on the ‘cultural’ rather than the ‘individual’: “The irony is that anthropology has always been rooted in an “I” – understood as

having a complex psychology and history – observing a “we” that, until recently, was viewed as plural, ahistorical, and nonindividuated” (Behar 1996: 26) Anthropologists’ efforts to push at this irony, has led to a re-theorization of genres like the life history and life story, and the creation of hybrid terms like ethnobiography and self-ethnography, she comments. Gupta and Ferguson (1997), as mentioned earlier, refer to various heterodox representations of fieldwork, such as insider ethnography and the ethnographic novel. On an inter-disciplinary level, social scientists from different disciplines are involved in exploring the boundaries of their ethnographies, such as for instance the married couple and sociologists Adler and Adler in their article on doing research on their own family, presented in the volume *Reflexivity and Voice* (Hertz 1997). Self-ethnography, in recent years known by the term autoethnography, has become an inter-disciplinary genre and qualitative research method combining ethnography, biography and self-analysis, utilizing data about self and context to gain an understanding of the connectivity between self and others within the same context (Ngunjiri, Hernandez & Chang 2010). The mission of connecting the personal to the cultural, is expressed differently by different autoethnographers through various emphasis on the research process (graphy), culture (ethno), and on self (auto) (Chang 2008). Regarding theory production, some, like Leon Anderson, are more inclined towards using the term analytic autoethnography, which sees the production of theory as equally important as writing evocatively (Anderson 2006). The autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis, on the other hand, holds that an artful, poetic, and empathic social science allows the readers to feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience, through the sense of presence that a narrative focusing on personal emotion creates. She encourages the exploration of various literary genres such as poetry, short stories, and drama as textual expressions, stressing that the purpose of the narrative analysis is not to produce general theory and abstractions, but an evocative story to be emotionally engaged in. This perspective is demonstrated in her textbook, *The Ethnographic I* (Ellis 2004). In an article together with her partner Art Bochner, Ellis suggests that an autoethnographic text can create a bridge between science and art, the story being both theoretical and analytic already, as a mode of representation in which the literary conventions of plot, character development and scene setting are employed (Ellis & Bochner 2006). Ellis and Bochner’s arguments revolve around the production of a text which is close to lived experience, leaning heavily on the autobiographical end, being testimony to the inclusion of emotion as an essential motivator in social life. Ethnographers have also in recent years increasingly begun to comment on the multisensoriality of the ethnographic process, bringing new forms of sensory representation,

expanding the space for self-representation in ethnography (Pink 2009). Through the expansion of the perception of the field and ways of doing fieldwork, one sees how ethnography has moved from being a one-sided portrait of 'the other', to becoming a portrayal of the entanglement of the anthropologist and the people whose world one becomes a part of through fieldwork.

Quite a few monographs have been made within various genres of mixing autobiography and insider knowledge, where the researchers, in different ways, have written from the perspective of their own experience, often using a more narrative, rather than academic language. A monograph springing directly from the private experience of the anthropologist is *The Body Silent* by Robert F. Murphy, in which he describes his personal, social, and professional life journey after he was diagnosed with a tumour on the spinal cord that would eventually lead to quadriplegia (Murphy 1987). Without the initial intention of doing fieldwork in relation to his own illness, he decided to share his experience due to the prejudice he encountered, by writing a monograph. In rich detail, and perhaps astonishment, he describes how people started to treat him differently, as though he was no longer a proper and relevant part of academic society, as his illness became more visible. Providing deep insights into the changes to his identity and relationships with others within academia that he experienced, he broadened the understanding of the circumstances that people with different types of disabilities may face in modern society and the prejudice they suffer. The anthropologist Jean Briggs also wrote about prejudice, but in her case, it was her own, in a quite self-reflexive monograph describing her experience of living with Innuits on Newfoundland for seventeen months (Briggs 1970). She showed how her perspectives and descriptions of the Innuits were at first very much coloured by her own cultural eyes and assumptions. She did not present her 'knowledge' of the Inuit lifestyle as a detached product but showed how she came to her new understandings through living with them as an outsider and foreigner, learning the hard way what it meant to be an Inuit, as she tried her best to adhere to their lifestyle, by gradually letting go of the gaze of the westerner. Through Brigg's awareness of her own perspectives as different from the perspectives of the Innuits, she managed to capture the moments of shifts in her own perspectives, the 'epiphanies' through which she came to realize essential aspects of the Inuit lifestyle and thinking, becoming acutely aware of the cultural prejudices that she brought with her to the field.

The discussion of cultural prejudices is important within any genre of anthropology, but the existence of such prejudice may become more obvious in a self-reflexive study. Ruth Behar relates the concept both to the personal realm of her own identity, as well as to a pre-theorized

reality of anthropological categories and perspectives. In her book *Translated Woman*, containing the life history of the Mexican woman Esperanza, she realizes the danger of presenting a stereotyped image of Esperanza, due to several pre-theorized realities that it is easy to immerse one's anthropological subjects in. First exploring the impact of her own personal history and position on her understanding of the people she writes about and the stories they tell, she then moves on to seek awareness of the impact of common anthropological narrative models for thinking about the life of others (Behar 1993). In terms of Esperanza, this reality related to feminist models for structuring the life history narratives of Latin American women, which focused on gender, ethnic- and class struggle. Esperanza did not fit the desired portrayal of the feminist heroine "for whom Western women are always searching among "native women" (Ibid 1993: 269). The idea of a pre-theorized reality that influences what we look for and what we see, inspires Behar to promote the perspective that we as anthropologists need to allow our subjects to 'misbehave' in terms of their expected ethnographic renderings, to allow them to 'take over' our research projects. She therefore chose to stay close to Esperanza's own conceptual categories in the rendering of her life history, which she pretty much let Esperanza tell herself, centrally locating Esperanza's voice in Behar's text, whilst refraining from laying a heavily analytic filter upon her story. It is in the process of trying to see the ethnographic subjects outside of the 'academic boxes' that pre-theorized realities may create, that Behar suggests that the purpose of self-reflexivity lies. In order to become aware of the other and avoid the temptation to make the ethnographic subject essentially 'other', one needs to become aware of one's own agenda, both academically speaking and as a fellow human being with a certain number of existential positions and needs. Referring to Edward Said, Behar states that any ethnographic representation inevitably includes a self-representation, and that the very act of representing involves a violence to the subjects through the reduction, decontextualization and miniaturization that must follow any form of representation. This is one of the unresolvable problems of anthropology, but Behar upholds the hope that through the realization of this fact, the inherent paradox in ethnographic work may lead us through a process of confronting our inability to comprehend the experience of others, but still recognize the necessity to continue our effort to do so (Ibid).

Behar's perspectives invite an in-depth consideration of motives one may not be aware of in relation to one's work. In my case, there were no pre-existing 'academic boxes' from within the discipline that caused the biggest challenge, but the 'academic box' I tried to create myself, wanting to fill it with spiritual seeking and individual growth. Allowing my informants

to 'overtake' my ambitions, the more striking concern became the question of the divergences and different orientations within church, pushing my gaze to linger more upon the dynamics of growth and unity within the fellowship. It was within this 'overtaking' of my subject that the proper framework for my interest in spiritual identity and growth revealed itself: The recognition of ones' spiritual self and needs as essential for the life of the fellowship as well. The fellowship became the backdrop of and framework for my inquiries, not individual seeking alone. My own seeking was essential as the issue that pointed out the direction for my work, but in the end, I had to stretch further than my own ambitions and needs, to meet the needs of the others and more important 'protagonists' in my story; the different members of church, both the ones deemed as 'others of difference' as well as 'others of similarity', and how they functioned together and constituted an integrated whole.

Critical Realism

As I mentioned in chapter 1, having decided to write a self-reflexive ethnography, I encountered a mix of fear and shame at the daunting idea of revealing myself as a Christian. The process of becoming aware of underlying fears and motivations brought me face to face with pre-theorized assumptions concerning the role of the anthropologist as the detached researcher, the controlled, dignified, and self-assured academic, emotionally cool and poised. Fundamentally, I believe that the fear of 'being visible' in terms of my Christian faith stretches its arms into a particularly anthropological difficulty with taking others' religious experience seriously. Anthropology has often related to the religious faith of others as symbolic of hidden circumstances, and according to Fenella Cannell, our discipline sometimes seems exaggeratedly resistant to the possibility of taking the religious experience of others seriously, especially regarding the topic of Christianity. Religious phenomena may be described in detail, she says, but the basis of their explanations seems to be that such phenomena have no foundation in reality. Instead, religious phenomena are considered as mere epiphenomena of 'real' underlying sociological, political, economic, or other material causes (Cannell 2006:3). In this vein social scientists have scrutinized psychological and social conditions of converts to explain for instance conversion by way of certain clues, patterns and causes, but without, as Susan Harding points out, finding enough regularity among converts for these correlations to be reliable (Harding 2000). The remedy for the dilemma of what should be considered real and not real within anthropology would seem to be to take both religious belief and the emotions that this belief may stir up *seriously*, in the

way the believers themselves take their faith seriously. This point of view Rane Willerslev professes in relation to his study of the belief in animism among the Siberian Yukaghirs. Taking other people's beliefs in a supernatural reality seriously, is something that has not usually been done within anthropology, he claims. Supernatural belief is rather, as stated above, considered as mental representations of something else, a conceptual device or an indulgence in metaphor. In Willerslev's opinion, this mode of analysis obscures and denies people's own modes of thought and discourse, suggesting that they live in two realities: one of actuality and one of metaphor. This view is problematic, since believers of a supernatural reality consider themselves to live in only one reality, encompassing both the natural and the supernatural (Willerslev 2007). Ann Kristin Eide observes that within the social sciences it seems that the atheist point of departure has been considered a neutral position, due to its refraining from any beliefs about transcendent reality. In her doctoral thesis, where she writes about spiritual seeking within different Buddhist communities in Norway, she comments that atheism also comes from somewhere; it reflects its own experience, the experience of the transcendent absent. One can therefore not hold that religion alone is something to be explained, whereas atheism is not. Reality is multifaceted, and there are different ways of approaching, understanding, and experiencing it (Eide 2008).

There are obviously clear limitations to what anthropology can or cannot know. The question "What can I know about the world?" is a question that belongs to the domain of metaphysics, a philosophical enquiry into the nature of reality, existence and being. The answer to this question is bound up with who we are, Henrietta Moore and Todd Sanders stress. We should rather ask, "How can I know the world?", which is a question related to method, and to the differentiation between different forms of knowing or knowledge (Moore & Sanders 2006). The questions raised above concerning reality and truth claims about what is real or not, is explored within the theoretical perspectives of Critical Realism, which argues the basic tenet of the independence of the world in relation to our thoughts about it. In other words, reality is more than what we happen to think about it, and it is more than the theories we construe about it. Roy Bhaskar distinguishes between the transitive and the intransitive dimensions of knowledge, where the transitive dimension consists of theories, thoughts, and reflections upon the world, and as is the case regarding transitive verbs, the object is changeable. There are thus many different and competing perceptions and theories about the world. The intransitive dimension is that which does not change, which is the world itself, and our existence in the world (Bhaskar 2008). The connections to Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception and

the world as already there before our reflections begin, are evident. Eide shares the perspective that Critical Realism is a basis for reflection, which contributes to a clarification pertaining to epistemological and ontological issues, regardless of discipline, field or whatever phenomenon is the object of study. The ontologically objective existence of reality is independent of our beliefs about it, the existence or non-existence of God being a case in point (Eide 2008: 44). Regarding the discussions concerning different types of knowledges, one must juggle between the transitive and intransitive dimensions, trying to decide what belongs in the objective realm of reality and what belongs within the subjective realm.

Writing about faith academically, *as* a Christian, the intimate, personal, and private faith, means to me not merely describing the appearance or outlook of an intimate relationship with God, but *being* in the relationship, whilst writing, from the meeting point between the social scientist and the believer in me. This enterprise embraces *mystery* rather than hard science, it is a portrayal of faith as a fact for some people, and as such a part of the intransitive dimension of knowledge. Taking the religious experience of others seriously, must involve an openness and acceptance of there being a spiritual reality that others engage in, an acceptance of the intransitive dimension of knowledge. This openness provides an opportunity to engage with the types of transitive knowledge involved in a specific form of spiritual life, and perhaps more so, as William James held, to be able to investigate the fruits of religious experience, even in the absence of one's own personal religious belief (James 1902). To take this perspective further, into the field, it also constitutes a gaze upon the Christian fellowship that I was engaged with. Anthropological perspectives are not for anthropology alone but aims to serve as an analytic gaze upon the world as it is, also beyond the academic discipline. With this gaze applied upon settings and situations in the field, we will later see that the issue of knowledge and truth claims constituted discourses within the community of Green Forest as well, which had the power to separate and create divisions. Perhaps moving towards activist anthropology, one of my concerns in the field related itself to the lack of communication within the fellowship, and the desire to see the gaps of misunderstanding bridged. I will let this latter point bring me back to the subject of self-reflexive ethnography and the type of text this ethnography facilitates for me.

Writing as experience

The writing of an autoethnographic text has made it particularly clear to me how my experience and understanding of the field has continued throughout the writing process. The experience of an event *revisited* in my fieldnotes at a later point, sometimes yielded a new experience, of seeing the event in a different light, often in a fuller context. Lisette Josephides talks about experiences of embodied remembrance or sensory memory, feelings that awaken in the ethnographer through different ways of remembering the field in the body. She compares this process of remembrance via the body to the creation of poetry, borrowing a paragraph from William Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads*: "Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity (...)" (Josephides 2008). The insights that occur and which the poet or the ethnographer try to grasp in textual form, may happen in a moment which is removed in time and space from an original event. These events point to the possibilities of language and its inclusive qualities, its possibility of transporting one to a new understanding. Thomas Csordas suggests that language constitutes a form of experience, a means through which one can enter an existential dimension where language is not just about representing a phenomenon, but also about "disclosing" a phenomenon. In his view, "Language is not only a form of observable behaviour, but a medium of intersubjectivity, providing an authentic access to experience" (Csordas 1994: xii). Of course, as Eide comments, this does not mean that one has free access to the experiences of others through language. Referring to Scarry (Scarry 1985), she emphasizes the perspective that there are limits to what is being put into words, and there are limits to what can be put into words (Eide 2008).

The idea of entering a field of experience through language is a significant perspective within narrative theory and narrative interviewing, both in terms of written and spoken language. The story of another may evoke my bodily memory of a related event in my own life, or it may suck me in as an active listener, virtually living the story, allowing for a more engaged entrance into the story for me. Becoming engaged in either a written or a told story involves becoming absorbed in the story, in one's own right, with the emotional capacities of one's own body. According to Young, a listener may slip between absorption and abstraction, the latter constituting the analytic mode, whereas absorption signifies a process of participation involving all senses (Young 1987 referred to in Eide 2008). Relating in the field also concerns the engagement in the *action* taking place in the world itself, which in my text becomes particularly

exemplified through the participation in the meetings in church and at Marsham Street. In these meetings specifically, we see that seeking God involves a movement towards absorption, connection, fellowship, and presence in this world. Young's description leads my mind to Martin Buber's distinction between the I-Thou and I-It dimensions of relating, as different realms of experience, where the primary word I-Thou is what brings connection and fellowship to a person, through the sense of presence that it creates (Buber 1992). Besides describing the sense of immediacy pertaining to religious experience, it is essential for my understanding of the divisions within church to direct focus to different modes of being present, because these different modes produce different kinds of knowledge, equally important for the grasping of the phenomenon I approach.

In *Kunnskapens språk*, Anders Johansen acknowledges the writing of an academic work as a research method in itself within the social sciences, where a particular form of writing becomes a particular way of handling or relating to an issue, thus a *method*. Research work is a commitment to language, the formation of knowledge is a writing work and a utilization of forms of language. Written language contains many sorts of resources, Johansen says – logical, conceptual, aesthetic, and emotional, all potentially released during the work of writing (Johansen 2012). We see how Johansen's perspective has a clear affinity to the vision of autoethnography. Håkon Fyhn, who has written one of the articles in Johansen's book, distinguishes between different forms of or intentionalities in writing; sometimes he writes to represent an experience, whereas at other times he writes to discover something (Fyhn 2012). In tune with Josephides' perspective, he holds that writing with the latter intention constitutes an experience in itself. He portrays an original event that he wants to describe, as an encounter with reality that becomes experience first at the point that it is written. I would rather say that writing to discover *highlights* experience and particularly how understanding or perception itself happens, in its different facets. An original event is already an experience, but through writing it may become insight. As Fyhn reflects, sometimes one has a vague sense of being 'in the trace or trail of something', and only through the work of writing will this sense perhaps, gradually, reveal itself, and become manifest as a knowledge that can be formulated. We see the connections also to Hanne Müller's perspective on practical and tacit versus intellectual knowledge (Müller 2000). There are thus several events involved in the production of an academic work; the original event or experience chosen as a case, the event of writing itself, methodically engaged in by the researcher, and the production of a text by which the writer tries to provide an engaged reading as an experiential event also for the reader.

For me, writing has very often been a method of exploration and discovery. The work of writing itself, the process of remaining in the pondering, with the aid of the pen, has constituted the method, above any, for uncovering meaning. I have allowed the sense of importance in my body, the intuition that some events were significant, to be an important instrument for my selection of cases. My text may sometimes be the exposure of a fragile self. This self is however, surrounded by other fragile selves, whose encounters become a current that draws us upward, a current through which we may rise above ourselves. Like shoots of ivy sprouting through a wooden wall, we must burst through pre-theorized realities and personal fragilities, transcending polarising identity politics, to seek to understand how otherness and difference is produced within a church, and how they may be overcome. This is my ethnographic vision, arising out of my ethnographic encounters with 'others of many kinds', and as such, perhaps a leap of faith. My personal journey is that of someone who does not fully trust in the love of God, towards and through landscapes revealing traces of grace, through which trust may become possibility. Confessing that I may at times occupy centre stage of my inquiries, my wandering has nevertheless found its direction through the contexts and environments occupied by those whom I met, and whose lives and stories informed my own. The living, and writing of my Christian life, is thus not merely about seeking God or seeking to understand faith as phenomenon, but also seeking to understand the life of individual faith in a community and fellowship with others. The ambition of my work may sometimes appear close to evangelizing. It is, however, an attempt at understanding the reality and condition of living in faith/in grace/in Christ/in the Spirit, as concepts and phenomena of a living relationship with God.

I hope to let my material speak as I write, allowing for the writing to become an event, not just a representation of what happened or of thoughts I have thought, but being a means of discovery, leading towards *a* meaning, amongst many possible ones, showing how understanding is always in the process of happening, in the process of being formed. The idea of language as a medium of intersubjectivity lies at the heart of my ethnography, where a personalized textual form seeks to create resonance with the reader, testifying to the fact that language is not just language, and that a literal translation of meaning is not sufficient to create the form of understanding that may act as a unifier of people. Taking as a foundational ground the ways that we are human, the emotions and existential needs that connect us utterly emphasize the connections between the anthropologist and the people he or she writes about, as well as between the anthropologist and the reader. May the reading of the text be an event, a

journey also for the reader, to venture into the wealth of personal associations that occur as companions to any reading. Please join the joyride.

3

Trusting in God

*Were not our hearts burning within us
while he talked with us on the road
and opened the Scriptures to us?*

Luke 24:32

The scripture verse above refers to the story of the two men walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus three days after Christ's crucifixion, being absorbed in conversation about this event and the rumours of his resurrection. When the risen Jesus walks up beside them and joins in the conversation, they do not recognise him. Not until he joins them for supper and breaks the bread before giving it to them, do they see that it is him. The scripture verse expresses the hindsight upon which the two men now view the walking with Christ in a new light; the burning in their hearts, which they now acknowledge, testifies to an aspect of the encounter, which illuminates the fact that this was not an ordinary event. They were walking with the risen Christ, and the knowledge of this facticity converts the journey into a singular, special experience, transforming the rumours of Christ's resurrection into truth, as doubt transformed into faith.

An insight drawn from the biblical narrative of the two men walking with Christ, points to the aspect of *seeing* him, becoming aware of his presence, as an important aspect of the spiritual walk. This chapter deals with the issue of trusting in God with different areas of one's life, from within different contexts, based on events that took place at the start of my second fieldwork. Some of the insights into what trusting in God may involve for someone, comes from conversations with Suzanne and stories from her spiritual journey. Her narrative also becomes essential in terms of creating a context for understanding the meaning of the prophetic for her. I present the first meetings at Marsham Street, as well as in Green Forest, comparing and reflecting upon the different approaches to faith that they expressed. Regarding what went on both around me and inside of me on the spiritual stage of these meetings, my narrative rests upon a selection and creation based on my own participation and understanding, focusing on the experiences of my body more than a general theoretical analysis of the meetings as field

material. For the parts of my text where I am experientially engaged, I am writing from the perspective of my own story. In these sections I employ Ellis and Bochner's perspective of autoethnography as a narrative form of writing one's research as a story that shows bodily, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual experience (Ellis & Bochner 2006).

For both Suzanne and I, seeking God and the reality of God involved a personal process of becoming aware of and situating ourselves existentially, acknowledging significant aspects of our situation, in the past as in the present. An underlying theme thus relates to the exploration of how our personal histories influenced our spiritual orientations, and how the creation of a spiritual narrative and context, grounded us in a concrete way in the actuality of the lives that we were living. This perspective forms the backdrop in the chapter.

Healing meeting in London

As I have said before, from quite early on in my fieldwork, I started attending the meetings at a different church with a more charismatic focus, together with people from the church in Green Forest. This church was in Marsham Street, and we only referred to this church *as* Marsham Street, although that was only the name of the street, not the church. My own attending of these meetings threw me headfirst into an exploration of some of the elements of the spirituality that the others were seeking, soon becoming engaged myself in a seeking based upon my own personal history. I start my portrayal of Marsham Street by referring to the first meeting I attended, as an extended field case:

A few weeks after my arrival, Suzanne asked me if I wanted to come along to a meeting in a church in central London that she and a couple of others from Green Forest had been talking about visiting. A healing meeting was going to be held at the Emmanuel Church in Marsham Street. According to Suzanne, the meeting was associated with a church in Lakeland in Florida, where a revival had originated in March and still lasted. Great miracles and healings were meant to have happened in this American church, and some of the people involved in the revival there had now come over to the UK to conduct some meetings in London. "Have you heard about it?" Suzanne asked me, which I had not, having just arrived in England. I was not too familiar with charismatic churches, which would be the label for this type of church. I didn't feel overwhelmingly keen on going for my own sake at the time; I didn't feel that I needed to explore charismatic church life, but it might be interesting as part of my

fieldwork I thought, since people from church were going. Suzanne didn't feel that bothered about going either, she confessed, but she would go if I wanted to. "Did you ever come to Marsham Street when you were last here?" she asked me, referring to my first fieldwork. There used to be charismatic meetings at the same venue, some pretty 'wacky' ones, according to Suzanne, about ten, eleven years ago, that she had often attended. In one of those meetings, she had been given a prophecy concerning a documentary about her work that she was participating in at the time. What had happened at this particular meeting was that the speaker on stage had said to the audience that he had a prophecy for someone present, and then continued by saying that it had something to do with a documentary being made. There were other details in what the speaker said that made Suzanne think that the prophecy was meant for her. The speaker wanted the person who felt that the prophesy was for them, to come up on the stage to be prayed for, and Suzanne thus ended up going forward to the stage. I remembered then that she had told me about this meeting during my last fieldwork, as well as others that she had been to at the same place. The speaker on stage was Martin Scott, one of Suzanne's heroes within the Christian scene, due to his prophetic voice and engagement in spiritual warfare. She must have attended these meetings just before she and I met for the first time, since I had never been to the church in Marsham Street myself. A conclusion as to whether or not we would go to the healing meeting was not reached at the time of this conversation. Suzanne brought up the issue of the healing meeting about a week later, this time stating that she was going to the meeting and then asked if I wanted to come. I asked her why she had made the decision to go now given her indifference the first time she suggested going. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "I'm bored". I still wasn't sure but decided that I might as well come. The meeting was the next evening, which was a Friday.

Around 6 pm Friday afternoon we met outside the train station with two of the others who were going, Estelle and her teenage daughter Mandy. Another woman, Jenny, would come later and meet us at the Emmanuel Church. I knew Estelle and Mandy from my last fieldwork, and had actually interviewed Estelle ten years ago, in relation to her knee being healed. We found our seats on the train and started talking about the meeting ahead. Estelle and Mandy were both enthusiastic about going, and Estelle clearly stated their expectations; "We're going to get our knees done!" I asked her about the healing that she had experienced ten years ago, and she said she had been well for a few years, but then for the last couple of years, her knee had become increasingly worse again. Her daughter had suffered a bad fall that had injured her knee and elbow recently. Estelle asked me what my thoughts were, and I admitted that I

didn't expect very much, I didn't feel anything towards the meeting, but had thought that it might be interesting to come along. Suzanne confirmed that she felt the same way as me. "Maybe your stomach pain will get healed?" Suzanne suddenly shot in with a glint in her eye to me. Estelle and Mandy's openhearted enthusiasm inspired me to share some details of this ailment of mine that Suzanne had referred to. I suffered from occasional chest burn caused by acid from the stomach reaching the oesophagus, which of recent had been a recurring problem; I had in fact suffered the pain only the night before, and several times since we had arrived in England. However, I had not considered this pain a case to bring to a healing meeting before then. But as soon as uttered, the possibility of a 'what if' must have started brewing in me, creating a slight sense of expectation. This was no doubt also helped by the fact that as we got on the train, the all too familiar pain had started raising its ugly head, causing my bodily orientation to disintegrate into an anxiety about the coming agony.

We arrived at the Emmanuel Church early, about half an hour before the meeting was to start, but it was already quite full and still filling up with people. The main hall was a big auditorium under a high, domed ceiling, with a scripture verse from the Bible written all around its circular walls. At the front was an elevated stage, now filled with musicians and their band. In front of the stage there was a space about 4-5 meters wide, separating the stage from the seated area. The crowd seemed more varied and multicultural than the common service in Green Forest, but the dress code of those present seemed to imply middleclass. There seemed to be an overweight of people in their middle ages, then quite a few our own age – mid-thirties and up, but very few young people under 20. To the left of where we were seated was an open space where people sitting in wheelchairs had found their place. My chest burn had got quite painful, so I wasn't managing to be fully present. I felt impatient, I just wanted the meeting to start, so that the end of it would be closer, and I could go home. The meeting was opened shortly afterwards by the Pastor of the church, an older, kind looking Chinese man, introducing the speakers who had come from America, and also giving a brief account of the revival that was going on 'over there'. It was the main speaker in Florida who was meant to have come to the Emmanuel Church this weekend, but he had been forced to cancel last minute. Instead, it was two other speakers from the same church who had come over to 'share' the spirit of the revival with us this evening. 'Impartation' they called it, claiming that this revival was different from previous well-known revivals like the 'Toronto Blessing' and the revival in Azusa Street in Los Angeles, since this new revival could be taken to other places, whereas the others were

concentrated to the place where the revival broke out¹³. Quite shortly after this ‘ceremony’ of introductions was over, the worship band was presented and started playing the worship music that constituted the first part of the service. Jenny arrived at this point and took her seat that we had kept for her.

The worship was in the style of melodious pop songs with Christian lyrics, many of which appeared already familiar to those present. My friends seemed to know the songs too, occasionally lifting not only their voices but also their hands into the air, while closing their eyes, in obvious response to the songs. I myself was not entirely joining in – as usual, I might say, not knowing the songs and not feeling like singing. I quietly wondered if I would respond to any of the songs, in terms of being moved. The songs were quite typical for the worship in evangelical churches, as I had become acquainted with them so far; lively and catching, using words like Majesty, Prince of peace, King of heaven above etc. to describe Jesus. I got particularly hung up with the lyrics of one of the songs, where the phrase ‘You are the Majesty beyond the galaxies’, was sung repeatedly. I found it quite cliché and thought to myself that maybe it’s the phrasing of the songs that don’t appeal to me. The songs aimed at bringing praise to God didn’t resonate with me, and I found myself wondering if there might be something wrong with me, since I couldn’t join in with the rest of the congregation in singing praises. I didn’t feel emotionally or mentally engaged by the songs, which was quite likely also due to the fact that I was in pain. I had not yet taken any of my medication, which I had in my bag. I thought that if I were to get better while I was at this meeting, I needed to know that it was not due to medicine. While I reflected upon my distance to the worship, a new song was being sung, circling around the image of Jesus as the lamb, the Lamb of God, being slaughtered for humanity. This song instilled a new sense in me, a sense of being moved. I think it was the content of the words, portraying Jesus as the slaughtered lamb, as well as the melody of the song, mellow and meditative, that found me and lifted my heart. At some point during the worship, perhaps at this song, my pain receded, and with great relief my body once again sunk into a relaxed pose.

¹³ This information was actually not accurate, as the revival in Azusa Street is considered the beginning of the Pentecostal movement, due to missionaries from Azusa Street travelling to other parts of the world, making Pentecostalism worldwide (Robeck Jr. 2000).

After the worship was over the stage was passed on to a young American pastor, Jerame Nielsen¹⁴, who would be in charge of the healing session. He was a man who seemed to have a lot of confidence, and he seemed to speak with a certain kind of authority. It was obvious both from the way he spoke, and from the way he held his body, naturally striding up and down the stage as he talked, that he really believed in what he was saying and doing. He said with unshakeable confidence that we were going to see some great healings here today. Then he prayed a general prayer casting out all sickness. I had already decided, despite my scepticism, to lay my doubts aside for the time being and enter the scene fully, in order to not put any limits on my experience. I reminded myself that I was not only there by virtue of my Christian faith and my particular reflections concerning healing and charismatic mass meetings, but also as an anthropologist. In order to conduct the type of fieldwork that I wanted to, characterised by participation and involvement, I had to allow my body to sway, together with the others, to the rhythms and the movements of the various 'conductors' of this healing performance. Only by trying to let myself be lost in what was going on around me would I have any inkling of what a potential healing experience could involve, I thought.

After having made this decision I started to take heed of what was going on in my body as the healing ceremony proceeded. The pastor talked about what had happened during other meetings that they'd had; people had been healed for tumours, some had received gold fillings in their teeth (!), and one woman who came to a meeting in a wheelchair, walked out afterwards. Nielsen said that he was not going to get people to come down to the stage for healing, because God could heal people wherever they were; hence there would be no laying on of hands, and consequently nothing that happened could be said to have been 'enforced' by the speaker. What he would like though was for those who received healing to come down to the stage afterwards and give their testimony for the glory of God. Then he started to sing a worship song with the band, and I found that he actually had a good voice. He was throwing himself into the singing and the being upon that stage, in a way that only strengthened my impression of him as a person with great confidence in himself. Whatever one might say about healing ministries, it was clear that this man was not 'faking' his commitment and belief in God and the phenomenon of healing. He believed in who he was, and the faith in God that he stood for.

He started to pray again, and his head moved from side to side, as if he had tics. He seemed to be totally oblivious of his appearance, throwing himself into the prayer with his eyes

¹⁴ I will be using the real names of the speakers and musicians at Marsham Street since these were public meetings.

closed. He wrinkled his eyebrows in concentration, and then he started to name different illnesses. He said that he 'saw' various illnesses and seemed to name them as they appeared to his inner eye; a tumour in a woman's head on the left side, high blood pressure, knee conditions, problems with the digestive system – at this point Suzanne looked at me as if to ask if that could apply to me, but I didn't think so and shook my head. The speaker went on ordering various illnesses to go, and I noticed that I did feel some sensation going on inside, then suddenly – and by this point he was banging his arm into the air as if to beat the illnesses literally out of people's bodies, he said, or rather shouted in a loud voice, 'burning in the oesophagus'! His words hit me with their accuracy, my heart jumped as if I'd been startled, and I instantly thought that this must be for me! Then I started to shiver from within my body, and my knees felt as if they were becoming weaker, a little like the shivers one gets when in enormous stress. Suzanne looked at me again, questioningly, and I nodded. I immediately started wondering if I had the courage to go down to the stage, then feeling a little insecure about whether or not I had really been healed, since my pain comes and goes anyway, and there was no way of testing it out right there and then. I looked at Suzanne for confirmation of what to do, and she said it was fine if I didn't want to go down. In the end I went down to give my testimony after all. Whatever it was, something had happened inside of my body. Estelle and Mandy had already gone down to the middle to join the queue for the testimony, as had also loads of other people. A woman stating that she had been diagnosed with a tumour in her head was at the front speaking into a microphone, claiming to having just been healed from the tumour. Another woman whom I recognized from the open space next to our seats for people in wheelchairs, walked staggeringly down the stairs towards the stage. When she got to the front, she shared with the rest of the audience that she had come to the meeting in a wheelchair because she was not able to hold her spine upright, due to an ailment she was born with. But now she could, she had been healed, she said into the microphone for all to hear. It was Estelle and Mandy's turn to share, and they both said they had felt a burning sensation, and Mandy couldn't feel pain in her knee anymore. A young woman who seemed to be part of the pastoral team, came up and said that she thought she'd had a prophecy for Mandy. She prayed for her in front of the open microphone, saying that Mandy would have wisdom beyond her age, and that others would come to her for advice. When it was Estelle's turn to share her testimony, she said a little bit about how her knee had been troubling her for years. Then she said that as the healing session went on, she had felt a burning sensation in her leg, but not in her knee, thus she couldn't tell whether she had been

healed or not. The speaker prayed more for her knee, and then asked her how it felt. Estelle said the knee started to burn, and the speaker praised God for the healing.

When it was my turn to share, I said I wouldn't be able to fully know if I had been healed yet, since my pain comes and goes, but I had definitely felt something in my body when he'd said, 'burning in the oesophagus'. The speaker praised God, and then asked for my hand. With my hand in his he prayed for me that I would never have the burning again, telling the devil to stay away. I was a bit puzzled at his bringing the devil into the picture, but I didn't say anything. Afterwards I walked up the stairs to take my seat again. Mandy had clearly been very affected by what had happened to her because she couldn't stop laughing, giving out little shrills of hysteric giggling now and then. I looked at Estelle and she shook her head towards her daughter. I started feeling anxious about my own daughter who was alone at home at the moment, and decided it was time to be on my way, the clock was already past 10 pm. Suzanne left together with me, the others stayed, as the healing meeting continued on.

“Fire on Marsham Street”

The healing meeting that I have described in this chapter was part of a series of meetings that would continue running throughout the autumn of 2008. The first meetings were held during the weekend when I first went, and then the meetings continued every Thursday evening until Christmas. It was Gerald Coates, founder and one of the leaders of the Pioneer Church in England, who initiated the meetings at Marsham Street. Gerald Coates had also been involved in running the meetings at Marsham Street in 1997 through to 1998, which Suzanne had talked about to me. It was at one of these former meetings Suzanne had been given the prophecy about the documentary that she had been involved in ten years prior. Within the Christian environment, many believe that some people have the gift of prophecy. Gerald Coates is thought to be one of them, and as he expressed in his blog, which I read after returning to Norway, it was a number of prophecies that led him to start the series of new meetings at Marsham Street. To give a sense of the trajectory of the prophetic element as an instigator for action, I will share a few posts from Coates' blog:

On his blog¹⁵, Coates wrote in 2008, that the background for his initiating the meetings at Marsham Street this time, were two prophecies about shoes, a new journey and new work

¹⁵ <http://geraldcoates.wordpress.com/2008/07/24/fire-on-marsham-street/>

starting. Shortly after Coates had received these prophecies, a woman in his church had a prophetic picture for him, in the form of a mental image of red grapes being pressed out. She also had the words “This will not produce a Beaujolais Nouveaux but Premier Grand Cru”. According to Coates, a few days later a visiting preacher was on stage in Coates’ church. He commended the church for their work, adding “This will not produce a Beaujolais Nouveaux” and then put his hand into a brown paper bag and pulled out a £ 90 Premier Grand Cru, indicating the same message as in the woman’s prophecy for Coates earlier. A quick google search reveals – to the person (i.e., me) not too versed in wine labels and categories, that a Beaujolais Nouveaux is a wine from the Beaujolais region in France, which has only been fermented for a few weeks before being released for sale, making them light bodied and pale in colour. The most popular and widely exported nouveaux wine is the Beaujolais Nouveaux. To be classified as a Premier Grand Cru wine, is on the other hand a sign of quality that only the best wines from the most prestigious chateaux will acquire, based upon both the vineyard and the wine territory’s reputation. These wines are of course top shelf, also price wise. In his blog, Coates presented the second ‘wine-episode’ as a confirmation of the first ‘wine-prophecy’. He then drew on another prophecy, which was given publicly in the course of the revival in Lakeland, Florida, where the preacher John Arnott had announced from the platform that the wells dug in the 90s in London would reopen. As I understand Coates, he interprets the meetings he held at Marsham Street in London in 97/98 as such wells; sources for bringing new spiritual life. The onset of the new meetings that he was part of initiating at the same venue ten years later, he considered a reopening of the same wells.

Placing the new prophecies into his file of previous prophecies, Coates wrote in his blog that he then reread the most recent of the older prophecies, from about a year before. This prophecy he had received from an evangelist who intimated that Coates was planning to step back, and let others take over. Coates confirmed that this had indeed been his intention. However, the opposite would happen, the evangelist had stated, and Coates would re-dig the wells in Westminster (where Marsham Street is), and by this act increase the influence with church and media. Through a further series of ‘accidents’ as Coates called it, tongue in cheek, he met up with the pastor of Emmanuel Evangelical Church, which is the venue of the meetings in Marsham Street. After prayer and discussion, they sensed that “on Thursday July 24th at 7.30 p.m., we should open the doors at the Emmanuel Centre and invite the public in for worship, getting right with God, impartation, fresh anointing and ‘re-dig the wells’”. As Coates showed

on his blog, it was on the background of a conviction that this was what God wanted him to do, that he started up again with the meetings at Marsham Street.

Moving on from Coates' blog to the actual meetings at Marsham Street: The first meeting that I went to with Suzanne and the others that Friday evening, was the second meeting that belonged under the headline chosen for the autumn's series of meetings: "Fire on Marsham Street". The name was a reference to the aim or purpose for the meetings, which was an 'impartation of the Spirit', which involved that people would be filled with the Holy Spirit and through this Spirit filled encounter be enabled to touch people in their own churches with the Spirit, or with the 'Fire of God', as the Spirit is also called. I will not try to assess whether this ambition came to pass or not, but I do believe that the promise of an 'impartation of the Spirit' may have intersected the longing for a stronger sense of the Spirit in everyday- and church life that many of the members of Green Forest expressed to me. In this respect, I came to see the travelling to and attending of the meetings at Marsham Street as reflecting a longing for a more Spirit filled life of faith, as well as a concrete approach to address this longing. The meetings at Marsham Street became an important intake for my understanding of religious experience and provided me with material to reflect upon the reasons behind seeking such experience. The meetings also instigated and became one of the settings for my own seeking and explorations of this form of spirituality, which was so 'other' in many ways, to the spirituality I had expected to find when I came to the field.

Experience and narrative

In my text I write a lot about experience and how we make sense of experience through narrative, creating order through text (Bruner 1990, Riessman 1993). What then is experience and what type of experience is important to my work? In chapter 1 I referred to Merleau-Ponty's concept of primary experience (Merleau-Ponty 1962) and Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of firstness (Daniel 1987), both referring to the immediacy of experience. Edward M. Bruner relates the concept of experience more specifically to the writing of ethnography, offering helpful perspectives that are useful for my purpose. He takes as a foundation for his understanding of experience the German thinker Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of *Erlebnis*, meaning, that which has been 'lived through'. Dilthey wrote that "reality only exists for us in the facts of consciousness given by inner experience", which Bruner translates into *ethnography* as the concern with how individuals experience their culture, or how events are received by

consciousness. By experience he means not only sense data, cognition, or reason, but also feelings and expectations, stressing how experience not only comes to us verbally, but through images and impressions. In other words, lived experience in terms of our interpretation or awareness of facts is the primary reality to which anthropology should give its attention (Bruner 1986b: 4-5).

Regarding my account of the first meeting at Marsham Street, it may seem largely a report of what happened in the auditorium in terms of what I saw from an external gaze, regarding the type of crowd, the style of music, the way the speakers comported themselves on stage, the wording of the message spoken, etc. However, these were not the aspects of the meeting that I came there to describe. What is of interest to me in my narrative, is what I encountered in myself. In this regard I notice that I first stated, while we were still on the train, that I had no expectations of the meeting. This statement was in response to Estelle's enthusiasm, through which she expressed her expectation of healing for her knee. As soon as Suzanne suggested the possibility of a healing for me as well, I felt a slight sense of expectation in my body. There was suddenly an object for an expectation to attach itself to, something more concrete to carry into the meeting than a bewildered gaze; I had gained an intentionality. My attention and awareness had found a focal point, grounded in my own body. This experience of expectation also centred my anthropological gaze, stirring a determination in me to immerse myself into the event of the meeting, rather than remain exclusively in the position of the distanced viewer.

As I have selected the attentiveness I experienced in my body towards the possibility of a healing as central to my narrative, there were two other incidents awakening new senses in my body during the meeting. The first relates to how I felt moved by the song portraying Jesus as the lamb of God being slaughtered for humanity. The other regards the sense of puzzlement I felt as the speaker praying for me mentioned the devil. Neither of these senses revealed a meaning to me there and then. They were like little butterflies fluttering in the air on the outskirts of my space of awareness. Hence, these senses have not become the centre pieces of my reflections, neither in the actual experience, nor in my fieldnotes or the interpretation of my fieldnotes, which I am currently engaged in. According to narrative theory, I have thus made a selection to organize and articulate my experience (Bruner 1986b). How I made this selection, or rather how the selection was made through sensory processes in my body, I find interesting. I am becoming aware of how the selective process may not always be very clear and may also give the impression of a conscious and deliberate act. This is where a focus on the experiencing

body may bring more clarity, revealing the position of the senses in conveying meaning. To this avail, I have often found it useful to employ some of the concepts used within Gestalt theory, which is an approach to human health and growth focusing on the interrelationship between emotion and body, based on the seeking of awareness of 'here-and-now' experience, or the ongoing experience of each moment (Norberg 2006). Regarding the attentiveness that I experienced in my body towards becoming healed, versus the two other senses I also had, Gestalt's concepts of figure and ground may serve as an illustration of the selective process. Here, figure is that which holds our gaze or attention in a particular moment, whereas the ground is that which is hidden or more distant to our awareness. The concepts of figure and ground are perceived as elements in our perception of the world, where that which is considered 'figure' is seen as connected with a need becoming present to us in that moment. Like a painting of a specific object also consists of the negative space around the object, to which we pay less attention, the concepts of figure and ground relate to the perspective that "we cannot see the totality of ourselves and our environment simultaneously. Some things become figure, while others remain ground, depending on our needs at the time" (Sills, Lapworth & Desmond 2012: 47). In this perspective, selection happens in relation to the emergence of a psycho-physiological need. For me, my attention had become directed towards the question concerning my need for healing, whereas other sense impressions had been placed in the background.

When I write down my experiences in a meeting into my fieldnotes, trying to capture the immediacy of what happened in my body, I make a representation, I create a narrative, which later becomes what I relate to in my search for the meaning of the experience. In this respect, my own narrative becomes aligned with other people's narratives in the sense of being created. The challenge in relation to writing about other people's inner experience is that I do not have direct access to it. I can only experience my own life and what is received by my consciousness. What I have regarding other people's lives are expressions of their experience, sometimes witnessed by me through my participation in events together with them, but mainly in the form of interviews and stories from their lives. Such representations, like my own I may add, are ambiguous, as Riessman points out. When it comes to the creation of narrative, stories "do not mirror the world 'out there', (or 'in there' – my comment) but are constructed, creatively authored, rhetorical, replete with assumptions, and interpretive" (Riessman 1993: 4-5). The process of selection related to my own inner experience, which I have access to, shows the challenges involved in the representation of experience, both regarding myself and others, in that I cannot say it all, only that which I become conscious of. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the

fact that fully representing an experience is impossible, but states the value in representation nevertheless, if we recognize that what we present is but one perspective, which is incomplete, partial, and selective (Merleau-Ponty 1962). It may be helpful here also to refer to Dilthey's distinction between mere 'experience' and 'an experience'. The former is individual experience received by consciousness in the temporal flow. The latter is the intersubjective articulation of experience, which has a beginning and an ending and thus becomes transformed into an expression (Bruner 1986b). It is the latter, 'an experience', that I can write about, that can be constructed into a narrative, and whose meaning I can try to understand.

The phenomenon of seeking the presence of God and identifying the voice of God, may serve as a joint signpost for both my own and the others' motivations for going to Marsham Street, and subsequently our creation of narrative regarding our experiences. We wanted to hear from God. Now, how could we do that? It was not as if God turned up as the manifestation of a corporeal Jesus on stage, speaking directly to us. What we relied upon was the hope for God's spirit speaking to us, his voice reverberating through our bodies, bringing presence and clarity to our lives. This sensory voice however, occurred not only in a body with its own personal history and positioning, but within a cultural context consisting of the vision and message of the meetings, carried through the speakers, through the music, through the healing prayers. In this respect, our bodies were immersed into systems of meaning speaking to our bodies, our belief systems, sometimes pulling us out of a framework of meaning to which we had perhaps unknowingly belonged. The question I must eventually ask then, is what cultural systems of meaning fuelled our narratives, and to what extent the voice in our individual bodies had the freedom to communicate itself and be understood within a given system of meaning. As I move on to describe some conversations that I had with Suzanne in the aftermath of the first meetings at Marsham Street, I also want to show how my voice and the orientations of my body, played a part in my selection of the aspects of Suzanne's narrative that I gave attention to.

Tested by God

The morning after the first healing meeting, Suzanne and I were enjoying a late Saturday breakfast, while we were talking about last night's events. This weekend it was only Suzanne, my eldest daughter and myself who were in Suzanne's house, as the rest of my family was with my 'in-laws'. The week after, my family and I would move into our own rented house for the

rest of our time in the field. For now, we were free to pursue the luxury of uninterrupted conversation, which soon became centred around the issue of trusting in God:

Suzanne wanted to know how my tummy felt, and I said it felt fine. I knew she was inquiring about the potential healing of my condition, but it was too early for me to say whether anything substantial had changed. The conversation soon took a turn, gently steered by me, towards Suzanne's journey with God over the last few years. Suzanne said she felt that she was learning to trust in God in a new and truer way. She related the onset of the process to an incident that had happened ten years ago, when she was travelling to the airport to catch a plane. She had been delayed on her way, and fearful, on arriving at the airport, that she had missed her flight, she had felt the Holy Spirit say to her, in her heart: "Pray about it!", upon which she had instantaneously responded, silently, to the sense of the voice inside of her: "This is far too important to pray about". She said what she had meant by her response, was that there was no time to stop and pray, it was more important that she hurried as much as possible to catch the plane. She rushed to the check-in to find that the boarding had just closed, and she missed her flight. This incident had prompted the realization in her that she did not trust in God: She had felt the Holy Spirit urge her to pray about her present need, i.e., catching the plane. Instead of taking the time to pray, she had ignored the urging of the Spirit that she had felt inside. Her interpretation of her response to the Spirit that day, as she shared it with me during breakfast, was that she had not believed in what God was saying to her, thus exhibiting a lack of faith and trust in God¹⁶. Suzanne said that over the years, since the journey of learning to trust in God more began, she felt that God had shown her different things. One of the things that God had made her recognize was her tendency to perceive of herself as not very important. At some point she had realised that her habit of wanting to help other people, although probably ingrained in her personality both by nature and nurture, could in some instances be related to the way she viewed herself as not being important. Being undemanding in terms of her own needs, she thought had affected the way she also related to God, in terms of not expecting too much for herself. She paused as she said this, then pondered aloud: "In instances of

¹⁶ "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:25-26). In a Christian worldview, the Spirit is the sign that Jesus left for his followers, for them to know that although Jesus was no longer present in human form, he was still with them in their bodies, *in spirit*, as the voice of a counsellor in the heart.

unanswered prayers, I think I have subconsciously put the lack of receiving what I asked for down to the thought that my request is not all that important”, she said, and continued: “It seems that this is a perception that God wants to change”. Suzanne reached the conclusion that the message God was giving to her at this point in her life was: “What you want is important to me”.

Against the background of Suzanne’s devotion to help others, I found the message from God that ‘what *she* wanted was important to him’ particularly interesting. This message from God, rather than containing guidance as to how Suzanne should go about realizing her potential as a helper, was about *herself* and who *she* was in the sight of God. To me, the image of God bursting through Suzanne’s story, was one of a God who did not *expect* as much as he was *giving, nurturing, soothing*, at the same time confronting her perception of herself as unimportant.

Suzanne went on to say that she had recently been going through a particularly difficult period related to not seeing her hopes fulfilled. When she one day grabbed her Bible to read, it just happened to open on Job, and she thought to herself, “Yeah, okay, so maybe you (God) are telling me that I’ve been through a test, like Job”. I knew that what she meant was that the Bible had not opened on this exact page by accident, but that it was God thus drawing her attention to this piece of scripture¹⁷. She said she had felt a little reluctant to take this scripture verse to heart however, resisting the idea of being tested. The reference to the book of Job in the Old Testament was a reference concerning the testing of Job’s faith and trust in God, that God allowed according to this book. Since I already knew the story of Job, I understood without questioning Suzanne that a reference to Job alludes to the concept of being tested by God. Suzanne continued her story by referring to one morning during the same period, when she had woken up with the sense or half dream of a party or celebration of her winning something, and the words “You have passed the test”. She did not know what to make of this dream, or whether to take it seriously at all. Later the same day, her sister texted her and said that she had just had a picture of Suzanne in a graduation gown. The visual imagery presented by her sister, seemed to Suzanne to relate to her own sense earlier of having passed a test, with the

¹⁷ This is a well-known anticipation for Christians when reading the Bible: That God will draw one’s attention to scripture verses of specific consequence to the believer, reflecting the message that God wants to give to a particular person.

implication that the test had been completed. Suzanne still did not understand exactly what this meant. Suzanne continued her story: One afternoon, she had been working on her computer in the front room, and the telly was on with the old version of the film “Charlie and the chocolate factory”. She was not watching it, but suddenly a scene caught her attention; it was a scene where Charlie and his grandfather were leaving the factory, the grandfather being all upset with Willy Wonka for having tricked them, saying, “How cruel you are to play tricks on a little child’s expectations and dreams like this”. By this sentence, Suzanne had burst into tears. “A children’s movie had me in tears!”, she exclaimed as she told me. She had realised that the grandfather’s words expressed exactly how she herself was feeling towards God. The next thing that happened in the movie was that Charlie, despite his disappointment and his grandfather’s indignation, ran back to Willy Wonka and thanked him for the experience. When he then returned to his grandfather, ready to leave, Willy Wonka called him back, and told him that he had won the prize! He said that he’d had to act in the manner that he did, to test if Charlie would be up to the task. He needed to know that he could trust in Charlie. Suzanne said that this made her feel as if God was saying the same thing to her; that she herself had to be tested, and that she had now passed the test. What test she had passed, and what prize she had won, she didn’t know. But the message from God seemed to testify to the fact that she would not have to do anything more – and that she should simply trust in God.

By this conclusion, Suzanne’s story came to a temporary end. Temporary, because the tale ended with a question: What was the test and what was the prize? The answer seemed to be floating in the air. The end of Suzanne’s story revealed a surplus of meaning that had not been laid to rest, producing an air of restlessness and anticipation in the atmosphere. Suzanne’s desire was to figure out what the sequence of events that she had just told me about, meant as a direction for her life, and her narrative also ended with a question mark directed at me, inviting me into the mystery. At that moment I too felt like I needed to know how Suzanne’s story would proceed. It almost felt like a quest to find the source for the restoration of her life, for her story to resume its momentum. What I experienced when Suzanne told me her story, was personal engagement. I became involved in her story, not just hearing her words and her account, but responding with the senses of my body, as an active listener, wanting to help her find the answers she was seeking. I had become a participant in the story, becoming absorbed in its world, allowing me to experience its mode of existence (Steeves 2004).

Experiences of absorption and abstraction in relation to listening to a story constitutes different modes of being present, according to Ann Kristin Eide. Referring to Young's phenomenology of narratives, she describes stories as events in a conversation, which may transport the listener to the realm of the Tale-World. This realm occurs as the listener becomes immersed into the story as a partaker. Young also refers to the Story-Realm, signified by the researcher's attention to the construction of the story and how the narrative is performed, discerning patterns and themes from an analytical perspective, relating from a mode of abstraction, most commonly associated with narrative investigation (Young 1987, referred to in Eide 2008). Being concerned with personal experience, it is the phenomenology of absorption that interests me, both in relation to the meetings I describe, as well as in relation to Suzanne's narrative. When I became a partaker in Suzanne's story in the manner described through the term Tale-World, this immersion is testimony not only to the intersubjective potential in language, but also to my relationship to Suzanne. I did not relate to her strictly as an anthropologist taking account of her story, but as a friend wanting to engage in her perspectives, her life, desiring and receiving the same in return. In this respect, our friendship has had consequences for the way I conducted my fieldwork in relation to Suzanne. In this relationship, I allowed myself to become a lot more involved than in any other relationship in the field. Developing close relationships with those participating in the research has often been advised against, as Joy Hendry discusses in relation to her friendship in the field. During a stay in Japan, Hendry became friends with a Japanese woman. The women kept in touch over the years, visiting each other and each other's families, deepening their friendship. Later taking up anthropology and returning to Japan for her fieldwork, Hendry started to rely on her Japanese friend's help both as a research assistant and as an informant. At first this arrangement proved beneficial to both, but eventually a case of role conflict developed, in the end turning the friendship quite 'sour', in Hendry's words. Exposing the feelings and expectations of the individuals involved, she raises the issue of the personal cost of the knowledge acquired. Becoming acutely aware of both advantages and dilemmas of turning a friend into an informant, Hendry still stresses the ultimate benefit to professional enquiry of long-term, in-depth relationships (Hendry 1992). Concerning Suzanne and I, we managed to avoid the role conflict described by Hendry, perhaps because in our case, she was an informant before becoming a friend? Whatever the reason, our friendship has continued over the years.

My friendship with Suzanne developed alongside my work as an anthropologist and would not have happened without my fieldwork. Because of my own spiritual journey and the

emotional connection that arose between Suzanne and I, this journey was always what bound us together, and in this respect, although it was my anthropology that brought us together, my profession always had the back seat in our relation. If we have taken liberties with each other, it has been in relation to our faith and spirituality, at times perhaps causing us to overstep the boundaries of privacy with each other, in terms of the comments we have made upon each other's lives and perceptions. This is the sort of dialogue that we have been engaged in with one another across time and space, one consequence being the continued conversation and dwelling upon events that have happened, when the meaning of these seems not to have been laid to rest. Such events are witnessed also in my ethnography. I will give an example of how Suzanne's narrative continued to live with me, nourishing both my spiritual and my anthropological consciousness.

Relating to God as Father

Years after the conversation with Suzanne, I was reading an article about Calvin, in relation to a summing up of church history. According to Calvin, God's relation to humanity is dominated by two images: God as the fountain of good and God as the father who cares for his children. To acknowledge these images of God, was what Calvin understood by piety. Calvin considered faith as the recognition of God's fatherhood, thus opposing the understanding of faith as a dread of God, or as the fear that God might be against us (Hastings 2000). Reading about Calvin's perception of faith as the acknowledgment of God as father, reminded me of what Suzanne had talked about that day, concerning how she felt that she was learning to trust in God through a sense that she was important to him. My recollection of our past conversation combined with these new reflections suggested to me now that the process Suzanne had been in at the time, may have been one of moving towards an understanding and experience of faith, wherein God more and more took on the image and quality of father. It seemed to me in this retrospective glance, that the relevance of Job in casting a light on Suzanne's story, i.e., life experience, lay in the prospect of Suzanne's identification with Job in terms of Job's sense of hardships and his experience of being tested by God. The Job narrative in this new perspective seemed to me to point towards a recognition of Suzanne's *experience*, in terms of how she felt about herself and her life at the time. Like Job, she was struggling to find out why she was experiencing hardships. Read this way, the reference to Job was not an *incentive* for further action, as had been Suzanne's first interpretation. In this new perspective, the story held a touch of a father's

comforting arm around the shoulder of his child, instilling in the child the sense and reassurance that 'it is over' (the hardships). I found myself thinking that the graduation gown had symbolized the end to the ordeals of passing the test. After the test, the hard work was over and there was rest. However, our focus at the time of Suzanne's narrative had been on the testing, trying to figure out what the test had been and what actions had been involved in bringing the test to an end. Ironically, dwelling on this part of the message involved an orientation that was still engaged in studying for the test, rather than 'laying the books down' and trusting in the fact that the final exam was over, in joyful relief. I reasoned that what Suzanne had experienced, more than actually being tested, was perhaps a form of therapeutic process of becoming aware of herself, where some of her misunderstood self-perceptions as well as her perceptions of God, were undergoing a sort of correction or even healing. Suzanne's sense that God was involved in this process, was perhaps her experience of a gracious God reaching out to resurrect her bruised self. Seen from the basis of this perspective, Suzanne's narrative as a description of the 'here and now' that she was living at the time, seemed to speak of her way of relating to God then, rather than concerning a future situation symbolising a test coming to an end. In Suzanne's former narrative, God appeared more as a potential judge, than as a father, I felt.

The example above of my continued engagement in Suzanne's narrative, exhibits my continued involvement in Suzanne's life as a friend. I was still a participant in Suzanne's life, and as an anthropologist, I was also an observer of this life and the meanings that could be drawn from it. This meaning was, however, construed by me, and of course also reliant upon the construction of my own narrative, drawn from my life, whose light was tentatively shed upon Suzanne's narrative as well. In my life, the concept of grace was becoming the most prominent inquiry into faith, gradually stirring in me the perception of God as gracious, forgiving, redemptive and justifying, above all else. The test analogy conjured an image of a judging God, which did not fit with the image of God as a gracious father. It was my own convictions reaching out to Suzanne. When I at this point shared an earlier draft of my recent interpretation of her narrative with her, she said she could relate to what I said about God as a father, whereas my reflections regarding the image of God as a judge did not resonate with her at all. I hence withdrew these latter reflections from my text and have only mentioned them here for the sake of showing the narrative intertwining of our lives. This narrative had however not yet reached its conclusion.

Suddenly, and long after the reflections I have described above, I had an urge to start watching *The Lord of The Rings*, which I had not seen for many years. In the first film in this

trilogy, different persons throughout the first part of the journey towards Mordor, encounter the temptation of whether to take the powerful ring for themselves, or to resist its call. Galadriel, the elf queen of Lothlorien, also faces this challenge, seeing in a vision herself with the power and might she would behold if the ring were in her possession. Trembling with temptation at the opportunity before her, as Frodo presents her with the ring, she battles the dark forces in herself, and returns to herself and the purity by which she is known, declaring with relief: *I pass the test!* Immediately, at these words, my thoughts went back to Suzanne's story regarding the test analogy. In Galadriel's case, the test related to her ability to withstand temptation and choose the forces for good, rather than the forces for evil. Applying this perspective to Suzanne's story, she was also in a situation involving a choice between good and bad. When Charlie ran back to Willy Wonka to thank him for the experience, rather than remain in an experience of disappointment and upset, where he carried on his perception of Willy Wonka as cruel, he chose to see the good in Willy Wonka and the experience he'd had through him. This choice, Charlie's return to Wonka in gratitude, was Charlie's choice of grace, rather than resentment. Was it a similar test Suzanne had passed, I thought to myself? Even the story about Job contains this test, where in fact the devil, upon charging God with the claim that the only reason for Job's faithfulness to God was his wealth and wellbeing, is allowed by God to rob Job of everything he has. Job withstands the temptation to blame God for his misery, instead faithfully continuing to praise and worship him. I can only wonder, but the symbolism of Suzanne's continued efforts to believe in a God as trustworthy as a perfect father, despite her hardships, seemed to mirror the courageous faith of someone who still chooses to believe in the good forces of God. After having watched *The Lord of the Rings*, I texted Suzanne to tell her of my associations between Galadriel's understanding of passing the test as representing the choice of the forces for good, and her own sense of having been through a test. She texted me back saying that she had been thinking along the same lines recently herself. So far, it seems this narrative has finally found its conclusion in the understanding of the test as representing Suzanne's choice of God/good.

In the vocabulary of Gestalt theory, the laying to rest of the narrative concerning the quest for the meaning of the test analogy, can experientially speaking be described as the completion of a 'whole'. As mentioned in chapter 1, Gestalt believes that the human need for wholeness is expressed in our bodies through a drive for balance, growth, and health, called an organismic self-regulation or homeostasis (Norberg 2006). Strictly speaking, my need for completion in this case seems to have equalled, or even surpassed, Suzanne's. My

representation of Suzanne's narrative is lined with my own drive for balance, as well as my need to understand grace as the laying to rest of every attempt at self-perfection from the human end, acknowledging grace through God alone.

Connecting on the prophetic

About three weeks after our first meeting at Marsham Street, another piece in the puzzle about Suzanne's hopes and expectations appeared in a conversation between us about the healing meeting we had been to. We were sitting in the front room of my house this time, which my family and I had recently moved into. I refer from my fieldnotes:

Suzanne said to me that she was going to Marsham Street for another healing meeting the following evening, which was a Thursday. She asked me if I wanted to come. This time I was not as hesitant as I had been when she first asked me, and I said yes straight away. Suzanne added that she did not feel stirred up to go, it was more a matter of boredom – as she had also stated the first time. When Suzanne was saying that she did not feel stirred up, it was her way of saying that she did not feel that it was the Holy Spirit urging her to go, through a sense of need or desire felt within her. Whenever Suzanne felt stirred up inside, it was for her an indication that she was being called by God to take a particular action or pay specific attention to a subject. According to what Suzanne had just said about boredom, there hence did not seem to be a great sense of expectation in her towards the meeting.

There was a question that had puzzled me of late, and it came back to me as we were talking about Marsham Street. Throughout August, the month we were currently in, there was a summer break from the services in Green Forest Community Church. In this period people from church would meet for barbeques and picnics on a Sunday instead of church, and my family and I took part in some of them. These Sunday gatherings enhanced my impression of the strength of the social bond between people in church but left me unaware of the quality of the spiritual bond between people and between people and the church in Green Forest, due to the mainly mundane conversations. I therefore asked Suzanne in what way the church in Green Forest was significant to her; was it because of the spiritual aspect or because of the social aspect of the church? She didn't seem to have to think about the answer for very long: "You know, over the last six, seven years the church has really changed. I don't connect with the service in the same way as I used to, and the worship isn't the same anymore", she said. I asked

her if she thought that in general, and by that I meant for most people, the significance of this church now lay in the social gathering of people more than in the preaching and the service. She seemed to ponder upon my question, but when she answered, or rather exclaimed, her mind was clearly still working on my first question: "Do you know what's wrong with me in church? There is no one that I connect with on the prophetic! And this is why I want to go to Marsham Street! You've just made me realise why I want to go!" She seemed quite pleased with the realisation. "I'm not interested in the healing, it's the prophetic!" Although she had mentioned Marsham Street in relation to her previous experiences with the prophetic and stated that the presence of Gerald Coates at these meetings was one of the reasons why she wanted to go there, it was as if she was now realising a new dimension of her expectations of and desire to go to Marsham Street. It was as if she for the first time, or perhaps for real, had become aware of what she was missing in church or in her life and hence looking for at the healing meetings; not a potential healing experience, but the possibility of connecting with the prophetic.

Our conversation moved on to reflections about our lives when I was last living in Green Forest. We had shared a house, we had shared experiences and thoughts with each other, and in general spent a lot of time together. The two of us had also regularly spent time with two other guys from church whom we shared the interest in the prophetic aspect of faith with, Simon and Ray:

Suzanne referred to the way we had inspired each other back then and said that this atmosphere was changed for her now, and that there was no one whom she shared the prophetic with. She mentioned the importance of another guy, Tom, now moved elsewhere with his family, who also had engaged with the prophetic dimension of spiritual life. Tom and Simon had also been mentioned by Lizzie and Gaby in my conversation with them in the park, that I described earlier. Suzanne continued: "When Tom was around, he and I used to text each other, and he would have prophesies for me. We could 'rub shoulders' with each other. I am not saying that I don't consider church important, because I know that it is, but its importance is not so much for what it can give me spiritually. I think that if I had been able to use my prophetic gifts in church, then church would have a different importance to me. Did I tell you about the prophecy I had a few years ago? I sensed God saying that church only works in about 5 % of its giftings, and if we prayed it up to 7 %, we would see great things happening!". "So why isn't church interested in doing this?" I asked. Suzanne lifted her shoulders a little, shrugged, and then

suggested fear. “Fear of what?” I asked. “They’re being protective”, she said. “In what sense? Is it a fear of being ‘dodgy?’” I asked. “Yes, I think so”, Suzanne concluded, then added, “Which is good, of course – in a sense”. The reference to ‘dodgy’ referred to common perceptions of churches with a strong charismatic profile as running the risk of emphasizing spiritual experience above social action. Suzanne in a sense incorporated both aspects of church in her Christian walk, as she was socially engaged to a high extent through her work, as well as desiring to live in accordance with what she felt the Holy Spirit was saying to her. “But I’m not blaming church; this is just as much my own responsibility”, Suzanne went on to say. “I should have stepped out and pushed it more, but I have not had the courage to do so. A few years ago, Jenny was trying to encourage me to take hold of the prophetic in church a lot more, but I just really felt that I couldn’t. I said to God, ‘If you want me to, then you know I will’. I think God gave me a break really from all the church stuff, which was also necessary for me. Martin Scott once said that before you can step out in the prophetic, you need to have seen the prophecies that God has had for you come to pass”. I asked her if she ever felt that unfulfilled prophecies were hindering her in stepping out in the prophetic, and she said “Yes, absolutely”.

Suzanne said she wondered if the new meetings at Marsham Street would have the same inspiring effect on her now, as ten years ago, but said she didn’t feel convinced that they would: “Things are different now, it is not a given fact anymore that just because I’m in a place with other Christians, the meeting will connect with me. Like the first healing meeting that we went to at Marsham Street; that didn’t really connect with me, although there was quite a good amount of time given to worship, which is often a part of the meeting that I particularly connect with”. Suzanne then brought up a meeting with a preacher called Jean Darnall, which she and I, Simon and Ray had gone to during my first fieldwork. This meeting was held in a smaller town outside of London that we had travelled to one afternoon. The boys had heard that Darnall was considered a prophet of our time, and so we made all this effort to go and hear her speak. “I connected with that meeting”, Suzanne said. “Yes, we all did” I replied, remembering the excitement as this woman, who was considered to have the gift of prophecy, prayed for each one of us individually after the meeting. She had never seen or spoken to me before, but her prayer was about my writing, and it was spot on, I had felt.

The enigma of connecting was not going to be solved that evening. I could feel the pull to assist Suzanne in recovering the connection again, but it was getting late, and Suzanne had

to get up early for work the following morning. I walked back to her house with her, it was only one street up from ours. On the way we continued chatting, enjoying the fact that for the time being, for as long as my fieldwork lasted at least, we were able to pursue and continue the close friendship that had grown between us during my first time in the field.

Looking to the face of Jesus

The next evening, as we had agreed, Suzanne and I went to Marsham Street. It was only the two of us this time. It was not that she felt stirred up to go, it was more that she was bored, she had said yesterday. After our chat about prophecies the night before, however, I think we both felt that going to Marsham Street might be interesting after all. I guess we felt more like we knew what we were looking for, or at least that we knew more what Suzanne was looking for. I was still feeling a little bewildered as to what I was seeking spiritually, but I knew it was something. From my fieldnotes of the meeting:

Gerald Coates was present, to Suzanne's joy, and spoke a little at the beginning. He referred to the team from Florida who had conducted the meeting that we went to some weeks earlier at Marsham Street. He talked about some prophecies that applied to Marsham Street, and which he claimed connected that meeting to the revival which was going on in the US. – "Jean Darnall had a prophesy some years ago, where she saw a map with fires over a series of cities throughout England. She said that these were the fires of God, representing great revivals to come. I believe that these revivals are happening now", he said. I looked at Suzanne. I remembered that Jean Darnall had been talking about seeing fires on a map which she interpreted as revivals, at the meeting that Suzanne and I had been to with Simon and Ray. Coates said that it was the current revival in Florida that had brought about these Thursday meetings now, which were hence in a way picking up the thread from ten years ago. It felt odd to hear Coates bring up Jean Darnall, when we had been talking about her ourselves only the night before.

Then the main speaker was introduced, Christen Forster, the founder of a church called River Church. Forster wanted to focus on the presence of God and said that this meeting was to be about the renewal and refreshing of people's faith. He wanted to pray for an impartation of the Holy Spirit for people, and he wanted us all to join together in the worship and in an exercise to experience the presence of God, so that we could all be in unity, because that's when

the Spirit of God would descend at its most powerful. A speaker like Forster would no doubt be called charismatic. There was no effort involved in listening to him, and what he said was in no way dry. It was as if his voice filled me with a kind of presence, as he lost himself to a wave of speaking or to a river of words just pouring out of him from a great beyond. As he spoke, he would take little breaks of speaking in tongues. He was not going to preach to us, he said. What it was he was doing then I was not sure of. He must have meant that he was not going to interpret a specific part of the Scriptures theologically. He talked about analytical knowledge and the reality of the presence of God as two different things; a distinction which fitted right into my own theme. I guess by not preaching he meant that he was engaged in creating the reality of the presence of God, more than he was going to teach us about God's presence intellectually.

Forster said that at times when we experienced being low, we should look to the face of Jesus, and that would revive us. I remembered having heard those lines before: Ten years earlier, at a farewell get-together just before I was leaving the field, Simon had said to me to look to the face of Jesus. He said he felt that I would encounter difficulties after returning to Norway, and that when that happened, I needed to look to the face of Jesus. "Just look to the face of Jesus", he said. He had been right about the difficulties, but I was not sure I had ever really figured out how to look to the face of Jesus. Forster wanted us to close our eyes then and visualise the face of Jesus. I so did, worried that I would spoil the presence of God for everybody else if I did not. I first saw Jesus' face, kindly looking at me. Then I lost concentration for a second, and I lost the image. When I tried to retrieve the image again, there were lots of people before my eyes, where the face of Jesus had been. I felt a little sense of panic, as I tried to bring him back again, but the crowd of people did not move. I thought to myself that this is how it is for me; I am standing far away from Jesus at the other side of the crowd, and I cannot see him clearly anymore. Then the face of Jesus came flying above or through the crowd, and it was transparent, so that through his face, I could still see the crowd, or through the crowd I could still see his face. I felt reassured, as the meaning seemed to be that although I might not always feel as if I see him, he always sees me, through the crowd. It warmed me, and I thought that maybe this was not the experience of the presence of Jesus as the speaker had imagined it, but I had to be honest. I had to accept the place where I was at, and not try to fake it, to meet someone else's standards of belief.

It was time for the impartation prayers. Neither me nor Suzanne felt stirred up to go forward for prayer, although I said to Suzanne that I might have liked to ask somebody's opinion about my pain. A few evenings ago, I had suddenly started to feel bloated, and soon the

all too familiar pain related to the burning sensation in the oesophagus had started. This time, however, the pain had settled in a lower point of my stomach. I had been puzzled about this fact, wondering why the pain had moved, and what then to make of the pastor's prayer that the pain was never to return, which had happened at the first Marsham Street meeting. Suzanne said to me; "Why don't you go down and ask the man with the ponytail to pray for you? He used to be an officer in the Salvation Army, and I think he is a very wise person". I followed her advice and moved toward the part of the stage where this man was praying for people. When it was my turn to speak to the ponytail man, I explained that I had been prayed for concerning pain in the oesophagus at the first meeting here recently, but that I was still having pain, although a bit lower down than before. He said that he obviously did not have all the answers, but that there was an enemy (i.e., the devil), so that could be a reason for why the pain was still there. He asked me how long I had known the Lord, and I said that I had been a Christian all my life. "But probably you are not as close to the presence of the Lord at the moment?" the man said. I didn't know how to respond to this statement, and I didn't really like to think of my faith in those terms. The man then said he wanted to pray for me. He prayed that I would experience a greater sense of God's presence, and that I would walk out of there with a sense of peace. He prayed that the peace of the Lord would be with me. It felt good when he prayed, as if a warmth surrounded me. But I thought to myself as Suzanne and I were leaving shortly after, that I didn't think I was feeling any different from before.

After leaving the building we headed towards Victoria train station, and I asked Suzanne about her experience of visualising the face of Jesus. "Oh, I got disturbed and never got around to doing that", she said. "But I have done similar exercises from a book that I have at home" she said kind of apologetically. "Some of those exercises were amazing, and I even did them with my small group". "What are they like?" I asked, and Suzanne continued: "There were exercises where you were to ask God to describe you in three words...I've done this exercise myself, but I'll tell you about it later, what I felt God said to me; I feel that it sounds like bragging". Another exercise was to ask God what he would do to make you laugh!" Suzanne then added and looked at me with big eyes that seemed to indicate exclamation marks. I said they sounded a little bit scary in a sense, these exercises, and she smiled and nodded. "But they are amazing", she held. "You would think that one would only apply one's imagination when doing them, but it wasn't like that at all, because the words that described me, for example, I would never have chosen myself. It felt a lot deeper than anything you could have made up yourself".

We walked on in silence for a while. I was pondering upon what Suzanne had said about the visualisation exercises, feeling the urge to know more, and to try these exercises myself. There was a strange feeling in me, and I could not determine what it was. I knew that I would not be able to grasp this feeling yet, so there was both a sense of acceptance of the necessity of waiting, and a sense of impatience due to the knowledge of this waiting, in me. The two experiences of personal character that I'd had at the healing meeting, i.e., the visualisation of Jesus' face and the prayer by the ponytail man, both seemed to indicate a distance in my relationship with Jesus. The sense of this distance made me sad, and although I didn't know if the indication of distance was true, it felt as if a part of me had started to realise that it was.

The exercise of looking to the face of Jesus encouraged by Christen Forster, emphasized the perspective that seeking the presence of God, *experiencing* a sense of the presence of God, could bring renewal and refreshing of one's faith. There were new perspectives on faith and spirituality being presented at Marsham Street, and I was on a journey where I tried to immerse myself in what was going on, at the same time as I tried to understand different aspects of where those around me were positioned. Attending the meetings at Marsham Street was for me like taking a crash course into seeking the presence of God through various approaches to healing and the prophetic, encountering different perspectives on the word of God and the power of God.

Entering the Glory Zone

Although all the meetings at Marsham Street were aimed at creating a space where people could experience an impartation of the Holy Spirit, different speakers emphasized different beliefs regarding what God could do. I was soon to be introduced to another speaker, with a particularly extraordinary message. In the beginning of September Suzanne, Estelle and I went to a meeting at Marsham Street again. Suzanne had informed me about this meeting a few days earlier, showing me a picture on a flyer of the man who was speaking, David Herzog. He was an American, and he had his own TV Company or TV mission. It was a picture of himself and his wife on the flyer. They looked very happy, perfectly made up and...well, very American. My first impression was that they seemed a little bit too glossy. I voiced my prejudice to Suzanne. She agreed, but suggested we overcome our prejudice to give the guy a chance. It might be good, she said:

Like the other speakers, Herzog spoke quickly, without manuscript, and sharing incidents of signs and wonders from his own ministry. I soon had to admit that Herzog was mastering the art of gaining a crowd's attention and engagement, and in this sense, he was a brilliant speaker. He seemed to have the audience from the first sentence. At one point, Herzog said "Don't analyse, just go with it", upon which Estelle gave me a nudge, and said "That one was probably for you!" Herzog was different than the other speakers in certain respects though. The miracles he spoke about didn't relate first and foremost to the healing of illnesses. He encouraged a wider perspective on our expectations of what God could do, as well as encouraging the audience to actively engage with that expectation there and then. Herzog wanted to open our eyes to new miracles, not just the ordinary ones that one always encounters at healing meetings, he said. He asked the audience if we'd ever heard of a spontaneous weight loss miracle. Well, he could tell us that he had prayed for many miracles of this kind and seen them happen. He then addressed those in the audience who had a few extra pounds that they would have liked to lose and said that he was going to pray for an instant weight loss. He asked people to hold on to their trousers and skirts, because in the case of weight loss they might fall down. I cannot remember now how those desiring this miracle were to indicate their desire for weight loss, but people were not to come forward, we were instead all asked to stand up to join in with the prayer. Herzog started to pray out loud from the stage, and after a while he asked if those who had lost weight would come forward to give their testimony – and show how baggy their clothes had become. A black woman who was in the row in front of us ran down to the stage claiming to have lost weight, pulling out her skirt at the waist to indicate how big it now was. We looked at each other, asking if anyone had noticed what this woman looked like before, but none of us had paid any attention to her waistline. We didn't know what to believe, but left the healing claim as it was, accepting that this woman believed she had lost weight. Perhaps the speaker wasn't satisfied with the result of his communal prayer, because he now claimed that sometimes you have to go with a prayer, act as if what you prayed for has already happened, to encourage the prayer to come to pass, sort of. He encouraged those who had not experienced instant weight loss and had prayed for this, to express their prayer by running around the whole hall: "Just go for it, express how much you want it!" Several people took him up on this call, and for the next ten minutes we witnessed a small marathon of people trampling at modest speed around the auditorium. Well, if nothing else, Herzog certainly lived up to his American reputation. Suzanne looked at me with worry in her eyes. "Can you believe he's

getting people to run around hoping they will lose weight?” She felt genuinely concerned for those people and the disappointment they would feel if nothing happened. Which I think all of us thought the most likely result.

Herzog did come across as someone who was genuine in his passion to demonstrate the great power of God, although frankly, what he preached did not necessarily happen, at least not this evening. The instant weight loss prayers testified to another issue than extraordinary miracles; it also showed how concerned Herzog was with the time element: In a day and age where the media overflows with a multitude of diets requiring a commitment over time, Herzog offered instant weight loss. And weight loss was not the only example of a miracle where time was a major element. During Herzog’s speak, he took the audience with him on a story from a car journey he’d made from the Netherlands to Belgium. He was going to have a meeting somewhere in Belgium and he was being much delayed and had to admit to himself that he was not going to make it on time. Suddenly he realised that he was not driving in the area where he by natural laws was meant to be driving, and that in fact, he was no longer in the Netherlands, although he had been several hours away from the border. He had actually been ‘transported’ into Belgium supernaturally, through some form of divine teleportation! I cannot remember whether Herzog had made it to the meeting in time – I was too flabbergasted to take notes – or whether he had just been slightly delayed. But the message was clear, whatever the outcome of this particular ‘transportation’; God had performed a miracle of the most extraordinary kind one could ever imagine.

With this latter incident, I think we have arrived at the outline of the core of Herzog’s preaching: He wanted us to imagine something so ‘out there’, so unexpected and extraordinary that it would change our whole perception of who God was and especially of what God could do. And in this respect perhaps Herzog was talking mainly to those who were already very familiar with the charismatic aspects of faith performed on a charismatic stage, those whom ‘nothing’ could impress anymore. I was definitely not in that category; I was still trying to get used to the idea that healing of an illness was something that one as a Christian was allowed to or even supposed to expect from God, not to mention believing in miracles beyond my wildest imagination. Herzog did seem to enjoy making fun of the most common stereotypes of a Christian, and at one point he imitated a person who was under the influence of the Holy Spirit, or under the anointment, as is also a term commonly used. Generally, the term implies that a person feels somewhat ‘heavy’ due to feeling the presence of God, feeling that God is urging them to say or do something specific, for instance give a prophecy to another person or to the

congregation. Herzog's imitation of someone praying under the anointment was performed as a person carrying a very heavy burden on his back; Herzog was bending forward, talking in a shaky voice that seemed able to utter words only through tremendous effort. This was admittedly a little bit funny, as Herzog seemed to be playing a very recognisable character to many Christians, and giggles were heard throughout the auditorium, our own row included. It was great fun to be at David Herzog's meeting, there was no doubt about that!

Herzog then introduced the Glory Zone. The Glory Zone was a zone or a space consisting of God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the angels, or so I understood it. It was a space where one would get into immediate contact with these four dimensions of spirituality. Living in the Glory Zone was different from being anointed, Herzog said and presented this life as an opposite to living under the anointment with all its strenuous aspects. Praying within the Glory Zone would result in prayer requests coming to pass immediately, he said, and I imagined he meant without the weight and heavy breathing of the anointment. Again, he spoke of the immediacy of things happening, instantly seeing prayers come through. By entering the Glory Zone, we would live life in a place where we would see amazing things. Herzog demonstrated what he meant by playing a different character to the one who had been under the anointment: This time he was a person who prayed a prayer and appealed, literally, to God as father, Jesus as son, and to both the Holy Spirit and the angels, and claimed that by following this formula, then boom! He was there, in the presence of God, without having to take the detour through anointment. In the Glory Zone, you could ask and expect anything from God and actually see it happen. Often Christians would pray to either God, Jesus or to the Holy Spirit, Herzog said. He presented the conviction that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit representing different persons in the triune God, also represented different forms of power, and that therefore it made sense to appeal to all three at the same time. Since the angels had often been used by God to make things happen on earth, their power was significant as well. There was a kind of smack effect to this idea of the presence of God in the Glory Zone; God's presence was instant, poignant and powerful. Herzog's perspective on the presence of God seemed quite different to Forster's perspective, which had alluded more to the traditional sense of anointing.

It was time for prayer. Estelle didn't feel that her knee had been entirely healed after the first healing meeting and wanted to ask Herzog about this, so she went down to the stage to get into the queue. "What did he say?" Suzanne asked when she came back after a little while. Estelle shrugged her shoulders and said Herzog had just told her to keep going for it; keep praying until it worked. She didn't seem all that happy with his response – naturally, since what

she had hoped for was instant healing. It was a bit intriguing, to have got some sort of a recipe for a new way of praying that would bring immediate results – although it was also obvious that praying in the Glory Zone did not always work the way the speaker had claimed. Estelle, for one, did not seem to have come out of the Glory Zone with her knee – or perhaps she was never in it? – and the prospect of ‘keeping praying’ was not what Herzog had promised through his concept of the Glory Zone¹⁸.

There were aspects of Herzog’s idea of the instant presence of God in the Glory Zone, which seemed blurred to me, and gave a sense of not presenting the whole picture. The question emerged of what to do with this presence of God once it was evoked? Something was clouding my mind and I could not get my head entirely around Herzog’s conception. It was as if my mind refused to take in what had been said, and when I tried, a sense of confusion descended on me. I was however, soon to engage the idea of praying in the Glory Zone in relation to my own life, which gave me the opportunity to reflect upon this belief in relation to a concrete context.

A stolen scooter

My youngest daughter Hannah was only two years old when we were in the field, and she was still sitting in a push chair. My son Erling soon found it exceedingly unfair that he, being four, had to walk while his sister got to sit comfortably in a buggy. So, we bought him a small scooter. Whenever we went for a walk now, which was practically all the time since we did not have a car, he happily scooted a few metres ahead of us on the pavement. He loved his scooter, and never demanded getting a lift in the buggy anymore. Walks had become a lot easier after the arrival of the scooter. One day as we returned home after grocery shopping, the scooter was unfortunately left out on the pavement in all the palaver with getting the shopping and buggy in the house. When we were going out again a few hours later, the scooter was sadly gone. Erling was devastated and started crying when I told him his scooter had been stolen. I was quite upset myself and felt so sorry for my boy. It felt like a small disaster had struck. I prayed

¹⁸ I am aware that I may present the meeting with an air of skepticism or incredulity. I would like to stress that this is a reflection of my positioning at the time, more than a comment upon what may be supernaturally possible.

silently that we would find the scooter, that somebody had just been tempted to borrow it for a while, and afterwards had thrown it into some bushes where we would find it later.

I did not manage to settle emotionally the whole day. The incident would not leave my mind, and my heart just would not lift, no matter how I reasoned with myself. I felt a great need to be in prayer about the scooter, pleading with God to bring it back. I remembered the meeting at Marsham Street the evening before, about praying in the Glory Zone to see things happen straight away. I tried praying to get the scooter back by appealing to God as father, Jesus as the son, the Holy Spirit, and the angels. I did not feel certain about whether I prayed in the right way, but at least I tried. At the same time, I had to reason with myself about praying to get the scooter back. I was not entirely sure if praying for a scooter was really a cause worthy enough; it was after all not a crisis of major dimensions. What if the scooter had been stolen by somebody who could not afford buying a scooter for themselves...? Strictly speaking I thought I would be able to buy another scooter for Erling – and I probably would do so, due to the importance of the scooter for him. Still, we were not loaded financially, having to pay the mortgage on our house in Norway in addition to the rent for the house in London, as well as paying the nursery fee for both children in Norway to ensure they kept their place there, and paying for a child minder for Hannah in England – on top of other costs. In the end I decided that whether I expressed poor judgement of what was a worthy cause for prayer or not, if I was honest about how I felt, the issue of the stolen scooter was of major importance to our family at the moment. So, I threw myself whole-heartedly into the praying over the scooter, not only pleading politely with God, but at times also claiming, if not demanding, that the scooter be brought back. Intellectually being aware of the probable unlikelihood, even impossibility – not to mention childishness – of such a claim, emotionally the claim now seemed entirely reasonable to me and fuelled the fervour of my prayers. I firmly believed at this point that we would get the scooter back! I did not expect anyone to ring the doorbell and deliver the scooter just because I prayed about it. I expected to find it through my own efforts. I therefore went out for a walk in the area; up and down the street to Erling's school, checking under bushes and trees along the way, going into adjoining roads and alleyways, walking the route to the shop, etc. The blue scooter with the orange wheels was nowhere to be seen. My mind was working on high speed, trying to think of places where a scooter might be likely to be dropped off, in the case of somebody finding it and wanting to make an effort to bring it back to the rightful owner. Once or twice, I thought of the library, with a slight sense of hope, but did not find the thought likely, so shrugged it off. The search was result-less, and I went home and tried to

induce some realism into my body by accepting the loss. I guess one could say that the intentionality of my prayer life at that moment had certainly changed, directing my spiritual awareness towards something other than my own self-reflection or confession.

The day after, on the Saturday, I suddenly felt like going to the library to ask if someone had handed in a scooter. The library was in a building connecting ours and Suzanne's streets, and it was such a short walk I might as well pop in. I was still feeling the hope that I would find the scooter and decided to give it a last shot. I went into the library, walked around and in between the bookshelves looking for it, then peeped over the counter to see if it was there. I could not spot it anywhere, and hope was swapped for disappointment. I turned to leave, thinking it was just too unlikely that it would be there, but standing in the little hallway waiting for the automatic glass entrance doors to open, I thought to myself that I might as well ask since I was there anyway. So, I went up to the counter, joined the queue and when it was my turn, said to the lady behind the counter; "I know it's unlikely, but has anyone handed in a scooter?" and the lady promptly answered "Yes", turned around and went into a room right behind the counter, and came out with an identical scooter to Erling's! I was amazed and absolutely blown away! "Is this it?" the lady said, and I responded "Yes!" She continued; "It's been here for ages", and I of course knew then that it was not Erling's scooter. I said my son's scooter was stolen yesterday, and I had thought to ask at the library, and that it was just the same sort as he'd had. It was amazing, and yet sad, because I had been so close! I felt a bit confused at the experience as well. The lady from the library turned then to put the scooter back into the other room as I had to admit that it was not my scooter. An old lady was standing next to me and said as the lady was removing the scooter that it was hers! The other lady stopped again, and the old lady said she had only been joking and gave a little laugh. Then she continued, now directed at me; "But I don't see why you can't have it, if it's been there for ages. I don't know what their policy is on matters like these". It was as if the old lady had given me the cue to take up my act again, and her comment prompted me to ask the lady behind the counter what their policy was. I recognised that I was feeling as if that scooter was meant for me! She said she'd have to talk to her manager and went into a different room to talk to another woman. This other woman came out, and I told her my story again. She asked me if I had a library card, which I did, and said that if I left my name and number, I could have the scooter, and bring it back if someone else asked for it later. I happily agreed to that and walked out of the library scooter in hand!

The concept of the Glory Zone became distant to me after this incident. For me, the message about the Glory Zone had been a call for action in the circumstance of my son's stolen

scooter that encouraged me to pray, desire and believe, as well as practically look for the scooter. The incident did however not generalise a practice of entering the Glory Zone as the means of fulfilling all my needs and dreams. Once the context of a lost object and the desire to have it back had gone, there seemed no purpose in applying the idea of this way of praying. This feeling of a lack of purpose points to an essential aspect of Herzog's message that he himself did not expand upon: There is actually a need for a purpose, because it is from within a sense of purpose that a conviction grows, and that's what I had in the circumstance of my son's scooter being stolen. There was also another component in my action to get the scooter back, which I did not consider at the time, but that I became aware of later: I acted as I did out of love for my son. I did not seek to experience the power of God for the sake of this experience. I acted on behalf of my broken heart that was aching for my son's wellbeing. The aspect of love as the major force, as well as perhaps calling, in my desperate effort to 'activate' the Glory Zone, was not mentioned in Herzog's exposition of it. What my experience of getting my son a scooter taught me at the time, was to acknowledge that sometimes the unexpected happens. The incident encouraged my belief that there is indeed a place, where one can come with the most extraordinary of requests or claims, and sometimes experience the wonder of having them granted. I might have experienced Herzog as a bit 'over the top', in terms of his views on the instant effects of praying to God in the Glory Zone. Yet ironically, through his encouraging of a new way of trusting in God, raising awareness of just how extraordinary God is, I was inspired to expect from God, to plead with God and to pray to God, in a way that I would not normally have done. Through extraordinary events in my own life, I received a glimpse of the extraordinary power of God turning something bad into something good. Although I did not start to expect God to meet my every need through demonstrations of his power in this way, I did learn to acknowledge and believe that God could indeed do the extraordinary, if only I could overcome my own sense of ridicule at asking him for something that a part of me deemed 'unlikely' and perhaps even 'silly'.

Recently, in my final review of this chapter, a scripture verse found in Mark 11: 24, has been brought back to me: "*Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours*". It is a peculiar experience, to feel that you own something before you have it. But this was the state of my being, my conviction, at the time when I scurried around looking for the scooter, fuelling my prayers. As I am writing these lines, I am reminded of the conversation with Suzanne that I presented earlier in this chapter, where she said, "I sensed God saying that church only works in about 5 % of its giftings, and if we prayed it up to

7 %, we would see great things happening!”. When I asked her why, she said that she thought church was reluctant to pursue a more charismatic approach out of fear of being dodgy – a word that may also be translated as dubious or untrustworthy. Considering my experience of praying for the scooter, in the Glory Zone, on behalf of the love for my son, I suddenly feel now that I see the church’s fear in a new light. As I reasoned above, appealing to the praying in the Glory Zone without a specific purpose, being birthed from within, would perhaps run the risk of becoming a seeking after a manifestation of the power of God alone, not for the sake of love, but for the sake of demonstrating the extraordinary. As I had come to understand the church, such a condition was not a part of its vision. Finally, and oddly, the very subjective experience of finding the scooter, that I shared above, came to give me a sense of what might have been the underlying reason for the church’s scepticism towards certain aspects of the charismatic.

The countercultural way of seeking God

The theme of the extraordinary carried on at the next church service that I went to, however in a different way. The Sunday after the Herzog meeting, the services in Green Forest Community Church started up after the summer. I was looking forward to church starting again, feeling a little as if my fieldwork could properly kick off now.

*It was Clive, the officer of the church, who was giving the first sermon. He spoke about a book that he had read and greatly enjoyed, during the summer. It was *The Idiot*, by Dostoyevsky. Clive said the book was about a Christ like person, of whom everybody was trying to take advantage. No matter how he was treated, the Idiot saw beauty in people and remained innocent in his approach to both people and circumstances. *The Idiot* stood out as a rare and unexpected individual in a society wrought with greed and self-interest, an example of how kind and innocent people might be abused by others, but still hold on to what is good and self-less. The story pointed to suffering and the human condition of experiencing hardships yet choosing to align with what is good. Clive used his book review as an appeal for us to strive to be more Christ like and in this way countercultural. He talked about how Jesus never sought to be extraordinary, he never sought to draw attention to himself, although he did draw attention, and he was extraordinary. Clive used as an example the story from the New Testament of Jesus’ 40 days of fasting and prayer in the desert, a story that also says something about suffering, presenting an image of a God who is willing to suffer for us. At one point in this story, the devil*

tempts Jesus to throw himself out from the top of a mountain, to show everybody that he will manage to land safely anyway. Clive emphasised how Jesus did not do that. He was not tempted to show off. The next thing Clive did, was to encourage the congregation to seek God's voice in the midst of our everyday, busy lives.

In retrospect, I think that what the first service in Green Forest after the summer provided was a healthy balance to the meetings at Marsham Street. What Clive said made me think about these meetings and their seeking to be extraordinary, drawing attention to the power of God. Clive did not point to the extraordinary aspect of God's power but to God's voice, the reason being, in my impression, to bring awareness to a fact that I often forgot: That to have faith in God was to trust in God's omnipresence, the fact that God was near, and that he is actually near all the time. It felt like an inspirational reminder of the presence of God in a different way than how this aspect of faith was presented at Marsham Street. In Clive's perspective God *was* present. In the perspective presented at the two last meetings at Marsham Street, God's presence was something that one *sought*, as an obligation almost, something one *should* do as a Christian, and where the presence of God was described as something that one more or less had a *right* to experience as a Christian. In Clive's words, God's presence came across as a gift. God's voice was one that we could seek to listen out for *during* the busyness and commotion of our day. It felt like an invitation to trust in the *being* of God, rather than the *doing* of God. The Marsham Street meetings may have run the risk of rendering the everyday into something of lesser value, whereas Clive had lifted and emphasized the every-day aspects of life as a Christian and a God of love, present at all times and in all situations. I recognised that I felt different at the prospect of acknowledging Clive's perception of God's presence, to the restlessness I felt when hearing about the presence of God at Marsham Street, because it felt like something I had to accomplish. Clive's speak made me aware of a sore spot inside of me where it seemed my longing for God resided. The sore spot resembled nostalgia: the sweet memory of something old, something precious, and something loved – yet the sore spot did not only hold nostalgia but hope, because what was there was not gone, but still present – although perhaps forgotten. On the other hand, if I took seriously what Gaby, Lizzie and Suzanne had talked about, the charismatic renewal that the church in Green Forest had once been influenced by, seemed to have run dry. According to them there seemed no expectations of God to perform the miraculous anymore, a state which was clearly in contrast to the countless healings and wonders that not only the speakers at Marsham Street talked about, but that the rich history of

the Salvation Army also testified to. A perspective of not trusting in God for anything extraordinary, may not either have presented the best image of an extraordinary God.

Another interesting element of Clive's speak, appearing not through my experience of it, but through my later construction of the speak as narrative, is the continuity from Suzanne's narrative of trying to understand the test analogy, to Clive's interpretation of Christlikeness. Clive presented a perspective on how to deal with hardships, by holding up Christ as an example of choosing what is good and selfless despite one's own suffering and abuse. It was the same perspective of choosing good, which was echoed in Galadriel's words 'I pass the test', in the face of her temptation. I did not make this connection at the time, and neither did Suzanne, who was not present at this meeting. It is interesting how the message came through via several narratives across time.

*When Clive finished his speech, a man called Edgar entered the front. Edgar read a paragraph from a book called *Life of the Beloved* by Henry M. Nouwen. The text was written as a declaration of God's love for every person. Edgar took us through a reflection about the Beloved, about how much God loves us. I found the words very moving and had to struggle to control a lump in my throat. As a form of meditation, we were supposed to close our eyes and imagine Jesus sitting in front of us. I knew instantly that I would not be able to enter into this meditation without succumbing to tears, and I didn't feel ready for that. I listened to the words but made sure not to let them affect my emotions too much. After the service I felt a little exhausted, the way one might feel when one has had to bring up a difficult issue that has affected the relationship to a person close to you. After such a conversation, one might feel exhausted, yet fresh – as though one has been through catharsis, and all the debris of old has been washed away. In the same way as a conversation may reunite an estranged couple or friends, this service focusing on Christ and God's love for us, felt like a reconciliation between myself and God, because somehow my flawed perception of God as someone I needed to make an effort to find, felt cleared away. The service created a sense in me of God's constant presence, and his unconditional love, in a way that made it possible for me to believe in God's character of love. It felt like a place where God was, and Clive and Edgar were involved in creating a space for this present moment, where God was felt. I did not feel like I wanted to get to a place where God was, which was perhaps the sense that the last Marsham Street meeting had instilled in me – I was already there, through no effort of my own, but the creation of a space, and of awareness, given like a gift.*

As a conclusion creating narrative unity, I end this chapter with the meditation that Edgar invited to, imagining Jesus sitting in front of us. I did not see this link at the time, but this invitation appears in a peculiar way to be a follow up of Christen Forster's encouragement in the earlier meeting at Marsham Street, to look to the face of Jesus. As if Edgar had heard what Forster had said, he provided a space and an experiential opportunity for doing just that. And I backed out, because I was not ready to be moved in front of other people for what I could instantly feel would be a powerful encounter with Christ. With no mention of the power of the extraordinary, Edgar showed, through his practical exercise of Clive's words about the presence of God in the everyday, how the extraordinary may also reveal itself in the most silent recesses of one's innermost soul, when we least expect it.

The flamboyant God of signs and wonders

*If I have the gift of prophesy and can fathom
all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I
have a faith that can move mountains,
but have not love, I am nothing.*

1 Corinthians 13:2

Seeking is not always about finding something specific, something already defined, or about being able to determine what is right or what is wrong. It is also about a consideration of different aspects of the road to find the path that you want to be on. Seeking in this sense is thus not always about looking and finding, but about looking and choosing, gaining the kind of information that enables you to choose, involving one's own autonomy, in both search and decision. Seeking in this perspective becomes the attempt to find out who you are and what you want, to make the most honest choice for yourself. In this chapter I carry on with the theme of the extraordinary, looking at some of the more 'controversial' meetings at Marsham Street and the understanding of God, and especially of church, that these meetings encouraged, going deeper into the question of what it was we were seeking, in general and individually. As I have mentioned earlier, to be a seeker positioned in between two churches, was at times a recipe for confusion for me, as I had to dig deeper into my own concepts and understanding of God, church, and the Christian life. In this chapter, I broach certain concerns arising in relation to specific meetings at Marsham Street, making me somewhat bewildered as to what I was seeing. Such concerns were not only my own; the others who went to Marsham Street also voiced confusion and uncertainty in relation to certain aspects of the meetings. On the other hand, some people, like for instance Estelle, whom we will get to know better in this chapter, was overall more enthusiastic than the rest of us towards what she experienced there. In this respect, Estelle especially emphasizes the context for why we were there in the first place: We were there to experience something new, 'something other'. We were on an adventure, a journey, venturing into new land to discover what that may or may not hold for us, unwilling to let neither prejudice

nor scepticism prevent us from going. It is this journey into ‘the promised land’, into a different form of church and spirituality, and the discovery of specific features of this land and our individual responses to it, that this chapter describes. The dialogues and reflections amongst us provided a context for the way we positioned ourselves in terms of different issues brought up by the meetings. This chapter therefore also explores the conversations that occurred between our critical reflections versus the immersing into sensory experience, the juggling between absorption and abstraction, thus also exploring the material and processes inherent in transitions from intellectual to embodied knowledge. Whatever our intellectual conclusions of them, the meetings represented a space for seeking the presence of God to us, igniting the desire to experience, and come closer to him. To me, the meetings capture important elements in my process of trying to specify that which I was seeking, as well as what the others were seeking. Save from a small account of the growth of charismatic spirituality and church profile, I am not intending to engage the reader in a critical discussion of morality concerning charismatic meetings. I am interested in describing the experiential aspects of the meetings, in terms of their spiritual fruits for us, and this chapter has an empirical, rather than theoretical focus. I start by presenting parts of an interview with Estelle.

Expecting something different

Estelle was a woman whom I had known since my first fieldwork, although we had never spent much time together, or been part of the same circle. Through the context of the Marsham Street meetings, we got to know each other better, and I found Estelle’s ways of expressing herself a refreshing contribution to conversations about spirituality. Estelle was quite outspoken and more of an extrovert than both Suzanne and I, and where the two of us might be more cautious in terms of participating at Marsham Street, Estelle was often all in, no fear, no hesitation. When I met Estelle for an interview, the subject of Marsham Street was the natural starting point for our conversation. Although I had shared the experience of going to the healing meetings with Estelle and we had talked about various aspects of meetings whilst at them or on the way to and from, interviewing Estelle helped me understand more of what she was looking for in her faith and hoping to find more of at Marsham Street. At the same time, understanding better where Estelle was coming from also shed a light on my own stance in certain matters.

R: So, what have you thought about the meetings?

E: At Marsham street? I like 'em, I really like 'em.

R: What is it about the meetings, then...?

E: I guess definitely things happen there that don't necessarily happen in our church. I think you go because you know it's something different, you go with the expectation of seeing something different, or experiencing something different. I don't know if that makes you more aware or...I guess you're just expecting it to be different because it is, you know it is.

R: Yeah, it is different. (...) What started it off now then?

E: When did I start...I think watching TV – I've watched probably hundred nights of the revival (referring to the revival in Lakeland, which the meetings at Marsham Street were inspired by).

R: How long has it been going on for? (The revival in Lakeland.)

E: Oh, (laughs) it started in April.

R: Really?

E: Yeah, a friend of mine sent me texts; 'you got to start watching this Florida revival, it's on God-TV'. And the first night I watched it I thought 'this is wild'! Marsham Street is nothing compared to the wildness that was going on there! (Laughs)

R: Really?

E: Yeah, yeah! There's just people walking around, there's empty wheel chairs all over the place, people have got up and walked off and been healed and everything. Everything you can think of, people are getting set free and healed and...over 20 something people raised from the dead and these stories, ah...it's just like...

R: People raised from the dead?

E: Yeah. Fantastic stories.

R: Stories about it? So, you didn't see...

E: Stories on TV, yeah. You didn't see the people, no – they didn't bring in dead bodies or anything!

R: So, where did that happen then...?

E: I think the most amazing one was this woman... (...) She was a teacher, and she'd been to Florida, to the revival, got the impartation, took it back to the school. And one of the kids, I think it was her cousin, was in hospital, dying. So, they prayed for her, and this child died on the Monday. So, they did all the tests, there was no brain activity. The person was dead, this kid's dead. And the Tuesday they were planning funeral, but they

kept the child's body on [attached to] a ventilator, because they were gonna harvest the organs, because they were gonna donate, heart, lungs, everything...¹⁹ And this teacher, I can't remember what day, but this teacher got everyone praying, and they prayed for this child, I don't know if it was for healing, that they'd known that it was dead, I can't remember, but they prayed anyway. And Wednesday they took the child down to harvest the organs and she coughed! And the kid's now sitting up, alive in the hospital. And Todd (The main speaker at Lakeland) had the dad on the phone...She said (the teacher), "I've got him on the phone now", so she handed the phone to him (Todd) and he said "Can you verify that your daughter had died on Monday?", and he (the dad) said "Yeah, she was dead, and she is alive now". And he said (Todd) "Have you cancelled the funeral?!" (Laughs)

R: Very American!

E: And it's just stuff like that, just all these...One collapsed in a gym; this woman who'd been to Florida was at the gym with her friend who was a paramedic. Then this person collapsed, had a heart attack. So, the paramedic was trying to revive her and said, "I can't do anything". They called the ambulance, but they couldn't revive, couldn't get this person back, and the woman (who'd been to Florida) said "Let me lay hands on her and pray for her". But everybody was like "No, no, no, you're not doing that". So, she stood on the other side of the room, praying, and this dead person starts breathing again, heart starts going – and people had already said "She died". Just these stories and they're all verified by what happened.

R: By those involved.

E: Yeah. And they got pictures of people's curvages of the spine before and after (healing). There's a picture of this woman, she comes along, and she goes "This is a picture of what I was like; this is a photo of it now". – And it is completely different. And I think to see it, to see people like that just makes it more unbelievable.

R: Yeah, of course.

E: So, I want it now, I want all that.

R: What – do you want a healing ministry?

E: I quite fancy it. That woman (a woman who prayed for Estelle at one of the meetings) prayed that I'd – I don't know if she prophesied, but she said he'd (God) give me the

¹⁹ I presume Estelle means that the child was brain dead or in a coma, given no hope of recovery, as one can only harvest organs from a body that is still alive.

gift of healing and prophesy – which people have said for a while...I've been playing with that idea for a couple of years now.

R: Really? So, have other people mentioned that as well?

E: Yeah, I don't know if you've done a test, I can't remember what the test is called, but you answer a series of questions and it says what spiritual gifts you have. My top one came out as prophesy. This was in our small group (in the church in Green Forest), and everybody was going "You better start practicing that one, then, hadn't you!" I've been reading loads of books about it, and...it just seems to happen...

R: So, have you ever experienced something up to now...?

E: Yeah. And it's been frighteningly...

R: Accurate...?

E: Yeah.

R: So, how is that, I mean, what do you get then? How does that feel? What's it like?

E: I think it's just like an idea that goes in your head almost or thought. Years ago, my friend Madeline was crying in one of the evening meetings (in Green Forest) – do you remember we used to have evening services at church then? Used to be a bit wacky... (...) They used to be quite wild, some of them, and they used to be quite good.

R: Wild in what way? Just like people crying and sharing things and...?

E: Yeah, sort of 'Marsham-streety', but not quite as extreme.

R: Okay...

E: But I remember Madeline got really...started crying about something...or she responded to something and stood up for prayer. She was crying so I thought I better pray though, best friend and all that...So I was praying, and I just felt in my head, it was like a thought was dropped into my head, and I just said to Madeline, "I think God's just saying that you're his child, and he's well pleased with you, like he said to Jesus when he was baptized". And she just went 'oueeeh!' (crying), and she said, "I've been needing to hear that!" And then a guy stood up and said, "I feel God's saying that a few of you need to hear that you're his son or daughter and he's well pleased with you". I just turned around and went; "Get the message now, Madeline?" She went "Okay". But I thought, I was right on that one, it wasn't just me having a wild, random thought.

R: Yeah, you had it confirmed by him (the guy who stood up) in a sense.

E: Yeah, yeah. I'll always remember that one. It was just like, woow!

R: *Yeah, that's pretty amazing. (...) And they're different from other thoughts, because you don't know where they came from, in a sense?*

E: *Yeah (...) it's quite exciting.*

R: *Yeah, it is exciting. I guess you...feel like you have a mission in a sense, I don't know, that you have a task that you can explore further?*

E: *Yeah, it's been great reading about it, as well. Because one person said "Study your gifts", so I felt; well, if it is a gift, I ought to study it really, you know, just to see.*

R: *But don't you feel like church can provide that?*

E: *Our church?*

R: *Yeah.*

E: *It's a bit dry at the moment.*

R: *Do you feel that?*

E: *Yeah. (...) And what that guy said (Probably David Herzog), he said a lot of churches are word but not spirit. So, you get teaching, a lot of teaching, but it's not backed up with the Holy Spirit as well. And I think that's where we are in our church. We get teaching, but there's no...I don't know what it is...No Holy Spirit stuff, or whatever.*

R: *In the meetings?*

E: *Yeah.*

R: *It's different (in Green Forest), I think, from what we have experienced at Marsham Street, it's a completely different style. I felt that what Clive was saying on Sunday was very moving though (I am referring to the service in Green Forest that I wrote about in chapter 3 here). And I thought, when he spoke about seeking the voice, I thought, yes...that felt good. I mean, I guess I felt that I needed to hear that, remember to be more aware, and take time, mainly, from a busy day to...But it's more of a gentleness...It's in a milder form (the meetings in Green Forest in comparison to Marsham Street).*

E: *I think Green Forest has got quite comfortable...Not necessarily a good place to be, it's almost like user friendly, doesn't offend anybody.*

R: *Do you think that's a general feeling in the church?*

E: *I don't know, I don't know. I know that I'm feeling...I've been feeling that for a while. Quite a few others have felt that.*

R: *And that's why you have started going to Marsham Street, because you might find what you seek there, and might feel inspired to reach out for your... Yeah, what you've been watching...?*

E: Yeah.

The first aspect that I want to point to from the interview with Estelle, is her description of Marsham Street as different from Green Forest, and how her expectation of both seeing and experiencing something different was part of what made her want to go to Marsham Street. Her interest in Marsham Street was inspired by the revival in Florida that she had followed on TV since April. From her renderings of these TV-broadcasts, it was clear that she was both fascinated and drawn to the extraordinary events that had happened on that stage. She expressed a particular drawing to healing and prophecy in the interview and gave the impression that she was eager for something to happen in her own life, she wanted ‘action’ or as she said: “So, I want it now, I want all that”. Through these words she expressed the desire to be involved in the performance of healing herself, as well as to develop what she experienced as the gift of prophecy. She not only wanted to experience healing and prophecy for herself but was eager to develop her own spiritual gifts and provide for these experiences for others. These experiences constituted what she did not think the church in Green Forest could provide. Hearing what Estelle had to say in the interview and remembering the first time I met her on my second fieldwork, as we were going to our first meeting at Marsham Street, I feel that one context of Estelle’s seeking begins to take more shape. In our conversation on the train back then, about why we wanted to go to the meeting, she had said, referring to both herself and her daughter, “We’re going to get our knees done!” With clear determination and intentionality, she had expressed her expectation of receiving healing for her bad knee. Perhaps one background for her faith that a healing would surely happen, related to all the incidents of healing that she had watched on the telly over several months, and the fact that a venue had been chosen, i.e. the Emmanuel Church at Marsham Street, to carry on this revival in London.

To return to the issue of difference, one of the words that Estelle used to describe Marsham Street, clearly related to the performance of healing and prophecy as something different to what she normally experienced in her own church in Green Forest. When I asked her if she did not think her own church could help her explore her spiritual gifts, she responded by stating that church at home was a bit dry at the moment. The development of Estelle’s spiritual gifts therefore did not seem something she considered likely that her church would help her with. I understood the label of dryness as a reference to the way the church in Green Forest related to the gifts of the Spirit, in Estelle’s view. There was a time element involved in this judgment. When she referred to church as being a bit dry, she added *at the moment*, which

to me implied that she hadn't always considered the church dry. She said that church *had got* quite comfortable, indicating that this state was part of a recent development. And although Estelle expressed that she could not really put her finger on what was missing in church, she leaned on the perception of David Herzog, one of the speakers at Marsham Street, who had claimed that many churches had a lot of teaching, but no *Spirit* residing in the words spoken. This judgment had obviously resonated with Estelle, who associated Herzog's definition with the condition of her own church now. That church had not always been in this state, was evident from Estelle's reference of the incidents where she had experienced some sort of confirmation that she had the gift of prophesy. Both the occasions she mentioned had happened in settings belonging to the latter church, long before the meetings at Marsham Street had started. I find it interesting that teaching is seen as contrary to Spirit, since there is not necessarily a given opposition between these two, and since there was obviously teaching in both churches. But in Estelle's experience, what she considered the teaching in her own church, did not at the time give her a sense of the Spirit of God, in the same way as the teaching at Marsham Street did. It seems to me that this judgement was really based upon a distinction between practical and experiential versus intellectual knowledge, but for lack of a better language, teaching and Spirit were set as opposing binaries. I do not think Estelle meant that the Spirit of God was absent from the church in Green Forest. She was just expecting the Holy Spirit to be more noticeably and visibly present at Marsham Street, since these meetings particularly focused on charismatic dimensions of the Christian faith. And perhaps charismatic is a key word in terms of understanding what Estelle was seeking. Charismatic means 'of the Spirit', and in the New Testament, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, various gifts of the Spirit are described, teaching being one of them, but all manifestations of the same Spirit of God.

Of course, I understood what Estelle meant when she was relating the spirit more to what was happening at Marsham Street: Obviously, we all expected to have spiritual experiences at Marsham Street to a greater extent than we expected to have them in Green Forest, since Green Forest did not have the same charismatic profile. But what were we seeking? Were we frequenting Marsham Street with the aim to be spectators to the extraordinary, or because we were seeking to experience something extraordinary ourselves? I believe that not only Estelle, but Suzanne and myself and others who came along to Marsham Street, were primarily seeking the Spirit, i.e., God, or Christ, rather than witnessing manifestations of the Spirit per se.

There is another context that comes to my mind as I am reviewing Estelle's interview, an incident that happened during my first fieldwork: Estelle had already experienced a healing. When I was in Green Forest the first time, I interviewed her about the healing of her knee, that had happened as she was visiting another church than her own, and the pastor there had laid hands on her and prayed for her. She had come to the church on crutches and left without them. Her own seeking of healing can thus be seen as not only based on her knowledge of what was happening in Lakeland in Florida, but also on the basis of her own experience from previously. She knew that healing was possible because she had experienced it herself. What she wanted was thus related to something she already knew as a touch of God, but that she at present felt without. Working on this part of my text, I see certain similarities between Estelle's and Suzanne's situations. The dryness described by Estelle in relation to church, seems to have the same reference point as what Suzanne said to me earlier, in relation to going to the meetings at Marsham Street: Suzanne said she wanted to go because she was bored. As I showed in chapter 3, I interpreted Suzanne's reference to boredom as related to her spiritual life, and the sense that church was not nourishing her spiritually. At the time, Suzanne had first mentioned the fact that there was a church holiday during the summer, perhaps as a reason for justifying her going to another church. Through our conversation back then, Suzanne had recognized that it was the possibility to engage with the prophetic dimension that drew her to Marsham Street, the venue where she had also experienced the prophetic in a strong way years ago. The context of previous experience as possibly influencing what they were seeking at present, was hence another similarity between Estelle's and Suzanne's stories: Both had experienced extraordinary events, which had constituted significant moments, and both in relation to other churches than their own. Their seeking of 'something new and different' may seem more of an indication of their assessment of their own church, rather than pointing to experiences within the spiritual realm of which they were hitherto ignorant and inexperienced. The choice of going to Marsham Street seemed based upon a recognition of the position of the church in Green Forest as unable to meet their needs for spiritual growth, paired with their growing awareness of the specificity of these needs in them.

Different needs and orientations towards Marsham Street

Going to the Marsham Street meetings soon started to become one of the highlights of the week for me. I enjoyed sharing the meetings together with the others, as well as the anticipation that accompanied these meetings. There was an expectation within me towards the prospect of experiencing something there that I could not quite define...something different, to use Estelle's words, or to have an experience of the prophetic, to use Suzanne's words, or to just feel the presence of God, which was probably the way I mainly came to conceptualize the event of going to Marsham Street at the time. Seeking the presence of God was also what both Christen Forster and the 'ponytail man' (whom by the way is called John Noble), in different ways had encouraged me to do. Even as I felt drawn to Marsham Street, however, I still felt a slight sense of uncertainty about what to really make of Marsham Street: Was it all ok, the stuff that was happening on that stage? There was a sense inside me of doing something 'risky', and that people from the church in Green Forest who were not going to Marsham Street, would not approve of this type of meeting. For some reason I mirrored myself in my expectation of their disapproval, and this expectation created a sense of shame or guilt in me for still wanting and choosing to go. There is a saying that 'what goes around, comes around', or in the Christian version 'as you sow, so you shall reap' (Gal. 6: 7), both relating to the fruits or consequences of our actions. A memory from my past has suddenly surged up, reminding me of a period in my youth, where the congregation of the local chapel (bedehus) experienced a division into two different factions. Following a disagreement concerning the Christening of babies, one group decided to abandon not only this tradition, but the adherence to the Christian fellowship, forming a new one instead. The new fellowship became a member of a regional charismatic church, meeting in the gym of the local primary school. Constituting my first acquaintance with the concept of the charismatic, and hearing stories of people acting 'madly' and 'falling over like flies' in this church, I developed a sense of disregard and scepticism towards charismatic churches. As irony had it, in the field, I had become one of these people myself, and it was most likely my own disregard I was ambushed by. My insecurity may also have been related to my knowledge of the Salvation Army heritage of social action, where spiritual seeking for most people is not about a feeling; spiritual experience should lead to something new, something that will preferably change the world, not just the one who is experiencing. Were we experiencing something through which we would change the world, or were we merely seeking our own wellbeing? I never asked the others who went to Marsham Street how they were feeling in terms

of the church at home, but as Estelle testified to in her interview, there were indeed overt objections by others to some of the things that occurred at Marsham Street:

E: I think a lot of things are just too massive to understand, so you just have to...go along the hope and trust. Clive and Peter Graham said something interesting yesterday.

R: Who?

E: Clive and Peter Graham just before Play Mate, they were in the office, and I was talking about supernatural weight loss²⁰ to Clive, and he's just going: "What?" And he's going; "This is what I don't understand; it is children dying in Africa every day of starvation, yet somebody here gets a weight loss miracle! Isn't it more important that the children in Africa get the miracle of being able to eat?" And I...yeah...like... Then Peter said this amazing thing, I thought, it was quite profound, he said; "Well, maybe God wants us to sort out the feeding people in Africa, 'cause that's something we can do, so that all the stuff that we can't do, the impossible stuff, like supernatural weight loss, can be left to him". And I thought, actually that's probably quite a good idea! That God wants us to take care of each other and make sure that every one's got everything and share everything so that he can do the stuff, he can do the healing, he can do the...whatever, that we can't do. Thought it was quite profound. I didn't explain it very well...but...Yeah that makes sense actually; that God would want us to do that.

It was as if Estelle had felt the need to defend herself, or defend the weight loss miracle, in the face of Clive's critique. Then Peter Graham came to her rescue, by suggesting that God might want to show his power by performing a weight loss miracle, whilst expecting us to feed the hungry, as an action within the reach of human capability. Estelle thus happily held on to the weight loss miracle's justifiable cause again, as presented to her by Graham. For me though, Estelle's reference to Clive's comments during the interview, awakened my insecurities and became a cue to voice some of my own concerns that I'd had in relation to the meetings. As I read the transcripts from the interview again, it seems to me now that I ignored the content of what Estelle was saying at the time, by not paying a great deal of attention to her attempts at arguing for the justification of the performance of a weight loss miracle, that this type of miracle really was ok. I just carried on with my own cause:

²⁰ Estelle is referring to the meeting at Marsham Street where David Herzog encouraged people to run around the hall, praying for instant weight loss for them.

R: And it's that being brought into focus, that the poor in Africa do have a vital place and that they are important to the charity. I've been thinking that as well, where is the gospel for the poor in these meetings, and where is the gospel for those who come there wanting to be healed, and don't get any healing...? They haven't been calling out "If you didn't receive healing today don't despair, God is with you..." or something like that. It has been more focusing on that God wants to heal you. And then if He doesn't, what is the reason? There could be a little more reflection upon that because some people might feel really, really disappointed, and decide to abandon the whole faith thing.

E: Yeah. I think what he said to me he should have said to everyone, when I spoke to him about my knee.

R: Oh, that David-guy?

E: Yeah. That would have been quite helpful, I think. He said, "Keep fighting, and if you don't get it, keep sticking it out".

This last reference to David Herzog that Estelle made, points to something that I think was an essential characteristic of many of the messages expressed from the stage at Marsham Street: If you do not get what you want, keep pleading. And perhaps the encouragement to keep asking for something that one wants is sometimes necessary, rather than accept an unsatisfactory condition that may be changed. On the other hand – sometimes we must accept that certain aspects of our lives will remain the way they are. I was expressing the latter perception, whereas Estelle was expressing the former. These two perceptions have a reference point in the different images of God often presented by the two churches, that I wrote about in chapter 3, as well as being indications of the different orientations of Estelle's and my own individual seeking there and then. In reference to the interview with Estelle it seems that I was a lot more hesitant than her in terms of 'just going for it' in relation to what Marsham Street offered, whereas she was at a place in her life where 'she wanted it all' as far as spiritual gifts were concerned, as she stated earlier in the interview.

Approaching the prophet

Although those whom I related to the most, like Suzanne and Estelle, as well as myself, were all in a state of seeking, we were seeking slightly different elements, related to our individual situations, needs and understanding at the time. I am becoming aware of the fact that *how* we were seeking also differed and influenced the way our seeking proceeded. Where Estelle to me seemed a person easily moved to go forward in a meeting and express what she wanted prayer wise, Suzanne seemed the opposite. She would never be first in line in a queue if she made it to the queue at all. Voicing her needs was not as straightforward for Suzanne. This fact was demonstrated in the next meeting at Marsham Street, where both Suzanne's manner of seeking, as well as one of the aims of her seeking, came to expression:

The evening after my interview with Estelle, Suzanne, Jenny, myself and Elsa, a friend of theirs from the church in Green Forest, went to Marsham Street together. Elsa had never been to Marsham Street before but said she had been thinking about coming for a while, after Suzanne had mentioned the meetings to her. This evening a man called Jonathan Atkins was speaking, and this meeting became more of a 'gospel evening' which focused on the interpretation of a part of the Scriptures. Gerald Coates had announced him as a man with an extraordinary story: Having been imprisoned for embezzlement, Atkins had come to faith whilst in prison, and now worked in government. However, despite Coates' emphasizing of the extraordinary turning of events in Atkins life, we soon discovered that as a speaker, he was not an American 'miracle maker'. He spoke in a calm voice and presented his message in an orderly way, without any shouting or gesticulations. If anything, he seemed humble. Atkins took us through one of the psalms that had been significant to him on his journey towards faith. It was an evening a lot more 'quiet' than usual.

After the speech Suzanne said that she wanted to ask Gerald Coates about the prophetic, more specifically about a recurring vision that she'd experienced lately. She said it as an expression of something she would have liked to do, and not as something she was going to do. Jenny urged her to go forward and ask him about it, but Suzanne hesitated. She didn't feel stirred up to go, she said. I said that maybe we shouldn't always expect to feel stirred up before approaching someone, but Suzanne wasn't convinced. Then Jenny said that she was going to go down and ask him, and off she went. The rest of us sat watching as she drew nearer to 'the great Gerald Coates', and since he was engaged in a conversation with a young boy, Jenny

waited patiently behind him. Occasionally she would look up at us and smile but continuing to wait. At one point the conversation Coates had with the boy seemed to be finished, and Jenny went up to him and said something. He replied her, and she apologetically turned away from him again and continued waiting, and we watched Coates go over and start chatting to another young lad, sitting down on the edge of the stage with him. Suzanne decided that she was going down to Jenny as well, I think she felt a bit concerned for her. Elsa and I remained in our seats, watching from above Suzanne and Jenny's progress down at the front. For a long time, Suzanne and Jenny just stood next to each other chatting, then after a while there seemed to have been a decision made, and they approached a woman who was standing a few meters away from them. She gave them her attention, and they started talking to her, and this went on for a while. When they had finished talking to the woman, they came back up to us, and we were naturally eager to hear about what had happened:

Jenny had approached Gerald Coates at last with the words; "Excuse me, I know you're busy, but..." to which he responded that he needed to talk to someone and went over to the young man by the stage. There was some discussion after this among us, as to what he might have thought Jenny meant. Suzanne thought he might have interpreted Jenny to talk about his 'busyness' there and then, a case in which she suggested it was natural that he might have thought 'Yes, if you think I'm busy, why do you approach me?', whereas Jenny had meant to say that she knew that he must be a busy man, in general. It had been a bit of an unpleasant experience for both Jenny and Suzanne; in whichever way one interpreted what Coates had said. In the end they had decided to talk to Coates' wife instead, whom they assumed would know a thing or two about the prophetic as well. It didn't seem like Coates' wife had anything new and revealing to say to Suzanne, but both Suzanne and Jenny nevertheless expressed that they had appreciated her taking the time to talk to them – which Coates had not. I said to Suzanne that I was sorry for taking part in 'forcing' her to try to speak to Gerald Coates, and I did feel sorry about this. I felt as if Jenny and I had taken action against what we saw as Suzanne's passivity, whereas I afterwards had to recognize that perhaps for Suzanne it was right to wait until she felt stirred up to do something. I made a promise to myself that I would never again urge her to act against her intuitions. Elsa commented that it was a bit funny that when she finally decided to come along to Marsham Street to experience the 'great adventure', and see what it was all about, it wasn't anything like she had expected. We left the building and headed home, all of us a bit disappointed with the outcome of the evening.

The promise I made to Suzanne was the lesson that I learnt from the meeting. Perhaps I had engaged in the thought that sometimes we should just move forward without having to depend on any great sense of 'rightness' within, because this thought was right for me at the time, and something I needed to learn, or test out. For Suzanne it was however right and necessary to always have a sense of God's voice convicting her before she took any action related to her faith life, such as going forward for prayer or other forms of guidance. I knew this was the case for her, because of all the incidents where she had used the phrase 'I felt stirred up to...', as an introduction to a story about what she had done, said, thought, felt or believed in a certain situation. In terms of feeling stirred up in the meetings at Marsham Street, in retrospect I can say that Suzanne remained a spectator at these meetings in terms of engaging with what was going on at the stage. She never went forward for prayer, because she never felt stirred up inside to do so, as she said to me during many a meeting. Suzanne's attendance to her inner 'stirrings' shows me that Suzanne was assessing what was going on in the meetings, not just visually and through hearing, but primarily through a form of inner movement that she related to the working of the Spirit. In accordance with her inner experience of what the Holy Spirit was impressing upon her, she positioned herself in relation to various events that happened in the meetings emotionally, spiritually, and morally. Although I myself paid attention to how I felt about various elements in the meetings and the messages expressed, I also felt somewhat torn between the sense of needing to relate critically to what was going on, and the need to just immerse myself in the experience, to see and feel for myself. I guess in a way I was finding myself at a place that could be metaphorically characterized as being in between Estelle and Suzanne's approaches. I felt less experienced but drawn to the inner life of the Spirit that Suzanne exemplified to me, and at the same time, although to a smaller degree, like Estelle in a phase of experimenting, wanting maybe not 'it all', at least not straight away, but definitely something more. This last observation points to and exemplifies how differently we experienced and analysed the meetings, and how it was mainly through the senses in our bodies that we assessed the meetings, and not through intellectual considerations of what type of church Marsham Street represented, or what theology it stood for, and whether we wanted to stand for the same. Our conversations and judgments were based on our individual experience and perceptions of specific types of experience, seen in the context of what type of encounter we'd had with these experiences. The meetings as venue were significant in terms of constituting the space and context for where we encountered various spiritual experiences and not in terms of their mapping onto a broader church specific historic and theological overview

and perspective. There were however of course also, as I mentioned earlier, currents of insecurity and uncertainty brewing underneath, at least in me, as to whether the procedures and visions of the meetings at Marsham Street would be considered socially acceptable by other members of the church in Green Forest, and whether they were spiritually sensible. Trying to handle and deal with different concepts and experiences of the extraordinary sometimes made me feel like I was in a constant phase of questioning. There were a lot of ‘balls in the air’ for me to juggle with, and I could not always see beyond the immediate scenario that I at any given time found myself in. These uncertainties, which were obviously also related to considerations regarding what was the best church and the right theology, came along to the meetings as faint voices at the back of my head, especially commenting upon events bidding a choice of either immersion or distance, of absorption versus abstraction. The aftermath of the meeting that I described above, constituted one of the moments that inspired critical reflection. The meeting that I will describe in the following however, constituted an opportunity and decision to let go of critical reflections and allow myself to ‘go with the flow’ and immerse myself into the meeting and the type of experience that I believe we were seeking.

Falling over in the Spirit

Focusing on singular meetings and my/our experience of these may have caused me an ethnographic anxiety related to the fear of not seeing the whole picture. However, sometimes it is easier to relate to a single event and move from there, like Clifford Geertz famously did when he described the cockfight and interpreted certain aspects of the Balinese society and sentiment based on this event, or this type of event. Geertz’ creative take on the cockfight as a happening, a cultural form, which not only represented the private sentiments and sensibility of singular individuals but could be read as a collective text articulating significant aspects of the cultural ethos, brings solace to my own focus on individual meetings and experiential happenings within them. Geertz compared anthropological analysis to the penetration of a literary text, exploring the perspective that cultural forms may be treated as texts and imaginative works built out of social materials (Geertz 1973). I like the sense of freedom invested in the perception of anthropology as an imaginative work. Although I am not looking for ways to draw symbolic lines between the individual and the collective in terms of cultural ethos on a large scale, as Geertz did, the image of a seemingly random gathering of people in a building with a domed ceiling, some metaphorically stretching their hands to an unseen God, constitutes a captivating

picture of desire and the longing to know more of God, and receive a taste of his transformative power within a temporally and socially delineated space. This imaginative perspective is however drawn from a distance. From the perspective of my own participation the image alters, as I will show in my description of one of the most peculiar events happening within charismatic circles, namely ‘falling over in the Spirit’, which seen from the ‘inside’ reveals aspects of seeking and being in the presence of God not visible from the ‘outside’.

During the prayer part of the meetings at Marsham Street there would always be many people ‘falling over in the Spirit’, as this occurrence is most referred to. What happened was that people fell over, i.e., fell to the floor on their backs, as they were being prayed for. Except for the times when I went forward for prayer myself, I would normally sit in my seat and watch people fall over from a distance. It was a peculiar sight, but one that we would grow so accustomed to we did not even flinch in the end. In the beginning, when I first started attending the meetings, I was pondering upon the point or the meaning of such an experience for a Christian, and I was debating with myself whether falling over in the Spirit was something I would like to experience. We never really discussed the issue of people falling over during the prayer session amongst us who visited Marsham Street each time. We were all just looking, as if we had taken for granted that this sort of event occurred at this scene to people – other people. Estelle had been the first to admit wanting to experience falling over in the Spirit, in the interview I had with her earlier:

E: She prayed for me (a woman praying for Estelle at a former meeting). And I remember thinking ‘My legs are shaking big time, they’re really shaking’, and I felt a bit shaky and I was thinking ‘This is weird’. (...) I think if she’d carried on, I reckon it would have been worse; I would probably have been on the floor shaking by then.

R: You would have fallen then...?

E: I quite fancy that! I think I’d be ready for that to happen...I almost want it to happen...I’ve seen it so much now.

R: What is it about it that kind of appeals...?

E: Well...I’d run a mile, a few years ago, if anyone would have suggested that to me. ‘Nope, you’re not doing that to me...no way!’ (Laughs) But I don’t know, I just think...I’m hungrier for it all...Yeah. I just want whatever’s out there now...

R: So, is that different, obviously, than it had been?

E: It wasn't a case of not needing...or not wanting God, or whatever, but I think I was very limiting, so...I think I'm a bit of a control freak...but now I'm just like, you know, if anything's on, just bring it on! I've seen enough, I think, to know that...it's okay.

One month after my interview with Estelle, the two of us found ourselves the only participants from the church in Green Forest at Marsham Street. It was another meeting with Christen Forster. Like the last time, he spoke about God's presence. I shall not go into detail about what he talked about in his speech, because at this meeting it was what happened after the speech that was the most significant event to both Estelle and I:

After Forster had finished speaking, he invited people forward for prayer. Estelle was quick to grab the opportunity: "Let's go", she said as soon as the invite came and pulled me along with her. Christen Forster had brought a guy from Canada with him, who obviously was a big name within Forster's church circle, according to the way he was mentioned as an important prophetic voice. I hadn't heard of him before and didn't catch his name. But this man seemed a little 'mad', or perhaps unpredictable is a better word. After Forster had finished talking, this man got up on stage, and with his back to the audience he started to sing. It was a song about flying away, which was repeated several times, and then concluded with flying into the arms of God. As Estelle and I lined up for prayer, this man was also praying for people. We heard him shout "Oh-oh", and then "Timber", before people fell to the floor. There were always a number of people standing behind those being prayed for, in order to catch them if they fell. Therefore, as people lined up, there always had to be room for a row of 'catchers' as well. What Estelle and I suddenly became aware of, was that as we entered the front row of the queue, Christen Forster started to go in the opposite direction to us, whereas the other guy was making his way closer and closer to us, leaving a trail of fallen people behind him. We looked at each other, Estelle and I, and the expressions we gave each other clearly stated that this was not what we had intended. I felt a little nervous as the man came closer, feeling that I wasn't prepared for being prayed for by him, with his loud shouting. If what he did was making people fall over, that was something I didn't feel that I needed – and he didn't seem to spend very long praying for people either. I guess I felt more interested in Christen Forster praying for me, since he seemed to spend quite some time with each person, giving prophecies concerning aspects of people's lives. Well, standing in the front row of the queue as we were, we decided that if we were prayed for by this man, we would still line up for prayers by Forster afterwards.

And then suddenly, the 'mad' guy was standing in front of us, laying his hands on our foreheads, and the first thing he said, which was for both of us, was "Dangerous women, dangerous women!" I thought that maybe he could feel our 'hostility' towards him, and therefore called us dangerous. He took our hands and turned them up in a receiving position. I stood upright and heard him pray over me, and I felt something fall upon or grab my head in a sense, but I didn't really think it would make me fall over. It was a sensation which is very difficult to explain, it felt as if my head were being lifted up, or as something within my head was being pulled at, with the result of making me feel a little lighter, as if I could float away – or perhaps fly away, if I wanted to. I felt myself going a little backwards, and the muscles on the upper part of my head tensed, causing my eyebrows to lift, whilst my eyelids, which I kept closed, also felt as if they were being drawn upwards. I didn't feel like I was just going to fall down, but I had become kind of curious as well by now, wanting to experience falling. At this point the man, who had left me, came back, and laid his hands on me, shouting, "Yes, that's it, sister, go for it, go for it!" And as if a veil lifted for just a second, those words 'Go for it, go for it' seemed to describe the character of this 'flight' in the sense that I felt a slight awareness of something which was 'beyond', and it made sense or seemed natural that if I wanted this 'beyond', I had to stretch for it, or let myself fall towards it.

All of this happened quickly, although the process of falling felt like a long time to me. I don't think I necessarily made all the conscious links of having to stretch for this 'beyond' in the moment, but on hindsight that's how I interpret the sense of a great beyond, which I could reach out for. There were also elements of my fear or insecurity within the experience, which I relate to the theological ambiguity of an event such as 'falling down' in the spirit. The event is contested among the critics of charismatic experience and the desire to be 'touched by God' to the point of falling, is by some perceived as an unhealthy focus on the emotional aspects of professing one's faith. I obviously walked down to the front with all of these 'currents' of hesitation within me. Maybe the man picked up on my insecurity, because one of the first words he said as he started praying for me was "Worry go, worry go!"

As the veil lifted, or maybe as the grey clouds in the sky moved aside to reveal the infinite distance beyond, what felt like 'my great within' and which seemed to mirror the sense of a great beyond, responded to and connected with the 'mad' guy's imperative words to 'go for it', and I could feel my knees going weaker. It was not a matter of the guy physically pushing me, because he had already moved on, but as I was giving in to the weakness in my knees, not making myself fall, but letting myself fall, I could hear him in the distance, shouting "Oh-oh,

she's going down, she's going down!" And the hands of the 'catchers' behind must have caught me; although I didn't notice anything, and moments later I was down on the floor. My knees were bent upwards and the guy came back to me and grabbed both my knees, praying that "The spirit fill her up, right to her bones, right to her bones." And I just lay there on the floor, feeling like the sun was up and shining on my face, and I covered my eyes with my hands, not to cover them from any blinding light, but to cover my visibility – although in a sense I didn't care. I was as if in a different world, a different room, a different state, and I could hear everything that was going on around me, but it was distant. I was wondering how long I should lie on the floor, at one point lifting my head to get up, but then succumbing to the desire to lie down again, and just rest in this sense of light for a little while longer. And it was pleasant, it was peaceful, and it was something which touched upon the sense of awe, and this sense of awe, also containing an element of sadness or sense of being overwhelmed at the recognition of this awe, which for the most part of my life is lost, broke me down in tears, tears from a place deep within. I lay on the floor for so long that a woman came over after a while and asked me to get up. And so, I got up, still feeling the sunlight in my eyes, and looked for Estelle. I spotted her further down the front; she was already lined up for prayers in another queue, leading to Christen Forster. She saw me and smiled, and I went over to her. "Wow", she said, "how was that?" Referring to my great fall, I could but smile and say something monosyllabic like "Yeah, it was...good..." She said she had seen it coming, I had started to lean backwards, and suddenly I looked drunk, and she looked around to see who would be catching me, and there was nobody there! She had tried to signal to someone, pointing at me, and someone obviously came running to my rescue. "You went down really fast!" she said. That surprised me, and I said "No, it wasn't that fast, I felt that it took a long time". "No, it didn't", she replied. I asked her if she had fallen, and she said she hadn't. She thought it was because she was a bit timid towards the guy who prayed for us, and because he had held her finger where she had a ring, and the pain of his grasp broke her concentration, and she became too focused on this.

Finally, it was Estelle's turn to be prayed for and Christen Forster started talking to her. He obviously both talked to people and prayed, giving as much time as seemed necessary to each person. After a while, Forster laid his hands on her forehead, and again after a little while, Estelle started wavering, two guys were ready behind, catching her as her knees gave, and laid her gently down on the floor. Estelle was grinning, as she was lying on the floor, with her eyes closed. After a while she opened her eyes and looked at me, still grinning, exclaiming "That was awesome!" After talking to her for a little bit, I asked Forster if he would pray a

little prayer for me as well. He prayed freedom over me, and said Jesus was telling me to 'hold his gaze'. Recognizing yet again that I'd heard this message before, I asked him what he meant by that, and he said "Well, let's ask him", and he then prayed that Jesus would reveal to me what he meant. He went on to say that holding Jesus' gaze would refer to being focused in prayer, not allowing thoughts about the shopping list or other things to interrupt my prayer. The words about being more consistent in prayer felt like an accurate description of my prayer life at the time and awakened in me what can probably be termed a quite common Christian form of guilt. Beyond the guilt however, there seemed to be a truth to what Forster was saying: as if I knew somehow that beyond my condemnation of myself for my faulty efforts to pray, there was a place where the true power of prayer lay hidden, and open to me.

We decided to leave when I'd had my prayers and Estelle had spoken a little with Christen Forster. We talked about what had been said and done that evening as we walked towards the tube station, agreeing that we were learning new things about each other as well. I asked Estelle what she had thought when the 'mad' guy had referred to us as 'dangerous women'. Quite contrary to my own interpretation of us expressing some 'hostility' towards the guy, causing him to experience us as 'dangerous', Estelle had interpreted his words as us being dangerous women to the devil. I thought it was peculiar how differently we responded to those words. Our differing interpretations were of course also a reference to our different personalities, as well as the different contexts and cultures of church that we came from and emphasized to me yet again how easy it is to assume that someone else experiences a certain situation the same way as you.

As I am now writing about the experience of falling over, I still do not know entirely what to make of such experiences in general, although I am aware that there are different perspectives upon such events from various theological perspectives. I am not presenting these perspectives here, as it is the experiential element for me that I am interested in. In that respect, I wish to point to one specific aspect of my experience of falling over: The experience was one of resting, not just my body, but my mind and spirit as well. I did not worry, I did not question, both of which were tendencies in my way of relating to the world in general. I simply was, in a different sense or state of being, than what I normally experienced in my everyday life, where there was often a target or goal to my existence. I am not going to analyse this event to any great extent in retrospect, because I want the case to stand for itself, as a singular experience of the presence of God. But if I were to apply a gaze more of the present, I must admit that the

experience resembles that which I am seeking when I have been engaged in mindfulness- or awareness exercises in recent times: To arrive at a place where what matters is not the reflections I can produce in relation to my life, but merely resting in that present moment which I am always in, but rarely stop to savour. What made the experience of falling over extraordinary to me however, and different from most of my mindfulness experiences, was the sense of the Spirit resting with me in that moment as well. Perhaps it was an instant of ‘holding the gaze of Jesus’?

I finish, as I started, with reflections drawn from Geertz’ Balinese cockfight (Ibid: 1973), where the concepts of depth and deep play signifies the absorption in the game experienced by those having placed the highest bets, those for whom most is at stake, those positioned closest to the centre of the match, as opposed to the ones furthest from the centre, whose disengaged bets invites disinterest, or shallow play: At this meeting I was at the very centre, ‘exquisitely absorbed’, playing deeply, risking my ‘spiritual morality and reputation’ in the imagined faces of those who would see me as a thrill seeker within the kingdom of God, as well as those who would have shared my disregard and criticism of the charismatic in my youth.

Prophecies, laughter, and electric atmosphere

Whatever Estelle and I made of our separate ‘falling’ experiences, and whatever perspective we came to have on such events later, for the both of us, the experience of falling seemed to create a greater openness and expectation to experience more of the charismatic spirituality that we had just got a taste of. In fact, the first time we met after the meeting described above, on the following Tuesday, we immediately fell into a conversation that was inspired by our shared experience of going to the last meeting, as well as by the expectation of what might happen at the next. On a Tuesday morning, I normally took my youngest daughter, Hannah, to Play Mate, the mother and toddler gathering that the church in Green Forest was running once a week. Upon arriving this Tuesday, the first person I saw was Estelle, who was there to help. On seeing me, she came straight over to me and said, “I’m going on Thursday”. “I am too” I responded. We did not have to say where we were going; it was obviously to Marsham Street. Estelle continued by saying that it was the guy who had prophesied the revival in Lakeland who was speaking, and she wanted to hear him. “I just want more now!” she said. Two days later we were again united in the huge auditorium of the Emmanuel Church at Marsham Street, Suzanne and Estelle, a girl called Norah and me, as the only ones from the church in Green Forest. After

the usual half hour of worship, Rob de Luca was introduced and entered the stage. Gerald Coates had previously described de Luca as one of the great prophets of our time, almost along the lines of the great prophets of the Bible. The speaker's reputation claimed that he was highly used by God in terms of the prophetic, and that the prophecies he gave were of great significance to the Christian church. There was a sense of excitement that at least I was feeling, as we waited, in anticipation and expectation for the prophetic voice of Rob De Luca, and for what we were going to see, hear and experience in the meeting:

Rob De Luca was something different altogether. He strode onto the stage, tall, dark and mysterious, with an almost mischievous smile and a self-confident way of comporting himself. The stage fitted him like a glove, and he owned the room, which was soon filled with a tangible form of energy. He seemed to enjoy addressing a large audience; he seemed to have done it many times before. He shared some funny remarks about the stiff-upper-lip reserved English church goer as opposed to the American over-the-top enthusiastic one; about this he had first-hand knowledge because of his English wife. Or as he said, "I married one of you". He liked to make the audience laugh, which he very soon amply demonstrated: He obviously knew some of the people in the audience, who had come from another church that he must have visited earlier. He said he wanted to pray for church pastors and invited the pastor and his assistant from this church, to come forward for prayer straight away. Two men came forward, one middle aged and one young man. As he prayed for them, he blew on them through his microphone and they both fell to the floor. He said he was going to give them joy, because God wants us to be happy, and so he blew on them again. They both started laughing, and they lay on the floor for ages, just laughing. This of course caused the audience to laugh as well, although in a more 'orderly' way. Then De Luca decided to pass the 'inspired laughter' onto other people in the audience and blew through his microphone directly on a few people sitting right in front of us. They burst out laughing, and practically just couldn't stop laughing throughout the whole meeting.

It was weird to experience this energy, or this presence throughout the meeting, and recognising that this speaker was performing in a way that was very unfamiliar to me. Yet at the same time, I couldn't deny the fact that something was happening which seemed to have nothing to do with mere suggestiveness. De Luca didn't talk about prophecies, but he shared, or gave some prophecies. They were about England, and about how God said through these prophecies that England was His. De Luca had a prophecy concerning the M25 leading down

to London and said that this would be a major vein for the revival that was happening. He also spoke about using our swords as Christians; the sword being the word of God, i.e. scripture verses from the Bible. De Luca then invited forward people who had experienced some form of rejection, and said he wanted to pray particularly for those today. When he had them all at the front, there were quite a few; nearly two thirds of the audience went forward. De Luca then told people to hold one hand on their head and one on their heart and repeat after him what he said. I didn't feel the urge to go forward, neither did Suzanne, so we remained seated. However, feeling the need to participate on behalf of my anthropological I, I did think about feelings of rejection that I had experienced from time to time, like we all do, and so I decided to 'do the movements' myself, from where I was standing. I didn't feel that it did anything for me, but at least I had somehow 'participated'. De Luca was saying that when we had been hurt, and if the hurt hadn't been healed through our forgiving the people causing the hurt, then a demon might come and fill the wound. Therefore, all the people at the front had to say that they 'cast it out', in the name of Jesus, and then cough it up; like a ball leaving their bodies they should cough it up. So, the people at the front covered their heads and their hearts and started to cough. "We need some tissue for this lady over here", De Luca suddenly shouted, and when brought to him he handed it to some woman at the front, whom I couldn't see. Several people were given tissue as the prayer event moved on. De Luca would pace back and forth across the stage and offer more definite prayers for some, like "Out of her, out of her, now". Many fell over as well, and the catchers had a difficult job trying to catch everyone, because there were no orderly lines, like there normally were.

Suzanne needed the toilet, and so did I, so we went away. Estelle and Norah who had both gone forward, had come back by then. Suzanne said when we left that she really felt for Norah, because she looked like she was ready to burst into tears, and Estelle looked like a thunderstorm. Suzanne said she was worried about Norah because she'd been through so much recently. I didn't know Norah, so I didn't know what she had been through. When we got back, Estelle and Norah had gone down to the front again and were now talking to the speaker. I sat down with Suzanne, then got up again, and said I would go down and see if I could talk to Gerald Coates, and maybe set up and interview with him. I had been thinking recently that it would perhaps be interesting to have the perspective on the meetings from one of the 'founders' of them. So, I trotted nervously down the stairs to the front, where Coates was talking to some young lads. I waited till he seemed to be finished, and when he came walking towards me, I went up to him and asked if I could talk to him for a second. "I'm just in the middle of two

situations here”, he said, and indicated that he didn’t have time for that right now. My heart just sank, it was very discouraging. I thought he would come back to me after he had ‘dealt’ with these two situations, so I sat down on one of the benches on the front row and waited. I could see Estelle and Norah still talking to the speaker and decided to go over to them after a little while. I saw the speaker place his hand on Estelle’s forehead and suddenly Estelle just fell backwards and was flat out on the floor. Norah was still standing, now alone, and I went over to her. The speaker had moved on. I asked Norah how she was, and if she had fallen over as well. “No”, she said, “I didn’t want him to touch me”. “Oh, so you didn’t want to fall over?” I asked, and she confirmed this. “So, what did you talk to the speaker about just now?” I asked and meant her and Estelle. Norah said she had asked the speaker to pray for her, but she didn’t want him to touch her. When she’d first asked him, he had put his hand on her forehead, and she had asked him to please not touch her. She just wanted to be prayed for ordinarily, without being pushed. He’d asked her then, sarcastically, if she wanted a cup of tea with that, and she’d responded “No, I just want you to pray for me normally”. “I can’t do that”, he’d said and wandered off. After a little while he’d come back to her, probably because he felt bad, Norah said, and he then put his hand above her head, in the air, and said “God bless you”, and then went again. Norah was a bit upset about the whole incident and didn’t quite understand why it should be so difficult for him to pray in the way that she felt comfortable with.

I kept looking out for Gerald Coates, expecting him to come back to me when he had a moment. I saw that he had finished with his ‘situations’, and at one point he looked straight at me, and I held his gaze for a while, then I looked away, and he just walked away, into a ‘new situation’, involving another young lad getting his full attention, pat on the back, arms around shoulders. I started to feel a little upset, I felt belittled by him, as if I were a troublesome ‘experience groupie’ kind of freak that wasn’t worthy of his attention. By now Estelle had got up from the floor and came over to us all smiles and amazement. “That was awesome”, she said; “It was just like being hit by a steam train!” I asked her what had happened, and she said he’d (the speaker) just laid his hand on her and said, “God bless you” and there was a colossal sudden pressure to her gut, and she’d said “Whoof”, and out she was. She did the impression of this sound several times as if to underline the strength of it. It had been much more powerful than the last time, a week ago, when she had experienced falling over for the first time, she said.

I went back to Suzanne and complained about Gerald Coates, explaining how I felt, and she said, “It’s just how I felt when I tried to approach him!” So, every emotion or thought that I expressed in relation to my ‘Gerald experience’, Suzanne said she could totally relate to. We

saw him walking up the stairs, probably leaving the building. I thought I might still bump into him on our way out, since we were also about to leave; I noticed that his wife was still down at the front. As we left, I looked for him in the foyer, but couldn't see him. I felt unsettled inside, and stopped for a second, saying to Suzanne that I didn't feel content with the response I'd got from him, and indicated that I would like to look for him to ask again. "No, don't!" Suzanne said. "I know exactly how you feel, but don't do it. I would hate for you to feel even worse. Think about how you feel now and imagine how you might feel if the same happens again. Believe me". She pulled me gently towards the door, and the others had caught interest in what was happening, so I started telling them about how rejected Gerald Coates had made me feel. "Well, he's definitely not a people-person", said Estelle, and told a story about an argument that she'd had with him once. It was during a series of meetings with young people that she'd been to, and he had said something quite provocative, and Estelle had told him afterwards that she thought he'd just hurt loads of people by what he'd said. She had chatted to him on face book recently though, and suggested I e-mailed him instead. I wasn't sure I really wanted to talk to him anymore anyway. Suzanne suggested that maybe God was trying to say something to me and her. I said he probably tried to tell us that we didn't need Gerald Coates. "But I do believe God uses him greatly to prophesy, though", Suzanne added.

We talked some more about the meeting and Estelle gave us yet another demonstration, well maybe actually a few, of the sound she let out when she was hit by the steam train. Norah imitated the speaker's response to her, and this time added, sourly, "Would you like a scone with that?" Suzanne said she really didn't agree with what had gone on in the end, where all those people had been lumped together at the front. She said for those types of prayers, where there is even a 'casting out' of something, one should receive a more one-on-one type of prayer, where there was room for the pastoral. At this meeting it was assumed that everybody might have something to 'cast out', and this wasn't part of the invitation to come forward in the first place. Norah commented on the falling of people, and how, standing at the front, she'd suddenly felt someone leaning heavily on her knee. She'd realised it was a woman who was just about to fall down, so she moved away a little and the woman fell to the floor. She looked around for someone to help the 'fallen' woman away, and another woman, probably one of the catchers, had said "No, just let her lie in peace". Norah dryly commented that the woman wouldn't be in much peace when somebody else landed on her.

The evening had been tainted by negative experiences for all, and the personal encounters with the 'great prophets' had been mostly disappointments. When we got on the

train however, our conversation was about the church in Green Forest. There was agreement concerning the fact that church back home was a little dry. Although we had discovered some glaring faults in the way people were treated at Marsham Street, these flaws did not nullify the experience of the faults in Green Forest. We still perceived Marsham Street as the place more likely to offer a sense of God's presence, but we had started to question more critically those who were meant to be the mediators of God's power and presence.

Questioning the prophets at Marsham Street

In the days after the last meeting, I was reflecting quite a lot upon the last events at that venue, feeling indignation at the way Coates had treated me, and pondering critically upon the performance of De Luca. These prophets, these 'great messengers' of God, with seeming recourse to some of the mysterious depths of God's knowledge; who were they, and how much weight should I, as a Christian, put onto what they had to say? During one of these private 'ranting' sessions, I was suddenly ambushed by the thought that I might be doing something wrong towards God by being this negative of persons to whom he might have given special and great gifts. Perhaps I should not be this critical...? My thoughts also wandered to my thesis and the issue of how I should write about the recent events. Was I putting Christianity in a bad light by questioning this much...? Was I doing something wrong by being critical, was basically the question that formed in my mind. It was the first time I had felt some form of apprehension concerning my interpretations of Marsham Street.

At that moment, out of the blue, the voice of the late Norwegian singer Alf Cranner came flying into my head, singing that to me old familiar tune: "Din tanke er fri" – "Your mind is free" (my translation). I had never known the entire lyrics of that song, but there was obviously a selection going on somewhere, concerning the most known and useful lines for my situation, because only three lines were playing on my mind; lines not even directly connected in the 'actual' song: "Din tanke er fri. Og slik vil det alltid bli: Din tanke er fri" – "Your mind is free. And thus, it will always be: Your mind is free". At this small, but pleasant experience, an instance of melody and lyrics playing in my head, I felt relieved. A sense of gratitude filled my heart, as the experience felt like an instance of God's care, his desire to appease me. Yet the greatest sensation was the sense of freedom that the lyrics brought, making me feel like I never again would need to doubt my freedom to question. God himself had told me so – that was how I felt. Perhaps as a result of my experience of this unquestionable freedom of mind, a thought

came to me a few days later – I even remember where I was and what I was doing at the time: I was engaged in the practical task of sorting out shoes in orderly lines in the hallway, lines that would later make one of my interviewees comment that my house looked like an IKEA catalogue. Suddenly, in the middle of my preoccupation with sorting shoes, an acknowledgement or what felt like a revelation dawned on me, that even if a person had been divinely granted the gift of prophecy, this gift did not automatically make them a good person in terms of the ability to treat others with respect. I realized that respect and care for the other were separate gifts to the gift of prophecy, at least the way this gift had recently been professed at Marsham Street.

Looking back at this period of confusion from my writing desk now, the thought strikes me that I must have had the assumption at the time, that if a person had the gift of prophecy, they would also be a person with a deep concern for others. The background for this assumption most probably related to the fact that such was my experience from my previous fieldwork in Green Forest. The people considered to have a prophetic gift within the church environment, which included Suzanne, had all been caring and considerate of others. Looking back at this period of my second fieldwork now, I recognize several factors that I did not see then. What I knew at the time, was that I felt confused. I experienced a sense of confusion in my body, but I was not entirely sure what the confusion related to, and as long as I was caught in the middle of this experience, it was difficult to gain the necessary analytic distance for assessment. I think I felt at the time, that my confusion mainly related to whether I could trust in what was happening at Marsham Street as coming from God. I can distinguish more clearly now in retrospect, between the different contexts from which my confusion arose. One of these contexts was, as mentioned, my assumption that prophets would be ‘good people’, living according to the gospel of grace. What I had experienced during the latest meeting at Marsham Street did not comply with this assumption, as both Coates and De Luca had acted with arrogance in my view. Because of their behavior, it became difficult to relate every aspect of their expressions to the will of a loving God. How should I then interpret what had happened, and where could I fit God into the picture?

It is strange to experience that sometimes, when the understanding of a situation is still beyond the reach of our conscious mind, the senses of our bodies seem to step in and tell us, through that niggling feeling, that something is wrong with our overall picture of the situation, or that important pieces of information are missing. I think both Suzanne and I experienced moments like this after the meeting with Rob De Luca. After our joint unfortunate incidents

with Coates for example, Suzanne suggested that perhaps God was trying to tell us something concerning prophets. She was considering her old perceptions of Coates against her recent experience, which put him in a different light, less glorified than before. In the following days after the meeting, I was remembering an incident that had happened during the Play Mate session where Estelle and I had announced to each other that we were going to Marsham Street to hear Rob De Luca. That day I also had a conversation with Lily, an older lady who helped at Play Mate. Lily did not belong to the church in Green Forest, she went to another church nearby. We got chatting about Marsham Street, and I expressed to her my puzzlement at how sure the speakers at Marsham Street seemed of themselves and their messages; they all seemed to exert a certain authority. She related what I said to a story from a few years ago, when one of the preachers who came to speak in her church, had stayed with his family at her and her husband's house. He had spoken in church about how children should behave so and so with their parents and be obedient etc. and Lily had thought that his children would probably be so well behaved. Then when they came to stay it turned out that they were not. They were just like any other children. She said that all the stuff that he had said in the speech was probably the ideal. The problem was that one often thought that those who spoke on certain issues were perfect themselves, whereas in reality, it was quite good to find that church authorities were still only human like the rest of us. At the time of this conversation, I remember feeling that there was a sense of urgent truth in what she said, and that this message was of significance. Not until after the meeting, however, was I ready to incorporate this truth into my body as a new understanding and belief that had become part of my own experience, through the recognition that indeed, prophets were no more than ordinary people, although perhaps sometimes with a much larger ego. Having seen how a few of the men who were recognized as prophets at Marsham Street had acted with a form of authority, which they in my opinion also had abused, it was hard to reconcile with the idea that my friends in Green Forest would be interested in such a demonstration of power. Indeed, it was not my impression at all, that people from Green Forest who expressed their longing for more of the prophetic, were looking for the power demonstrations that we had seen in some of the meetings.

The prophetic as an expression of care

It occurs to me that although the prophetic was often mentioned as a particular gift that people in Green Forest would have liked to have more of in church, this gift may have served as a

reference point for the gifts of the Spirit in general, or for the Spirit itself. It was my impression that many people sought a faith and a church life more inspired by the Holy Spirit, or more Spirit filled, as some would say. Those who went to Marsham Street, did so to seek a 're-fill' of the Spirit and to explore a different form of engagement with the Spirit, quite literally and practically through participating in a church approach directing itself to the works of the Holy Spirit in a certain way, known over the last 60 years as the charismatic renewal, which I shortly referred to in chapter 1. Marsham Street represented a different church structure than the church in Green Forest, and by attending the meetings there, one was not only experiencing the Spirit, but also a different culture of preaching the gospel and being church.

To better understand significant aspects of the spirituality of Marsham Street and their interpretation of the charismatic renewal, it might be worth looking at the movement that preceded it, making it a 'renewal' in the first place, namely the Pentecostal revivalist movement, which started at the beginning of the 20th century. The charismatic renewal shows similarities to classical Pentecostalism but differs from it historically in terms of the lack of organisational uniformity. The charismatic renewal appeared as a movement within different congregations and traditions, rather than becoming its own (Christenson, Simonnes & Engelsviken 2018). Pentecostalism's most significant trait is the proclamation of the baptism in the Spirit as an invitation to all Christians, a call to 're-experience' 'the tongues of fire' that fell on the disciples of Christ at Pentecost, filling them with the power of the Holy Spirit and the gift of speaking in tongues²¹ (Ski 1979). Charismatic phenomena were thus present at the beginnings of Christianity, then disappeared for centuries, except for occasional 'wildfire'. The mark of the Pentecostal movement has consequently been the baptism in the Holy Spirit, as the source of power for living an 'apostolic' life sharing the gospel. Following this baptism is the expectation of receiving the gift of speaking in tongues, along with the spiritual gifts of prophecy and healing (Robeck 2000). In the 1960s and -70s all the characteristic phenomena of Pentecostalism appeared in mainstream churches as an embrace of 'the charismata', at first not necessarily within these churches' public worship, but within smaller groups within the churches, like for instance cell groups and bible study groups. Imperceptibly, the charismatic

²¹ "When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them" (Acts 2: 1-4).

movement gentrified Pentecostalism, and by the late 1980s there were Pentecostal/charismatic congresses in North America. Theologically the two strands were very near, but charismatics were more theologically accommodating than Pentecostals, and largely stayed in their churches and developed ecumenical links. In the 1980s and -90s, more sectarian forms of charismatic Christianity developed, detached from other churches, and more centred on individual leaders. These churches sometimes have a more authoritarian structure, one example being John Wimber's Vineyard Christian Fellowship (Mason 2000). The meetings at Marsham Street, although never fully developing into a church of its own, would be closer to the description of the latter kind of charismatic fellowship.

At Marsham Street the spiritual gifts in focus were prophesy and healing, for the sake of the revival that the leaders were hoping for. One wanted to demonstrate the power of God through the most powerful spiritual gifts, as well as 'pass on the gifts' through what was called 'an impartation of the Spirit', in order for people to take the gifts home and use them in their own churches. The speakers invited to give a talk were all 'spiritually gifted' in relation to some of these gifts. Gerald Coates, as one of the founders, often repeated that the purpose of the meetings was to impart the Spirit to others, and of course we wanted this mysterious impartation. I guess the impartation remained somehow mysterious, however, since no one told us exactly how we were to get this impartation or take it home to our own churches. There was, in fact, not a lot of information in many of the meetings, regarding how we should deal with what we had seen, heard, and experienced afterwards, for instance in terms of how to understand ourselves and God through them. Dealing with our impressions and experiences, our questions and considerations, primarily happened through the context of our own conversations, and the 'fruits' of our spiritual encounters had to be grown in our own 'back-yards' so to speak. To be fair to Marsham Street, we had never intended these meetings or this venue to become 'our church'. Neither had Marsham Street the intention, I presume, to become anyone's church. Its vision was to be an instrument for revival, continued in people's own churches, respectively.

In my attempts at understanding both what was bothering me about Marsham Street, as well as why people I knew from Green Forest desired more of the prophetic in their church, I picked up snippets of information here and there, which little by little added to a fuller picture of the situation. In this respect, my husband John sometimes also offered additions to my understanding, from his own encounters with people. One evening, John went to the local pub to watch England play a football match. When he came back, he said he had met Oscar and Derek from church, and they'd had some nice chats, some of which were about church. Oscar

and Derek had said that church had changed so much. ‘Where are the Ezekiels and the Isaiahs’²²? ‘Where are the prophets?’ ‘Where are the carers?’ they had asked. Just like Gaby and Lizzie had commented upon earlier to me, Oscar and Derek had mentioned to John that people with the gift of prophecy and care had moved away, but not been ‘replaced’. At this point John had pointed to Suzanne, who was still around, and who embodied both the prophetic and the caring qualities. When John shared the conversations he’d had, with me, I first picked up on the fact that Oscar and Derek had expressed their desire to experience more of the prophetic in church. Their comments broadened my perspective on the prophetic as an aspect that not only people in my closest circle missed, but that perhaps more people than these seemed to miss from church life. There was however a different point that I picked up on later, upon rereading my fieldnotes, which related to the fact that Oscar and Derek had not only mentioned the prophetic, but also the caring qualities of the people who had moved away. Seen in the light of the association they made between the gift of prophecy and the gift of caring, I think Oscar and Derek’s comments highlight the fact that peoples’ longing for the prophetic was not an expression of the mere desire to experience the greatness and power of God through fantastic prophecies, but a need and desire to be *cared for* through the spiritual gifts, of which the prophetic is one. In this perspective care, or love, becomes an essential foundation for the gift of prophecy, as this gift was referred to by people in Green Forest. With a reference to Suzanne’s story from chapter 3, about God’s involvement in her life through prophetic words and images, Oscar and Derek’s comments may similarly have pointed to their desire for the presence of God as an active, intervening God, telling them important stuff about themselves and about his love that they needed to hear to live closely to him: To have a sense of ‘knowing’ God that would ‘flood’ this knowledge into their lives like a constant stream of water.

The meetings at Marsham Street were one interpretation of how a church could engage with the spiritual gifts. The references to previous members of Green Forest, who had exercised their prophetic giftings, pointed to another interpretation, where the prophetic voices were not ‘on a stage’, but in amongst everybody else, as members of the church community. And perhaps it is within this perspective of care as vital for the exercising of the prophetic, that the failure of some of the meetings at Marsham Street is best summed up: I see nothing wrong with the desire to exercise and share the gift of prophesy and healing, which was part of the ambition of Marsham Street. The sad fact of some of these meetings was however when this ambition was

²² References to two of the prophets in the Old Testament.

sought after without care for the other, and the after meeting, which was the opportunity to engage with the speakers in person, failed to provide a space for genuine interest and connection between those in charge of the meetings and the audience. All of us who travelled together to Marsham Street obviously wanted to witness the manifestations of the Spirit, at the same time as our underlying motivation related to a deeper need than the mere desire for the spectacular. At some of the meetings at Marsham Street however, like the one with Rob De Luca, our deepest needs were not met, because the church mainly met us through the figure of spectacle, and this figure seemed without the ability to relate to us personally, as singular individuals. On such occasions, we were more like observers, invited to experience the power of God from a distance.

In his first letter to the Corinthians²³ in the New Testament, Paul writes about the different gifts of the spirit. Love is described as the most important spiritual gift, without which all the other gifts lose their meaning: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing (1. Corinthians 13:1-3). To the believer, God’s presence and engagement, in peoples’ lives and in the world, are witnessed through the gifts of the Spirit, which serve to uplift, strengthen, and comfort the church²⁴. The gifts are, according to Paul, not meant as a private gift to the individual, for his/her own glory, but meant to serve everyone. Associated with the gifts of the Spirit is thus also a responsibility; the responsibility to share the gift with others in or through the church. The concept of impartation that the meetings at Marsham Street promoted, may be related to this responsibility, as the gifts of the

²³ “There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines” (1. Corinthians 12:4-11).

²⁴ It says in 1 Corinthians that “everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort” (1 Cor 14:3) and “he who prophesies edifies the church” (1 Cor 14:4).

Spirit were offered to everyone to come and witness, as well as be served by. It is, however, interesting that the greatest gift of all, the gift of love, sometimes seems to be the hardest one to come by. In the next chapter, I will explore aspects of the gift to care for others more closely, as it manifested itself in the stories of certain people in the community.

A suffering, comforting and gracious God

*“Comfort, O comfort My people” says your God.
“Speak kindly to Jerusalem; And call out to her,
that her warfare has ended.”*

Isaiah 40:1-2

Personal fellowship and relationship are key words in this chapter, both in human terms and in terms of relating to God. During the period covered in this chapter, I started to feel the pull of a spirituality expressing a greater depth of care for the individual, mainly emanating from the environment of Green Forest, although a few meetings at Marsham Street at this time also conveyed significant elements of a spirituality of care. Through an interview with Clive and conversations with him and others, I was given the opportunity to explore grace and mercy as a practice of faith and a particular way of relating to God, in a situation of personal tragedy, as Clive had recently lost his beloved wife. In Clive’s narrative, a spirituality emerged where it seemed that *seeking* itself, as if by a gentle force, had taken a step back, in the acceptance of an undeniable reality of pain and loss. What gradually became clear to me, was the impact of this loss upon the entire community. I start the chapter by continuing the conversation about the dryness within church, with Suzanne, whose perspective suggested more deeply, existentially positioned causes for the ‘dryness’. Suzanne pointed to the loss of an intercession team within church, where a group of people had regularly prayed, or interceded before God, on behalf of one another and of church, as a significant element within the current situation of what some would describe as dryness.

The intercession team

Upon arriving in Green Forest after the Marsham Street meeting with Rob de Luca, Suzanne and I decided to have a tea in my house before she went home. We sat down in the sofa, and

kept on chatting about church, remaining in the conversation about church that we had started on the train.

I asked Suzanne why things had changed so much since I last lived in Green Forest, and the change I was referring to, was the one that was causing some people to describe church as dry. In Suzanne's opinion, she said, the church had changed after the first pastor left, a few years after my first fieldwork. The church, which had previously sought to provide space for charismatic elements of faith, had gradually entered a phase where the charismatic aspects increasingly diminished. There used to be an intercession team in church at the time, a group of people who would meet up to pray prior to the service on a Sunday. Suzanne had been a part of this team, she said. Then the person who had stepped in as temporary pastor of the church stopped the intercession team, because there had been complaints about the team being exclusive of others. The argument was that prayer should be open to everyone, and from then on prayer only happened in an organised way within the church service itself. "But the intercession team was never exclusive, everyone was welcome to come and pray", Suzanne said, and added that if the group seemed exclusive, it was only because those who were a part of it, all had a particular interest in prayer, and therefore the same people would meet up each time and thus bond with each other. After the closing of the intercession team, people were of course free to meet individually in their own time and pray together. "But that wasn't the same", Suzanne said: "The intercession group facilitated so many other things within church, like prayer weekends and other prayer related events, which stopped happening after the breakdown of the intercession group. The intercession prayers fuelled certain aspects of church life". Intercession prayer as a church activity had thus been suffering over the last few years, according to Suzanne. She interpreted the consequences of this lack as having negatively influenced the state of the church.

Both personal and intercessory prayer were essential elements in Suzanne's spirituality and practice of faith. Through a prayer weekend described later in this chapter, I experienced for myself significant aspects of intercessory prayer taking place within an atmosphere of trust, openness, and acceptance, allowing me a glimpse into its value for some people. I will come back to the issue of the intercession team later in this chapter. For now, I am indicating Suzanne's perception as a starting point for my own reflections regarding the issue of dryness within church. My positioning and understanding of the dryness were of course influenced by

the interpretations presented to me by others who were concerned with this issue. When I interviewed Clive, I experienced how the issue of dryness was still present within my mind although not spoken about by him, and how through his story, a new aspect of this situation emerged.

New officers to the church

As I have mentioned earlier, when I left Green Forest in '99, I kept in touch with several people, and through this contact as well as several visits back, I kept up with news about the church and the people that I knew. There were a few years after my youngest children were born, where we did not have the opportunity to travel to London to visit the church, and during this period, Suzanne came to visit us in Norway on a few occasions. When we moved back to Green Forest in the summer of 2008, I was therefore aware of some major changes to the scene, many of which related to changes in the leadership team. The church in Green Forest had since its early days had a vision about sending people from the church into new areas for church planting, starting new churches in other places. A few years after I left Green Forest, the envoi or functioning pastor of the church, moved to a different part of England to get involved in another church. As Suzanne had said to me earlier, the church faced difficulties for some years related to finding the right person to fulfil the role of pastor. In the end, a married couple, both officers within the Salvation Army, who had overseen other corps elsewhere, took on the task as officers of the corps in Green Forest. It was an arrangement that both the church and the two officers were happy with. Suzanne told me at the time about the new officers, and she was clearly positive towards them. Judging from her appraisal, they were great people, loved by the whole congregation. The new officers, who brought new life to the church, were Clive and his wife Rachel. Several times when Suzanne spoke about the church after the new officers had arrived, and I asked her how things were going, how people were doing, etc., she would also mention Clive and Rachel, the new officers. Every time she would ask me "You did meet them, didn't you?" I had never met them, but she kept forgetting this whenever she spoke of them. It seems to me that they had become a very natural and important part of her life. I was sadly never to meet Rachel. One day in the autumn of 2007, I received a text message from Suzanne, asking me to pray for Rachel. She had been diagnosed with cancer a while back, and the doctors had said there was nothing more they could do for her. She died in April 2008, leaving behind her husband Clive and their four children, as well as a congregation of mourners.

A few days after my family and I had arrived in Green Forest for my second fieldwork, I met Clive for the first time. We were still living at Suzanne's place and since Clive was in the neighbourhood, he came over to say hello to us. It was not difficult to see that Clive and Suzanne were good friends and that Clive was as fond of Suzanne as she was of him: "I'm her number one fan!" he said about her. During the conversation, he also said that he had lost his wife recently. He was very open about his loss and the state of grieving that he was in. "I miss her everyday", he said. When Clive mentioned the loss of his wife the very first time that I met him, I think it was because this experience was what defined who he was at that point in his life. If I were to know who he was, I needed to know this. As time went by and my fieldwork proceeded, I came to realise that Rachel's death was what to a great extent also defined the whole church at the time when I was in Green Forest. The loss of Rachel had made such an impact on the church, and although I never met her myself, I was to become acquainted with her memory through numerous interviews, with her husband and with her friends, who still missed her deeply. From various people that I spoke with, and interviewed, I know that an enormous amount of people was engaged in praying for Rachel. As far as intercessory prayer is concerned, friends and family, acquaintances, churches, and Christian fellowships interceded for Rachel across the world. The Salvation Army is a huge international network, which Rachel's family and friends greatly used during her period of illness. Yet she was not healed. The power of God did not restore her, and the presence of God, which Rachel clearly knew, and which some of the speakers at Marsham Street claimed would chase any illness away, because God cannot stand illness, had not taken the cancer away.

Still, whenever I heard stories about Rachel, about her death, I always felt like a sense of God's presence was seeping through the story, as if bearing witness of a peculiar form of comfort. Through conversations with Clive and others from church, when they talked about Rachel, I got a sense of a comfort emanating from a place of depth, resonating with previous experiences I'd had of feeling the presence of God. Especially Clive's words about his loss of Rachel seemed to have the quality of being able to ground me in a sense of reality, which strangely carried a seed of hope in it. This reality was not about reaching for the spiritually extraordinary through healing, as presented at Marsham Street, but encouraging an acceptance of the present circumstance, which somehow came to embody the spiritually extraordinary in a different way, inspiring an awareness of one's experience here and now. Clive's speech in the sermon that he gave after the summer break, which I described in chapter 3, where he spoke about listening for the voice of God, also drew out this form of awareness of the present, in me.

More than anywhere however, I felt this awareness, this grounding in the present, in the first interview I had with him, about three weeks after I first met him. When I first tried to write about the conversation with Clive, I found that it was especially difficult to do justice to the experience through the most common forms of ethnographic representation. The encounter just did not fit in to my usual textual rendering of field experiences and events. Then I came across *The Ethnographic I. A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, written by Carolyn Ellis. Amongst the many chapters of the book, is one where Ellis explores different forms of writing autoethnographically, and where she describes poetry as a better way sometimes than social science prose to represent lived experience: “The short lines, breaks, spaces, and pauses create a text that sounds more like actual conversation” (Ellis 2004: 201). Poetry is embodied, and re-creates embodied speech in its form, making it easier to also re-create experience for readers, Ellis says. Her basic tenet is that we learn by having our emotions evoked, and a poem may resonate in the body, and move people emotionally and intellectually more easily than prose. The memory of my encounter with Clive feels like the memory of a poem, and so I will present it.

All is well and all will be well

I met Clive for an interview	at Wetherspoons
He was there when I arrived	
sitting at a table near the entrance	
He greeted me with a smile	
What do you want? He asked	
I'm not sure, I said	
squinting at the drink's menu	
He recommended cranberry juice	which he was having
I said I would try that	
I said I was buying the drinks	
I said I was the anthropologist	being rendered a service
He wouldn't hear of it	
I had to capitulate	
as he went to the counter to pay	

I said the interview would be like a conversation

He started asking the questions

How are you?

Have you settled in yet?

How are the children finding living in England?

And I answer, I start talking

Why I came to Green Forest in 98

Re-finding my faith

Becoming friends with Suzanne

Sharing house, sharing life

I want to write about spiritual experience, I said

The kind of knowledge they represent

Oh, numinous experience! Clive exclaimed and asked me:

Have you heard about Terry Pratchett?

Phantasy author, atheist:

Got ill, was hospitalised

and had a numinous experience

It changed his outlook on life

And he became a Christian

The experience was like a deep sense of knowing that

All was well and all would be well

I had a spiritual experience like this

when I was a little boy, Clive says

I knew for certain that

All is well and all will be well

Clive remembers his wife

His eyes fill with tears

He speaks whilst stifling a sob

God said to him: “My grace shall be enough for you”
I felt this happened to me as well
My understanding of grace became totally different
Do you have a different knowledge of grace now? I ask
He nods. Yes, absolutely

The funeral was wonderful, he says
Instead of a horrible experience
The day was beautiful
Sad
But a service exactly the way Rachel wanted it
The church was packed with people

The support from my friends in church
So important for my coping with Rachel’s death
They are great to me
I know without a doubt that they care about me
I really feel that they have been with me the whole way
I know I can always come to them
when there is something I need

I don’t understand why Rachel couldn’t be healed
But I can’t question God on it either
I just have to accept
this was what God decided

I loved my wife. She was my companion
for so many years
We had four children together
the youngest only fourteen
A boy of fourteen shouldn’t lose his mother, says Clive

I look at Clive, I see his mouth

battle between poise
and surrender
to the grief he feels
I hear his voice tremble
And I feel something from his words
pain
but also a form of peace
a warmth vibrating inside me
an aching sense of presence
screaming from within
And the question: What do I know about grace?

On my grandparents' gravestone
The words 'By Grace Alone' (Alt av nåde)
is written, I tell Clive
I love these words
they say it all
but I don't know all they're saying
just that something resonates

Being with Clive I believe in grace
it is almost tangible
real
a power
This that I am feeling now is so important!
But how do I capture with words
this sense of significance
and glue it to my anthropological papers?

I cannot
I cannot explain
I can only feel

And I feel accepted. I feel okay
I tell him my failures
I don't read the Bible often
I don't pray enough
He says God loves me. He says God wants me to be happy
I say I dream of going
to a blues club one evening
He says I should go and listen to some blues one night
Not once does it occur to me that I should watch what I say to Clive
He is all for me
No judgement
I am without fear
I relax
And it is a grace to me

A few days later my husband meets Clive at Wetherspoons
Getting to know each other better
When he comes back
He says he felt such peace
in the company of Clive
Something he had never felt in the company of anyone else

And I tell him about my experience of being with Clive
It is odd: That we both felt
that there was something special
something soothing maybe
about being with Clive

As if Clive had passed on the feeling that
All is well and all is going to be well

Grace present within loss

Meeting up with Clive for my first interview with him, was a special experience. He was so honest and up front about his loss and his grief that our encounter never went through the usual stages of going gradually from the surface to the depth. We went in on the deep end. With Clive, there was no pretending that everything was ok, because everything was not ok. Yet, without denying this reality, he held on to the conviction and the experience that all is well. After the interview, I had difficulty understanding entirely what I had experienced. On one level, I had conducted an interview, which had broadened my understanding of Clive and his situation. On another level, I felt like I had come out of a therapy session, where I had *felt myself embraced*. In its own special way, this embrace pointed to God, as well as to Clive, for me. The sense in my body during and immediately after the interview with Clive, did not feel related to me and my present situation, like the personal revelation I had felt through the devotion described in chapter 1, which I felt spoke about my distance to God. This time the revelation, or element of appropriation to use one of Kierkegaard's concepts (Kierkegaard 1984/1844), related to the more general phenomenon of grace. I felt that I had touched upon grace on a deep level, as experience, not as concept, through our conversation. When Clive talked about his experience and new understanding of grace, I felt as if he was passing on some of this grace, to me; I felt that grace was at hand.

When I formulated my fieldnotes, and when I arrived at the stage where I was ready to write about the event of meeting Clive in my thesis, I wanted to try to grasp the feeling and the sense that I'd had, because it felt so immensely meaningful, and to pass it on through my text. I recognized that a mere rendering of what had happened in our meeting, sort of from a-to-z, would not be able to capture this sense. Ellis says, "Filled with metaphors and symbols, poetry honours mystery" (Ellis 2004: 203). Grace is a mystery; it is a matter of faith. However hard I try; I will never be fully able to define or grasp grace. Through choosing poetic form for portraying our conversation and our feelings, I hoped to at least be able to describe small aspects of the mystery that grace is. The impression that meeting Clive had on me, and the sense of grace that I felt he exuded, must have something to do with how he dealt with the loss of his wife, I have thought. This perception seemed consolidated by testimonies of others that I talked to, who expressed their own strong sentiments and impressions with both the funeral itself and Clive's way of dealing with his loss. Although nobody mentioned grace, some people pointed to the experience of strong feelings, which they not only associated with their own experience

of grief, but which to them also bore witness of a greater presence, of God, in the midst of their sorrow. A while after my interview with Clive in August, I met up with Jonathan. Rachel's death was one of the first subjects he brought up when I asked him about his experience of his faith and of church at the time:

“A major thing that’s happened to us as a community has been Rachel getting cancer and dying of it. So, I think that has had a big impact on us. And I think for a long time for church, it’s almost been about trying to get through it all. Yeah, I think it’s really difficult, and also, we’ve had to pick up a lot of responsibility that she had as well, which we’re still kind of doing, I guess. She was a full-time minister in the church, so Clive and her worked very much together, they would sort things out together in terms of Sunday mornings. She was very pastoral, so she was involved in a number of pastoral relationships.”

I remember being a little surprised at the time of the interview that my question about faith would spur Jonathan to talk about the loss of Rachel. That Clive had talked about losing Rachel was natural, but from Jonathan I was expecting a more personal story about something that had happened specifically to him, his reflections upon faith based on his prayer life or some other aspect of his life, which clearly related to his relationship with God. Instead, he spoke about an experience of death that he had shared with the rest of church. My assumption of course related to the fact that I did not know what Jonathan knew about loss and its impact on his whole being and his whole life, faith included. I was gradually to learn, over the course of my fieldwork, that losing Rachel was not something that only her closest family experienced; Jonathan had experienced Rachel's death, as had everyone else in church. The closest family was not grieving in solitude; the whole church grieved, together. As Clive had done, Jonathan also related to Rachel's funeral as something significantly meaningful:

J: It feels weird to say that when Rachel died, it was like one of the most incredibly strong and profound experiences with God that I’ve ever had. Yeah, on the Sunday we kind of came together as a community afterwards. There was just an incredible sense that she was with God. And Clive, he had an incredible sense that she was carrying on her resurrection, eventually. When she died, they, all her family, were around her bedside singing worship songs. And although it was quite shorter than we would have

liked, her life, it was also incredibly significant in that she had touched a lot of people. So, it was a weird thing, the Sunday after it happened, because during the service we all laughed together and we all cried together, and just the incredible sense that through it all God is with us, through kind of the treasured memories that we'd had as a community, you know, we could give thanks for. And also, you know, we could cry in terms of needing Gods healing, and Gods comfort. So yeah, I think it has hopefully made us a deeper community.

That Rachel's funeral had been a strong experience, perhaps even in a different sense than one expects from a funeral, I gather from the amount of times Jonathan used the adjective *incredible* in the passage above. There seemed to be something utterly inexplicable and unexpected about the funeral. A situation where one might have thought that the sense of loss and aloneness would prevail, had been sprinkled with a sense of the presence of God. Jonathan's sentence *just the incredible sense that through it all God is with us* pointed to an experience of the presence of God in the situation, not only for himself; he said *us*, including the others in that experience too. Rachel was not there anymore, but the fellowship that mourned her had a sense of being together: With her, with each other and with God, through her death. The image of Rachel carrying on her resurrection in heaven was not an image of end, but of continuation, in Christ. Clive was not the only one to experience this situation as special and not just ultimately sad and hopeless, but also carrying in it a grain of something deeply significant. In the descriptions of Clive and Jonathan, the death and funeral of Rachel had not been a faith reducing event, but faith enhancing. Through Jonathan's account, an image of God coming forth and showing himself as a person, is expressed, as God is given the qualities of being the healer and the comforter; *we could cry in terms of needing Gods healing, and Gods comfort*. It seems to me that this is the sense of God that builds faith; this is the material that faith is made of, the sense of God as a person, the sense of God as real.

To hear Jonathan talk about the experience of losing Rachel, not only on behalf of himself or Clive, but on behalf of the whole church community, gave me the impression of a close-knit community of people who were standing together in grief and care for one another. This story of loss and grieving and a community standing together in a fellowship of love and support of one another, I was always touched by. I recognised the strength and the compassion that I felt was a mark of this church, since my first fieldwork there. Yet, I do not think I realized at the time, to what extent this story of loss was also a story of belonging, and that to have

shared the experience of going through Rachel's illness and death, being there with her and her family through these hard times, bound people together in ways that I could not fathom. I certainly did not understand then, as they did, a faith where needing God almost for survival was a major element. Clive and the people in Green Forest needed God and their faith in him for their lives in a way that I had never experienced for myself. Throughout Rachel's illness, the members of church had had to relate to the reality of her cancer, they had experienced the need and demand to relate to her situation, which was also *their* situation, as what was real in their lives as well, there and then. I can only speculate here, but when she died, the focal point for people's awareness over a long period had disappeared, perhaps leaving them in a sort of emotional and spiritual limbo? After Rachel's death, was there a sense in people, of being left with their own lives, but missing this sense of 'real' that had put them right in the centre of God's care, comfort and thus presence? With the portrayal of the experience of her funeral as an immensely significant event, I can only imagine the members of church as feeling at roads end afterwards, starting the process of finding their way in a new landscape.

What I now know for sure, is that many of the people that I met, were in a state of grieving when I arrived in the field. How this state influenced people and their spiritual seeking is difficult for me to assess, but I am more aware of the existence of grief as an element in this process. With time, through rereading the words of Jonathan and Clive and many others, from numerous fieldnotes and interviews, in their reference to this tragic event and descriptions of clusters of moments where God's presence was strongly felt, the embodied weight of living with loss has dawned more upon me. It feels as though I am more able to acquaint myself with the need for God and that I can sense something of the dimension of this need for the first time. The image arises of a people hurting and grieving from the loss of a beloved leader and mentor, and it is as if the situation of the dryness of church suddenly stands before me as closely related to the situation of losing Rachel. The impact of Rachel's death on the church, Estelle confirmed a little while later, when I met her for the interview that I referred to in chapter 4. Without me asking, she pointed to a connection between the situation of loss and the experience of dryness.

“We didn't get what we wanted”

When I asked Estelle about her perspective on the dryness of church, one of the first things she mentioned, before talking about the differences between Marsham Street and Green Forest, was Rachel's death. Although the interview was not to any big extent focused on the experience of

losing Rachel, the part of the conversation where she was mentioned, felt like crossing a bridge over a fire, to me. The issue felt as if it was burning, without me being able to assess where this sense of importance fitted in amongst all the other pieces I was putting together in my pursuit of a full picture of the situation of dryness. As had happened in my interview with Clive, hearing about Rachel moved me. Again, it was as if I got a sense of a depth of some form resounding through Estelle's words, a depth difficult to capture in words:

E: I think we've been knocked about by Rachel dying, if we're honest.

R: So...the whole church was affected by Rachel dying?

E: Yeah.

R: It must be a massive thing to experience.

E: Yeah. We all went through it together, 18 months or whatever it was of...being diagnosed, going through surgery, chemotherapy.

R: Has that brought you closer together as a church, do you think, or...has it been draining more?

E: When we went on the retreat before Rachel died in October last year... – she didn't die in October last year; the retreat was in October last year.

R: Yeah, I know.

E: This person came in and had a picture about our church.

R: A person outside of the church?

E: Yeah, came in to preach, and she was asking God what He wanted to say through her, to the church. And saw this picture of travellers, looking a bit tired, and some people were carrying other people: Yeah...you've been through...on a long and difficult journey, but God says, well done for still being together, for still being here, kind of thing. And looking back, there's just been this long path...rocky path...I thought; We've really hit the nail on the head with that one, 'cause that is just how...Yeah, we've travelled a really difficult road. People were...yeah, you couldn't begin to know what was gonna happen, was Rachel gonna go and be healed, or is she just...nobody...everyone was a bit kind of...oooehh. And yeah, we've had to carry people, other people have...Yeah, some people have been carriers, some people have been carried, some people have been carriers who've had to be carried for a while. I was amazed, you know, just summed up...big time.

R: Did she know what you'd been through?

E: She knew that Rachel was ill, yeah. But it's a tough thing, had the potential I guess probably to destroy a lot of people's faith. You know, when you're all praying for somebody to get well, and then they die, it has a big potential for people to be like...what's happened here, where's God, why did he do this?

R: How do you relate that experience to the message that you can feel like they are giving out at Marsham Street?

E: That everyone can get healed?

R: It sounds like, sometimes, like that's what they're saying, that God can't stand illness, so if you seek God's presence, then that should be enough to make illness go away.

E: Yeah...I don't know...I think Clive summed it up, the Sunday after she died. The whole family were in church, which we were surprised about, you know, and then Clive stood and spoke, and he said; "We didn't get what we wanted, we all wanted her to be healed and alive and with us, and we didn't get what we wanted". But he said something like, "God created everything, and if he chooses to do what he wants, or to be silent on this one, then...that's it. If he chooses to be silent, then that's good enough for me". And I thought; your wife has just died, and you're just submitting yourself to God and saying, 'If that was his choice, then who am I to question?' Then I thought; who am I to question? This isn't my wife, this is someone I cared about and still miss, but...if you can stand there and say, 'I trust God, I don't know why he did it, you know, why he let that happen, but that's his choice and if he chooses not to tell us then that's his choice as the Creator of the universe, kind of thing, that's good enough for me'. And I thought; that's gonna have to be good enough for me, as well.

Amazing.

As I spoke with Estelle during the interview, hearing her account of what Clive had said in church, just after his wife had died, made a strong impression on me there and then. How Clive dealt with his loss is simply a strong story. However, the strange thing is that the more I read this part of Estelle's interview, the more moved I am, even now, as I am writing about what Estelle said. It is as if the story of Clive holds a lot more than words can ever tell, and every time I read the story, some of what lies hidden between the lines seep through. Perhaps there is a particular message, gentle encouragement, or bidding, residing in the story that resonates more and more with me as time goes by, because I become more and more open to hearing? I ask myself what in Clive's story is so moving to me. Besides the fact that reading

about other people's loss of loved ones is always moving, because we can all identify with the fear of this happening to us, there is another aspect in what Estelle said about Clive, that especially moves me. I find this aspect ringing in Clive's sentence "We didn't get what we wanted": A plain and simple, yet such a brutal sentence. It is the sound of something that is over: There is nothing more to hope for, nothing more to expect, in the case of praying for Rachel's healing. It did not happen. Yet, there is more than the peculiar relief hidden in a condition of 'nothing left to do' that hits me. There is also no explanation. Clive does not resort to a meaning. He does not try to reason. He does not try to explain nor excuse God. He states very simply that he does not know why, he does not understand. So, he accepts instead. He bears. He grieves, but he bears.

And I recognize that this is not my way. This is not what I do when I encounter difficulty, hardships, suffering: I want to know why. I want to understand so that I can change the course of action the next time, or so that I can handle my situation better: I want to be prepared. This attitude is a natural orientation in life for me, and perhaps my being moved by Clive's approach relates to a gentle recognition inside of me, that my way may not be the one leading to grace. Clive seems so naked, so bare; it is heart breaking to read about his acceptance of his reality. And yet, there is something so tremendously moving about him. Is it the power of grace that he spoke of to me in my interview with him, which becomes expressed through his acceptance, his surrendering to the present reality, to God? And does this move me because of my own seeking to understand grace, my own need to grasp the love invested in this concept? Do I feel in the representation of specific aspects of Clive's lived story, an utterance with the message that when there is nothing left to hold on to, nothing more to do, grace remains? What rings true in Clive's words to me is a deep sense of truth²⁵, but its voice is so faint I can barely hear it. Yet something in my body responds to this voice.

In Clive's story the necessity of *seeking* grace seems laid to rest; grace comes to meet him instead. Is the gracious embrace and acceptance of his own reality, the ground for being found by God; not by seeking, but by letting go of seeking? Does Clive's simple practice of surrendering himself to God harbour the secret of how to 'look to the face of Christ'? These questions I do not ask with the intention of having them answered in my text. They are quite

²⁵ I lean on Maria Boulding's definition of truth, referred to in her translation of Augustine's *Confessions*: "«Truth» is originally what is real, genuine, reliable, trustworthy; it is a moral quality, above all of God, and of human beings who are like him. Only by extension from this does it come to mean accuracy of statement, a quality of speech" (Boulding 1997: 237).

private questions, really. I voice them because I think their nature is part of the material upon which faith is built. Spiritual life relates itself to the matters of the heart, our attitudes, our decisions, our sentiments; the practices of our inner faculties, directing themselves towards God. It is the inner qualities of faith becoming visible to me through the story of Clive's loss of his beloved wife, and his response of surrendering to God.

A pastoral model of church and fellowship

Clive represented a different spirituality and a different form of presence than many others that I met. This spirituality was also reflected in Clive's perceptions of church. In the interview I had with him in August, he had said that he wanted a non-controlling church, and a non-coercive leadership. His model was a non-hierarchical way of doing church, which he called 'a counter cultural church', based upon a pastoral model. It seemed to me that these perspectives formed the backbone of his spirituality, which came to expression in the way he spoke about faith and how he described life in Christ, through for instance his sermons in church. Clive expressed his spirituality in the way he spoke with and related to people: He was accepting and present, not only in relation to his own circumstance, but also in relation to everyone he met, it seemed to me, which I myself experienced profoundly when I met him for the interview earlier. What he had made me feel was total acceptance. Clive embodied the image of a God who was present and accepting. In his natural way of being towards others, it was as if Clive was exercising the role of comforter, the soothing therapist, through his mere presence, without knowing it himself. He seemed to be a person who was not trying to change people, but through his way of being present, he inspired people to embrace who they were, rather than trying to become who they believed they 'should be'. Clive's spiritual approach to life was not only something he talked about; his actions reflected his belief. To me, this approach was particularly visible when he talked about his situation of loss, in which he held on to both the perspective of tragedy and the perspective of hope. In a later conversation I had with Clive, he showed how these perspectives came to expression also in his daily life with his children.

"I feel God's grace every day, but there is always a sadness within me, a constant sadness", he said. He continued by saying that everything had been a lot better than he had thought it would be, after Rachel died. He had thought he would never feel joy again; that was it for him, his life was over. He still had church and his children of course, and his life would

be about his responsibilities toward them, but he had not expected there to be any joy, he said. "But I was wrong; there's even been joy in my life", Clive added. He referred to the book by C.S. Lewis 'Surprised by Joy' and said that it had been like that for him too; he had been surprised by joy. "But I have a little cry every day, and the other day my son came upon me crying, and he asked me; 'Are you okay, dad?' I answered him; 'Yeah, I'm just having a little cry'. 'Ok', said my son, and went off, as if it was the most natural thing in the world". And in a way it was natural for them as a family to be open about how they were feeling and be able to show that they were crying, Clive said. The day before, which was on the day six months since Rachel died, he had phoned his eldest daughter in the evening, around the same time of day that she had died. Clive had not been aware of the coinciding of time, but his daughter was, and told him. She was crying when he phoned, Clive started to cry too, his other children who were at home heard him crying on the phone to their sister, and so they started crying as well. "So, we all cried together, we had a communal cry", Clive said in a sorely humorous way.

I commented that they all seemed so open about their loss, and that the children seemed happy when I saw them in church, despite their bereavement. Clive said yes, they were all doing well, considering. Some of them cried every day, he knew, but they were very close as a family, always there for each other. He said he did not think that any of them had developed depression despite what they had been through and related this to their closeness to one another. He knew of another family who had lost their father, and where the mother had suffered depression afterwards. She had become more dependent on her adult children, not wanting them to leave her, which he knew had caused some resentment in them. As a father, Clive emphasized that it was important for him not to put a stop to the choices that his children wanted to make for their lives, due to what had happened. He added that he thought the fact that the family was also so close to God was of major importance for their healing process.

The way Clive and his children communicated presence in relation to the circumstances they were experiencing, suggests to me that sorrow and support were intermingled and had become natural expressions of life between him and his children. Honesty prevailed, and their sorrow and sadness were not conditions that any of them needed to hide from each other, to put on 'a brave face'. There seemed to be a great freedom to express themselves and how they were feeling and coping at any time. This sense of freedom, which I imagine was like what I had felt in the company of Clive, had created a particular form of emotional intimacy, related to the sense that I could be honest about who I was. I described this form of intimacy also in chapter

2, in relation to the evening with Suzanne and Vivien, where I felt a strong sense of belonging. As I pointed to in that chapter, this sense of presence and intimacy had affected the spiritual atmosphere for me, stirring my awareness of my longing to be in the presence of God.

Two huge doors and gold nuggets

To be in Clive's company was a rare occasion for me, whereas Suzanne I saw regularly. However, one weekend in the middle of September, the opportunity came to spend time with them both, in relation to a prayer weekend set up by the church in Green Forest in collaboration with the Methodist church in the area. This weekend, people took turns praying for one hour each from Friday until Sunday, for the local community, for the nation and the world, for themselves and each other, and for any issue or prayer request that anyone might have. A room in the Methodist church had been set up as a prayer room, where those praying would gather.

Suzanne sent me a text on the Friday evening saying she had just been 'prophesied over', by which she meant that someone had given her a prophecy. She asked if I wanted to come over for a prayer slot at nine o'clock, and so I went over to the Methodist church a little after nine to join Suzanne for her allotted time. When I arrived, she was sitting together with Clive. It felt calm and peaceful to enter the room, nicely decorated with some red fabric hanging down from the ceiling and loads of lit tea lights. The nice details in the room created atmosphere, but it felt like there was a special peace in the room as well. I sat down with Suzanne and Clive. Suzanne immediately started telling me about the prophecy that she had just received: They had been four people praying; Suzanne, Clive, a man called Will and a woman called Serena. Serena and Will had left by the time I came to church, since their prayer time was up. During their prayer, Will had a picture for Suzanne, she told me. As I have explained earlier, this was a picture in the form of a mental image or scenario: While praying, Will had seen two huge doors, and Suzanne was leaning on them, almost to the point of giving up ever being able to push them open. As she was leaning on the doors this way, they suddenly opened. It was a little bit of her, and a little bit of God, which had made them open. "I always struggle with this" Suzanne exclaimed; "How much am I supposed to do myself, and how much am I supposed to expect God to do?" I understood Suzanne to be referring to her tendency to try to fix things herself, rather than wait for God to lead the way. Suzanne said she thought the doors represented a specific issue that she was struggling to resolve at the time. Although she

did not know exactly what possibilities the doors in the prophecy opened up to yet, she experienced the picture that Will had for her as highly encouraging, and it was obvious that she was quite excited about what had happened. Her joy and excitement concerning the prophecy, was what had made her text me and 'summon' me to come over to share her news with her.

Suzanne's comment "*How much am I supposed to do myself, and how much am I supposed to expect God to do?*" reminds me of the conversation I had with her earlier about trusting in God, which I referred to in chapter 3. In that conversation she had shared with me the moment when she realized her difficulty to trust in God, as a tendency deeply ingrained in her. The experience of becoming aware of this tendency in her was a revelation to her, it was an element of appropriation, showing her an aspect of herself, which in her understanding was a hindrance to her fully trusting in God. To fully trust in God was one of Suzanne's major orientations in her faith, also often articulated by her as *submitting to God*. In the case I referred to in chapter 3, she had decidedly ignored what she recognized as the voice of the Holy Spirit inside of her and followed her own intuitions. Because of my knowledge of this aspect of Suzanne's faith, I knew why the prophecy of the huge doors had made such an impact on her: It was not merely because of the concrete situation she understood it to speak into; it was also because it brought insight into a dimension of her grounds for making important decisions in her life. It was important for her to consider whether she was doing things in her own strength, or as Christians are often encouraged to, in God's strength, in accordance with his will. In this perspective, the experience of the recent prophecy seemed to speak about a middle way, where Suzanne was 'pushing' from the outside, but where the doors opening related to God's part in the operation. After Suzanne's sharing of the prophecy, we naturally spent some time talking about the specific issue in her life, which she felt the prophecy related to, and that the doors to her symbolized an opening into. In retrospect however, it is Suzanne's reference to the dilemma of assessing whether a desire within her for something, or the need to resolve a particular issue, was of God or of herself, that stands out to me. This questioning, which I also recognize in myself and referred to under the headline *We didn't get what we wanted*, stands in such a contrast to Clive's way of trusting in God despite his circumstances. As in Suzanne's definition of her struggle to determine the balance between herself taking action and leaving the action up to God, as an expression of her trust in God, the subject of trusting in God, was also the issue seeping through Clive's narrative. Where Suzanne described her dilemma as not knowing when

to stop her own attempts at fixing a situation and leave the resolution of the problem up to God, Clive had come through this stage. After having tried out every possible way of curing his wife's cancer, there was nothing to resort to, but to trust in God. Clive's state of grace seemed to have come through his acceptance of a broken issue. This state of grace felt like a part of the nerve, or atmosphere, when the three of us got together the next day as well:

I went back to the Methodist church the following day and met with Suzanne and Clive again. They were sitting in a more enclosed area this morning, and Suzanne had just made them a cup of coffee. Again, the atmosphere that met me as I stepped into the room felt good and immediately moved me and evoked my emotions. Since last night, and through the morning, I had felt somewhat heavy inside, like a sense of missing something that I could not quite put my finger on, but that the atmosphere in the prayer room brought up again. There was like a need to or a desire to go deeper, within me, growing from a sense that I was somehow just cruising on shallower waters in my life, yet sensing that beneath there was a whole world of depth, out of my reach. So, when Clive asked me "What can we pray for you?" I knew there would be tears, as I was opening a sore spot inside of me. I tried to articulate how I felt. They prayed, and there were tears, but it felt good. I did not know why it felt good, because there was no conclusion that could tell me why I was feeling the way I was but being prayed for was soothing.

Suzanne and I then prayed for Clive, and Suzanne said afterwards that in the prayer she had seen an image of Clive giving away gold nuggets to people after he had spoken to them. It was as if gold dust burst over the heads of people after a meeting with Clive, she said. I thought to myself that what John and I had experienced in our meetings with Clive, I could very well describe as a feeling of receiving nuggets of gold. Clive seemed surprised at what Suzanne said, it did not seem as if he was aware of having this 'golden' effect on people. He commented on how Suzanne would receive pictures and words from God, whereas he did not. "I never receive any pictures", he said. "I would have loved to, but I never do".

As I had felt when I interviewed Clive earlier, I had a strong sense of there being something essential and important in the atmosphere of the prayer room and the company I shared with Suzanne and Clive. I felt that my inner being, and my emotional engagement was 'lit up' by 'something spiritual', that it was 'filled with the Spirit'. Articulated through a Christian vocabulary, I would say that the Spirit was present and strongly felt in the room, and I would say, without being able to describe exactly how, that what I relate to as the sense of the

Spirit is different, feels different, to any other sense that I have experienced. These observations are highly subjective and relate to a specific religiously inspired language, that Christians often engage in. One refers to the Spirit in terms of bodily senses that one picks up. The Spirit is referred to as felt, as a particularly felt presence in the moment. The anthropologist in me wanted to ‘grasp’ what ‘this sense’ that I felt really was, which of course, due to the subjective nature of my experiences, cannot objectively be done. They are all a matter of faith. I can however point to certain aspects of our being together, and how they affected me. We were already being ‘real’ with each other, in terms of how we felt about important concerns in our lives; concerns to which we did not possess the remedying answers, but whose mere address and praying over seemed to bring comfort. The sense of reality and honesty brought relaxation and a sense of comfort, into which was however also carved out a space for a spiritual influence, expressed through for instance the event of prophesying. Suzanne received a prophecy for herself, and later, during our prayer, she received a prophecy for Clive. For me, who was not at the time very accustomed to being in an environment where the prophetic, as a message from God, was so easily shared and engaged in, the prophetic made a big impression on me. The perspective of the prophetic as an expression of a truth coming from God, moved me beyond the mere human aspect of our encounter, and towards my own longing for a deeper relationship with God. When on the first evening in the Methodist Church, the Friday, I felt that I bathed in a sense of wellbeing by merely being in the prayer room, I think the atmosphere of openness, honesty and being real came a long way towards providing this experience. As I came to church the following day, on the Saturday, the atmosphere of depth that I had experienced the previous evening had opened that space in me that longed for this reality on a general basis, setting in motion a strong anticipation for more of this openness and comfort, forcing itself upon me as a tidal wave. Within this wave, and within the sense of intimacy between us, arose a sense in me of the nearness, the presence, of God.

Without reflecting upon this fact at the time, because of other compelling concerns related to our being together there and then, like trying to understand what Suzanne’s prophecy meant, noticing the atmosphere in the room and how it affected my sense of a spiritual presence, it has later struck me that the prayer weekend let me experience intercessory prayer for myself. Although there was no permanent intercession team being set up, the getting together to pray followed the same pattern that Suzanne had described earlier, of people gathering specifically to pray for one another, for church and for the world. The intimate set up of the room, as well as the small number of people praying together for each prayer slot, allowed for an atmosphere

of personal intimacy and closeness, which provided a space where it was safe to bring up issues not necessarily brought into the open very often. Through my own experiences of being in the Methodist Church over this weekend, the significance of the opportunity to meet up for prayer in this way, became more obvious to me, both as a form of being together with each other, but also as a space for relating to and hearing from God. This perception, grown from my own experience, makes it easier to appreciate the essence in Suzanne's understanding of the place for intercessory prayer within church, as well as her judgement of the dryness as related to the lack of an intercession team.

Intercessory atmosphere at Marsham Street

Interestingly, in light of the conversation Suzanne and I had after the meeting with Rob de Luca, where Suzanne linked the dryness of church to the lack of an intercession team, followed two meetings at Marsham Street, which were of an intercessory nature. These meetings carried the subject of intercession further and demonstrated what a church service, which focused more on a prayerful attitude and attentiveness towards God throughout the service, might look like. The married couple John and Christine Noble were the main speakers at these two meetings. Suzanne was keen to hear them, because she had always liked John Noble, she said. Noble was a former officer in the Salvation Army, and he seemed so sympathetic and wise, she had said to me earlier. John Noble was the man with the ponytail who prayed for me at the first meeting with Christen Forster, where he suggested to me that I was at a distance from Jesus. Noble had been around when the meetings at Marsham street first started ten years earlier as well, according to Suzanne. I refer from my fieldnotes:

There were more people from church than usual at the first of the two meetings with the Nobles. In addition to Suzanne and myself, Norah, who had also been to the last meeting was there, Estelle was there with her daughter Mandy, and another woman from church, Maggie, was there for the first time. The worship this evening was mellow, soft, and meditative. The singer had a sensitive voice, and would sometimes sing very quietly, as if he were listening out for something at the same time. At one point he did listen, it was obvious, he stopped singing, started whispering in tongues, and said "Let's stay here for a while, there's more to come". After a little time of listening, he repeated that Jesus was saying there is more to come. He encouraged us to close our eyes and ask God what he wanted to say to us, and for us to say to

God that he could have all of us. "Come and take me, God, take all of me", he sang. The worship seemed to have a form of embrace to it, as if inviting one into the arms of God. To me the atmosphere seemed characterized by a strong sense of peace and rest, in which it felt good to linger. After the worship, John and Christine Noble entered the stage. John spoke first, then Christine. John spoke mainly about their life together before becoming Christians, describing how they had both been involved in witchcraft, and how they lived in a kind of violence towards each other which would have broken them up had they not found Christ and experienced healing through him. Christine spoke about Christians as wells in virtue of our life being in the Spirit. She shared the perception that when we are in Christ, we are wells filled with his life, with living water, through mere faith in him. In stark contrast to previous meetings, often focusing mainly on the power of God, the Nobles brought the message down to earth; first through an autobiographical account of their personal journey towards Christ, their own lived life, then through focusing on Christ as living water that we are carrying in our bodies, like wells. More than being portrayed as those who should fetch the water and bring it to others, in a boost of action and effort, the perception of the Christian as a well, focused on Christ as a resource received and being carried within, as an aspect of our being, and of our human condition. The focus of the preaching was not on what God could do through us if we believed in and appealed to his power, but on whom we are in God. When I felt that there was something earthbound in the perception of ourselves as wells, I think it was because the metaphor of myself as a well provided a sense of myself as something solid, sunk into the ground – grounded, not in myself alone, not merely in my circumstances, but majorly in Christ. The metaphor gave a sense of me being where I was supposed to be, through being filled with Christ as the living water, in embodied connection with God. In this sense, the image used by Christine Noble provided an awareness of myself as being in a relationship with God, which was independent of my own efforts.

After the speech, people were invited forward for prayer as usual. I did not feel a desperate need to go forward in terms of having a particular prayer request. The atmosphere of rest lingered and I felt at peace just sitting in my seat. In the end, I went forward because I felt slightly stirred up, without feeling that the stirring related to anything in particular; nothing had come to my awareness that I felt needed attention and prayer. I asked Suzanne if she wanted to go forward as well, but she did not. She said she did not feel stirred up to go, and she did not want to go unless she did. I went forward on my own. None of the others who were with me came to the front either. I waited behind Christine, as she was praying for another woman. She

came over to me afterwards, and I said I was not sure what I wanted her to pray. She prayed that Jesus touched me. She said this sentence several times, as she was touching my forehead with her fingers. I felt a light fall upon me, my bowed head felt like turning to face the light from above, so I lifted my head, and she let go of her fingers. I started to feel a little faint, although not that I would necessarily fall, but then I could feel myself start to lean more and more backwards, just gently, until my knees gave. The arms of the catcher behind me put me carefully down on the floor, where I laid for a little while with my eyes closed, feeling as though I was being bathed in warm light. When I got up in a sitting position, Christine came over to me again and asked me if I was okay, and I said yes. I got up and went back to my seat. Suzanne asked me if I was okay, and again I said yes. There was no need to say more. I sat down, and we all stayed a little bit longer, just sitting in our seats, soaking in the peaceful atmosphere. We watched as Christine prayed for two girls, separately. The girls seemed to need a little more attention after the initial prayer, and Christine took the first girl over to Gerald Coates' wife, who was sitting on one of the benches. Mrs Coates had just been prayed for herself by Christine, and she had looked like she would fall, but instead Christine and the catchers had led her over to sit down on the bench, where she seemed to rest peacefully. After Christine had said something to her, she started tending to the girl. Christine went back to the other girl, who started crying desperately when Christine prayed with her. After a little while, Christine led the girl over to the bench right in front of us, where she sat down with her and talked. I left for the toilet, but Suzanne afterwards said, unable not to have picked up the conversation on the row right in front of her, that the girl had said she was being abused in her marriage. Christine had asked the girl if she was going to a church, which the girl was, and Christine had then asked the girl if they had a good vicar in the Anglican church that the girl was attending. She was obviously trying to find out whether there was a good support system around her.

On our way to the tube station shortly afterwards, Suzanne commented upon the fact that Christine was tending very well to the people for whom she prayed. She did not just pray a short prayer, and then leave. She took the time, where she felt it necessary, to talk with people. Suzanne was more positive about Christine's way of praying than some of the other prayers offered to people during previous meetings. She referred to the last meeting we had been to, with Rob de Luca. She stated how disruptive it could be for people to be told to gather at the front and just be jointly prayed for and then maybe nothing more. What if people did not have a church to go to? she asked. What if there were things that they needed to work through? Where would they go then? Suzanne saluted Christine for asking the girl about church and

enquiring about its quality. Christine Noble seemed particularly aware of the vulnerability inherent in a prayer situation: To bring one's most compelling concerns to someone for prayer is a vulnerable position in which to place oneself. One puts oneself in acute visibility to the person praying and since what is often voiced as prayer requests relate to some form of suffering, one is bringing out into the open issues that reveal one's needs and most intensely felt hopes and aspirations for a better life. Experienced in and deeply concerned with prayer as Suzanne was by nature, the way prayer was offered to people was always the subject most urgently on her heart in relation to the Marsham Street meetings – and any Christian meeting for that matter.

I asked Maggie how she had found the meeting, and she said she had found the meeting very good. "We should have more of this in church", she said, referring to the church in Green Forest, without specifying what 'this' was. I still thought I knew what she meant. Maggie's comment started a conversation about what people felt were missing in church at the present time. The lack of opportunities to be prayed for was addressed, as this was an area that everybody agreed was suffering. The Sunday evening prayer meetings had stopped, so there was nowhere for people to go and ask for prayer, unless it happened in people's small groups, i.e., smaller groups of people who met up in each other's houses once a week in the evening. Maggie added that not everybody in church went to a small group, which would further reduce the opportunities for prayer for them. Maggie seemed to vent some frustration when talking about church and Suzanne said with a glint in her eye that Maggie's frustration was due to her pastoral heart, indicating a knowledge of Maggie that I of course did not have. Maggie had a pastoral heart and therefore she was concerned when people did not receive what they needed, Suzanne said in a gesture of encouragement towards Maggie. Having a pastoral heart, as I understand the term, meant that a person cared and was concerned about the wellbeing of others. Of course, such a description could very well be used about Suzanne herself, who in my view had a big pastoral heart, which prompted her to speak out whenever she considered that somebody had been treated unjustly and without dignity. The particular care for another which sought expression through an act of prayer, both Suzanne and Maggie obviously considered one of the essential ingredients of a fellowship portrayed and experienced as good.

As if higher powers wanted to demonstrate that we had been wrong about church, three days later there was a service in Green Forest, which seemed an objection to the perception of dryness, or at least an indication of latent potential. Unfortunately, I was not present because

one of my children was ill, but several of the women I regularly spoke with, mentioned this service later and described it as very inspirational. Clive had spoken, and from others I heard that he spoke from Revelation. It was no surprise to me that Clive had held an inspirational service. In my experience, he was an inspirational person. When I spoke to Estelle about the service, this was her comment: “It was as if something almost happened and the service was almost like on Marsham street: People were invited forward for prayer after the speech, and it was just that atmosphere of anticipation that makes you feel that anything can happen”. She said it was as if you just knew that things were happening for people, as they were being prayed for, as their wounds were being healed.

Intercession and the case of unanswered prayer

One of the characteristics of prayer and intercessory prayer relates to the hope invested in it: Prayer is an opportunity to come before God and present one’s deepest needs and concerns with the hope of seeing them answered and resolved through God’s intervention. Confession in terms of the sharing of certain aspects of one’s personal life with another person may be the event leading up to an intercessory prayer, and comfort, sometimes in the form of liberation from a burden, may be the aftermath. In the preface to Augustine’s *Confessions*, Maria Boulding, who translated the 1999 edition of his work, writes about the meaning of confession as she claims Augustine understood it: “This creature (man) comes to be in responding to God, in speaking the graced word of faith, love and obedience back to God. The word of confession is therefore not simply a statement of what is, of the present truth of oneself, seen and admitted in the light of God’s presence, with all the liberation that implies. It is more than a static recognition; it is a creative process. The human speaker is at one with God who is creating him; he becomes co-creator of himself, constituting himself in being by confession. Words, as Augustine often observed, are essentially signs; and they reach their fullest meaning as servants of self-transcendence.” (Maria Boulding, OSB, Introduction in *The Confessions by St. Augustine*, 1999). The confession that Augustine speaks about refers to man’s confession to God, and in Augustine’s own expression, his confession took the form of a lengthy written manuscript. Through intercessory prayer, a confession does not happen in private, between the individual and God only, but with the aid of the intercessor in a way repeating the confession as prayer, being like a midwife, aiding a person in reaching out to God. Whatever form it takes, whether by private or intercessory prayer together with others, confession first requires an awareness of

an existing situation, aspects of oneself, one's own life or another's. This awareness, fuelling the confession thence being lifted to God, may have the qualities of both liberation and creativity described by Boulding. Through becoming aware of *that which is*, in oneself, another, in the situation, one engages in a process of creating oneself afresh, through relating to one's circumstances in a new way, through new awareness, transcending oneself and lifting oneself above one's circumstances, heading instead for the hope in God by appealing to his counsel.

In the practicing of mindfulness, which is a form of meditation where one focuses on certain aspects of what is happening in the moment, one is supposed to non-judgementally register and become aware of one's inner processes, whilst refraining from judging them as shameful and unacceptable. Accepting oneself, or looking at oneself mercifully, is believed to enable a conscious way of relating to the various processes and tendencies in oneself. This inner gaze is not applied to justify everything in a person's thoughts, feelings, and actions as acceptable, but its non-judgmental character may set in motion an inner transformation growing from the sense of acceptance (Telle 2011). The practice of mindfulness as an act of seeking awareness of tendencies in oneself, has similarities to the Christian confession as an act of becoming aware of who one is, as part of the process of coming before God. Mindfulness however differs from the perspective of confession articulated by Boulding, in that in Boulding's description the awareness of oneself becomes directed or offered to God, thus becoming an element in the process of relating to God. Rather than seeking self-transformation as a goal, one seeks to be in union with God, and God and the relationship with him remains the purpose. Estelle's words: *It was as if something almost happened*, may figure as a suitable description of the onset of this creative, self-transcending, self-transformative process, that always has the potential of happening, but which thrives best in an atmosphere of openness and acceptance.

There are times, however, as we have seen, when prayer seems unanswered. To go forward for prayer in hope and faith may sometimes expose one's vulnerability, in the fact that there is no guarantee that one's prayer will appear answered. The vulnerable position one might find oneself in after a prayer that did not seem answered, was one of the issues brought up by John Noble at the couple's second meeting at Marsham Street. When he started speaking at this meeting, Noble addressed those who had come forward for healing prayers at previous meetings and had not received healing. He said these people had been on his heart. He wanted to share something with those who had experienced the lack of healing: Remember that being prayed for will not have made it worse, he said. Then he invited those whom this experience applied

to forward during the prayer time and said he would like to pray for them again. What John Noble was offering was a form of closure for those who had not had their prayers answered the way they had anticipated: He was offering comfort. He was offering a different perception of end intended to encourage hope, not despair and confusion.

Not every speaker at Marsham Street had the wisdom of John and Christine Noble, who had managed to express how comfort was a constituent part of intercessory prayer. A different, and I may add unfortunate perception of the link between healing and faith was amply demonstrated at the next meeting that I went to, held by a woman called Naomi Dowdy. Dowdy claimed that the literal meaning of the word salvation was healing, and inferred that if your faith were strong enough, then you would be healed. Sadly, this meeting was the one that Clive decided to come to. Throughout the speech by Dowdy, the awareness of Clive's presence two seats to the left of me made the whole experience of the meeting into a study of dis-comfort to me. I could only imagine how Clive must have felt. The message in Dowdy's perception of salvation as healing was that unless one was healed, one was not having the right faith or enough faith. This is not a comforting message to receive when your wife has died from cancer and you have been engaged and engaged others over a long period in prayers for healing. Clive and the person he had arrived with left before me at this meeting, and I did not have the chance to talk to him. At a later occasion and at a different venue I was however present when someone asked Clive if he had ever been to Marsham Street. Upon confirming that he had, the other person asked Clive how that meeting had been. Clive's response was immediate and full of feeling: "It was awful. It was awful".

The danger of Dowdy's message is that one is encouraged to desire a different reality than the one that one is living. The improvement of faith may thus become faith's orientation. This orientation of faith is in stark contrast to Clive's own orientation, which was one of acceptance of his reality as well as trusting in God, i.e., Clive's orientation of faith was towards God. Clive and Rachel had sought numerous prayers for healing. When healing did not occur, Clive and his children sought an orientation of faith that continued to hold them in an embrace of grace, the comfort and reassurance that all is well, rather than the opposite, placing the blame with themselves and their lack of faith – or with God. It seemed to me that it was on the basis of his orientation towards God that Clive had experienced a sense of grace, which he later described to me as being of the greatest comfort to him in his grief: "Only through the grace of God have I managed so well these months". Contrary to the perception, that Clive and his

family's prayers for healing for Rachel had been unanswered, it seemed to me that the answer had come in the form of grace to the family.

The many names of God

This chapter has been about intimate and close relationships; from the most precious one between man and wife, family relations between a father and his children, till the closest friendships between members of church. It has also been about the intimacy that may exist in a prayer situation, either between two people, or between several people praying together, as in the case where the intercession team was described. I have portrayed this intimacy as related to a sense of acceptance and an attitude of non-judgement between the participants of a relation. As Gestalt theory holds, "Our deepest, most profound stirrings of self-appreciation, self-love and self-knowledge surface in the presence of the person whom we experience as totally accepting" (Sills, Lapworth and Desmond 2012:17). This perspective embraces the understanding that a person's health and growth are best facilitated in the context of a relationship. The comfort and trust that may exist in a relationship characterized by mutual acceptance and support also presents a suggestion of how a close relationship to God may be experienced by the believer. Clive's story of how he experienced the grace of God as carrying him after the loss of his wife, bears witness of his relationship with a God who is present, engaged and caring. In Clive's lived life and narrative, God becomes a being whose presence can be felt and experienced, although not grasped and understood. Through Clive's faith in God as present in his life, he gives the impression of living with an embodied understanding of God as someone who is always close and always caring, and his faith seems to be a knowledge upon which he relies. Clive's narrative shows how his faith has become a certainty for him, immersed into his body, and that within this type of faith, what matters is not understanding God's purposes and God's plan, but trusting in God and in the confidence that there is a plan, and that it is a good one. I believe Clive's story exemplifies the kind of faith that allows a person to submit himself into the care of and trust in God.

In chapter two I wrote about relating to God as a person, and I referred to Martin Buber's perspective that when we are present with people, with our surroundings, which he described as an expression of the primary word I-Thou, this presence bears a resemblance to the presence of God as the eternal Thou (Buber 1992). Throughout my text I am trying to portray faith as a relationship to a personal God. The idea that God is personal and close, is also an idea portrayed

through many biblical narratives through the various names given to God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. In Isaiah's prophecy about the coming Messiah (Jesus) from the Old Testament, Messiah is referred to by these names; Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Eternal Father and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9: 6). In psalm 23, God is referred to as both Lord and shepherd; *The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want* (Psalm 23: 1). Jesus also said about himself *I am the good shepherd* (John 10: 11), along with many other names. Concerning the name of the Holy Spirit, which Jesus gave to the disciples before he ascended to heaven, he has been given various names according to which translation of the Bible one is using: *But the Comforter/the Advocate/the Helper/the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you* (John 14: 26). One may object that through visualizing God in this way, he is at once objectified and reduced. This perspective may be correct. However, the above scriptural references show us that this form of objectification is also part of a biblical tradition of giving God numerous names, according to his many qualities, and according to the needs of those calling upon his name. The least objectified name of God is found in the Old Testament: In Exodus, Scripture tells us that Moses wanted to know what name he was to give to the Israelites, of the God who claimed to be the God of their fathers: *God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you* (Exodus 3: 14). Do these names imply the attempt to put God in a box according to one's needs? Or do they imply the impossibility of putting God in a box? What is certain, is that naming God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, is part of the practice of relating to God for the believer, and it is part of the practice of growing in intimacy, because appealing to God by the name of one of his qualities, also involves a confession of needing God, thus not only naming God, but becoming aware of, and naming, an aspect of oneself, in which one's insufficiency and vulnerability is acknowledged.

While I was in the field, both during the first and second of my fieldworks, it sometimes occurred to me, as I got more acquainted with prayer and learned, through my own participation in prayer situations, about people's various requests to God, that God often appeared to be related to as a therapist. People would ask for guidance, they would ask for advice, they would ask for a help that they felt were needed in their lives. They would confess how they were feeling, and if deemed necessary, they would ask forgiveness for a wrongdoing. It was my impression that God was considered a provider of strength, of comfort, of care and direction in various situations. To my surprise, I was not the only one pondering the idea of God being related to as a therapist. Sometime after my first fieldwork, I attended a seminar in Korskirken

in Bergen, held by the psychologist Berit Borgen, based upon her master's thesis in cognitive psychology. Borgen had investigated the therapeutic implications for substance abusers who experienced a religious conversion to the Christian faith at a Christian rehabilitation centre, where she did her fieldwork, and where the abusers became immersed in a Christian culture and community (Borgen 1994). The abusers emphasized that what made a difference at the Christian rehab centre in comparison to previous treatments they had been involved in, was the personal relationship with God and Jesus that they experienced there. They believed that their success had been possible only with 'the Lord's help', and by the engagement of the community at the rehabilitation centre, treating them with love, respect, and acceptance, backing up their process of growth. This new life of living in a continuous dialogue and closeness to Jesus the abusers, and hence Borgen, described as one of the main elements for their recovery. Through personal prayer sessions the abusers experienced that God spoke to them personally, and in Borgen's perspective, the success of the Christian rehabilitation relied upon the way both abusers and helpers related to God as a 'therapist', expressing their faith in Christ as the healer.

Borgen suggests that the abusers experienced God as the 'real' therapist, above the human therapist, whom they could trust, and who would always possess the correct perspective and resolution to their situation. To me, this perspective invokes the biblical reference to Christ as *Wonderful Counsellor*, referred to above, the name of which, to a Christian believer may take on a significance beyond being a mere name: To the Christian believer, Christ may be *experienced* as a wonderful counsellor, through a person's intimate and personal engagement with him, through faith, in various situations. In Clive's narrative of his experience of relating to God, during his wife's illness and after her death, it felt to me as if his narrative suggested that he had met the *Wonderful Counsellor*, completed his therapy, and was now residing with the *Prince of Peace*.

The mystery of Grace

When Clive was talking about grace, he was making a reference to Paul's statement in the New Testament, which according to Paul was God's response to his prayer for redemption from a condition which Paul described as 'a thorn in my flesh', that he wanted to be rid of: *My grace is sufficient for you* (2 Cor 12: 9), was God's answer. When Clive expressed how grace had saved him, what he also referred to, was his own helplessness and need of God. Through a

narrative of personal experience, Clive pointed to the gospel of Christ's grace, and illustrated how Christ's spirit was with him, even as a new and undesired reality had been forced upon him. Clive was without his wife, he missed her deeply, but he had a sense of being with God, a sense of God's presence, which held him up. In a sense, Clive set an example, through his lived life, of what the theologian Gerhard O. Forde describes as the power of the Word becoming evident when we *proclaim* it: "To qualify as the mark of the church the word must be orally preached, and believed, professed (enacted), confessed and lived" (Forde 1999:4). The oral preaching referred to contains, according to Forde, the power of the gospel "breaking into our present, (...) making us new" (Ibid: 4). Proclamation of the word is to "do the text to the hearers, to do once again in the living present, what the text records as having been done of old" (Ibid: 5). The spirit is perceived as hidden in the letter, in the text and in the words, thus constituting a metaphysical reality, a here and now of spiritual presence creating faith through our encounter with the Word, endowing Word and Scripture with the material presence of God. When listening to the biblical Word, what one is encountering is therefore not merely literal words and their meaning, but God himself. Forde's perspective connects the Christian self to a greater, all-encompassing narrative formation from which the Spirit, according to the perception that the Bible is God's inbred Word, imbued with the material reality of God, flows into our own life as we read the Word, hear it preached and experience its encounter in various ways. Clive was not talking about the power of Scripture or about meeting the Spirit of God through the actual reading of the Bible, but he was referring to a Scripture verse from the Bible and applying this verse to his lived life. The passage of Scripture on which Clive relied, "My grace is sufficient for you", may also seem to have been embodied in him as a quality bursting forth in his relating to both God and others in his life; regarding the reality of not receiving prophetic elements like pictures and words from God, which he referred to during the prayer weekend together with Suzanne and I, he was, through the prophetic image that Suzanne had for him during our prayer, portrayed instead as someone others received gold nuggets from, through his encounter. God's grace did indeed seem to be enough for Clive, as an experience for him and as a gift to pass on to others. Looking back, I feel that Clive's orientation in life in many ways seemed like a living testimony of grace. Perhaps that is the reason why he made such a strong impression on people that he met, including myself. There was nothing extraordinary about Clive and he certainly did not point to the extraordinary as anything to seek after. Yet there was something highly extraordinary about him, and how he made you feel about yourself: He made you feel seen and he made you feel that you were good enough.

Whether or not I understood exactly what I was experiencing during my interview with Clive, or whether I could fully understand the scope of grace within the Christian faith, I was learning about something significant in my encounter with Clive. Something that resonated through my body and which related to some of the deeper meanings of the faith that we shared, and which thus pointed beyond us both. That which it pointed to, was the part of God in the relation; the ungraspable part of God, which we could only long for, but not understand, explain, nor fully express. I am reminded of a text by Valentine Daniel, in which he portrays the unfeasibility of expressing certain aspects of our experience and understanding, as he speaks about the unrepresentability of beauty and pain (Daniel 1994). Daniel says that neither beauty nor pain can be fully represented through language. Nevertheless, this is what we try to do, and where the descriptions of beauty flourishes in language, the descriptions of extreme pain get stuck. Daniel suggests that where the experience of beauty opens up for inexhaustible possibilities of expression, pain resists language, if not destroys it. Beauty objectified by finding itself a place and position through signification and language loses a measure of its truth and integrity, Daniel claims. Yet this objectification is generous; it opens up to the world, inviting further signs. Pain, on the other hand, when embodied, closes in on itself. Daniel's examples of the incommunicability of pain stem from his data material, where he interviews victims of torture. Unlike socialized pains like headache, toothache, and numerous other pains, which have been recognized and named in folklore and medicine, the pain experienced in torture becomes privatized to such an extent that it seems overwhelmingly unshareable to the victim. As Daniel shows, victims of torture could well describe the torture they had been subject to, but without passion and emotion their narration acquired the quality of a sketch, producing an air of incredulity in the listeners, and arresting the victim in the aloneness of their pain, referred to as an individuated state. Daniel suggests that pain that has been arrested in this form of insignificant and individuated state, does not find its way out of this state even when it is objectified in verbal recitations. He concludes that "In order for pain to find its freedom into the semiosis of culture, it must pass through the liminal phases of either terror, beauty, or both" (Ibid: 238). The form of terror Daniel here refers to is not the terror of torture, but a second, therapeutic terror, which he likens to a seismic after-shock. This terror relates to the remembering of terrible acts and manifests itself in many ways, from uncontrollable sobbing, rage, to violent shakings of the body, among other things, and begins the process of the de-individuation of the person, through bringing pain into cultural processes of significance. In

this way terror remembered or relived dislodges pain from its fixed site, making the pain more understandable both to the victim and those living close to the victim.

I have no reference to the embodied pain of torture described by Daniel, in my material. The existential struggles that I describe in my text, have no resemblance to the process of individuation through unspeakable pain. Yet, Daniel's text portrays what may happen when pain becomes individuated, that may shed light upon other domains of experiencing pain as well. Trying to tread carefully here, could it be that an essential aspect of the de-individuation referred to by Daniel, involves an identification with something other, something bigger, reassuring, which exists beyond the imprisonment of pain? Daniel describes a scene where a torture victim sees a picture of Christ crucified and exclaims: "How beautiful! What pain! It gave us peace" (Ibid: 245). Daniel's conclusion unites pain with beauty, claiming that through terror remembered, pain can become objectified in a similar manner as beauty, thus bringing pain into the domain of culture and shared meaning. Still tentatively, and with no comparison between the pain of torture and the pain of loss, there is something in Daniel's portrayal of the vision, the experience, of seeing Christ crucified, encountered by the victim of torture, that draws my mind to Christ, whether it is as a symbol of God or of man, as well as to Clive. May it be Christ's quality of identifying with the widower as well as the torture victim in a liberating embrace bringing unity between pain and beauty, across time, across space, across experience, across text, that is revealed? It is impossible to say; it is a suggestion. It is a question. It is a possibility. It is a mystery.

6

Longing for greater depth

Be still and know that I am God.

Psalm 46: 10

In this chapter, the reflections around spirituality and church belong mainly to three women whom I interviewed. None of them attended the meetings at Marsham Street. These women, Judith, Lizzie, and Jessie had all started to enquire about the spirituality that they experienced in their lives as well as in their church. Based on various personal concerns, they were becoming more aware of who they were and what they wanted from their faith, as well as from church. The recognition of personal needs and desires had created greater awareness of their expectations of church and the kind of input from church that they were missing. This awareness seemed to prompt them to look beyond their own spirituality, and I try to capture aspects of this ‘gazing beyond’, to get a clearer image of the spirituality or qualities of the spirituality that they were pointing to. None of my interviewees seemed entirely able to define this spirituality and seemed unable to describe how they would integrate a different spiritual orientation into their lives. A common denominator seemed the desire for greater depth, a depth that represented aspects of both seeking to become the persons that they felt they were deep down, and about seeking to hear from God concerning themselves and their lives.

Reflections upon the interviews

While presenting some of the interviews that I have, not only in this chapter but in other chapters as well, I have sometimes found it awkward that I have had to cut into an interview and extract only the sections of particular interest to the issues that I am discussing in one part of my text. My ideal choice would be to present each interview at full length rather than slicing into it in a too selective manner. In this way, the interviews would be expressions of a greater variety of

people's concerns in relation to their faith, than the ones that I have chosen to focus especially on. To render the interviews at full length has not been possible however, as the length of just a few of the interviews would fill the pages of the entire thesis.

One particular reason why I would want to add full interviews has been the apprehension that unless I did so, I might create the false impression that someone speaking about what he or she missed in church, was overall in a troublesome relationship to church. This was most of the time not the case. People were generally eager to take responsibility both for how they were feeling and for what they were doing about their feelings: Although people might be missing something in church, many were quick to state that obtaining what was missing was part of their own responsibility. Most people stressed the importance of church and the friendships and support they found in church as vital elements in their lives. It was indeed noteworthy how people often seemed to want to balance a negative statement about church with a positive one, as if people needed to say that 'Yeah, I would have liked a stronger spiritual input into my life from church, but there are still so many other important things I get from church, so...'

Although I cannot render full-length interviews, I do give a relatively big amount of space to some of the interviews in this chapter. I have tried to avoid cutting an interview in a way that hinders coherence, and I have kept long parts of the conversation between the other person and myself, solely for the purpose of context, allowing the reader to see where a statement came from. Personal narratives are 'essential meaning-making structures' Riessman argues, which should be preserved rather than fractured, because the way people construct meaning through narrative allows the researcher to analyse how meaning is accomplished (Riessman 1993: 4). Being primarily concerned with trying to grasp the experience represented by the words in an interview, it is not a traditional narrative analysis of language and content I am interested in, although I use certain features of language, like hesitation, pauses and flow of language as markers. I try to look beyond the words, to grasp the sense or feeling that their evocation yields, in an attempt to establish awareness of what seemed most important for the person interviewed in terms of what they were seeking in their faith.

Judith on seeking and navigating her way through questions about faith

I had known Judith since my first fieldwork when we took part in the same small group. We were about the same age, both had an academic background, and both were in a phase of bringing up small children at the time of my second fieldwork. Because our paths did not

naturally cross on an everyday basis, I had arranged to go over to Judith's house for an interview one evening. As a member of the church in Green Forest for many years, I wanted to enquire about her perspectives on both her spiritual life and her church life. The interview situation was a casual event where we sat down in the settee in front of the fireplace, like two friends talking and catching up over a cup of tea. After an introductory phase of chatting about home and family, I turned my recorder on and steered the conversation towards the subject of Judith's faith:

R: So, do you reflect a lot upon faith? (...)

J: And in terms of how I reflect on my faith...I don't seem to have to reflect on anything these days... (laughs). If I'm honest, I normally, sort of during the day, get through the day, put Elijah to bed, and then have all of these grand plans in the morning of what I'm gonna do with my evening, and then when I get to the evening, I'm just normally like...oough... (- For the sake of the recording...oough means in some sort of vegetative state.) Yeah, so all my thoughts of reading through the bible from front to back cover go out the window and I turn the telly on. So, in that sense, how much I am reflecting, I don't know, but what I would probably describe myself as at the moment is seeking, in the sense that I have lots and lots of questions about my faith, and I'm trying to find a way of navigating my way through those things. And at times, that can be quite disorientating and confusing, but at other times, actually quite positive as well. I think it's important that maybe some of the things that I used to kind of think about and pursue, or maybe not think about but still pursue, I just don't necessarily find that helpful now. I think it is partly getting older.

R: Could you give an example...or is that personal?

J: I think it is certain things like maybe my approach to how I would define mission, or my emphases on certain aspects of faith. So, when I first became a Christian my emphasis was probably much more on things like the importance of sharing the good news with people and evangelism and making sure that I somehow brought God into conversations, and sort of engaged my friends with that kind of approach, you know. Although I was always quite rubbish at it and always felt quite sort of guilty that I didn't do it very well. And now I think that actually what is more important is how am I pursuing my relationship with God and how am I seeking to know God, and what is it that enables me to grow sort of in depth, I suppose. And if stuff comes out of that, you

know, has a knock-on effect on a friend or something, then great, but I'm not sort of going out of my door every morning thinking, oh I must really make sure I have eight conversations about Jesus today. One of the things that shifted for me I think, is that I almost feel kind of embarrassed, or not embarrassed, but I kind of find that whole approach quite contrived and quite inauthentic. And I just have quite a big problem with it when I perceive other people doing that or being like that, or the church being like that; I just find it quite uncomfortable and unnatural.

I don't know if that's a good enough example, but it's a shift for me, and I don't really know what I'm shifting to... And that's just one example I suppose. I'm just kind of like; what concepts of mission... – or are we doing mission, or is mission actually a complete way of life and is mission something that God is doing anyway, and we just happen to be involved? Rather than having that mentality that it's all down to us as Christians, I think it's just trying to kind of come to a new place on some of that stuff. So, I don't know if that makes me...probably some people would dismiss that as 'Oh, she's a back-sliden, liberal Christian', whereas I prefer to think of it as I'm just at a place where I want to be a bit more authentic, and not contrived and target driven in my approach. I kind of think God is bigger than all of that kind of stuff anyway, so...

R: I hear what you say, and I can identify with that for myself. It's kind of funny to hear you talk about it because I have been feeling the same way. But I think it kind of puts you in a more difficult place since you are asking these big questions and you want to be authentic, and... Yeah, all the answers, easy answers just vanish, don't they, and you find yourself at a place where things take time because you're settling into something which is just totally different in a sense (Judith agrees). It's like when you go for something which is more solid, and that's just not done in a day (Judith: No).

J: Yeah. It is weird, because it is disorientating, and sometimes I feel like I'm sort of...I feel like faith is this huge map, and I am sort of a dot on the edge of it, and I'm kind of like, I just don't know where to start navigating, how to navigate my way. It's kind of like: Do you read about different aspects of theology, or do you try and just read the bible all the time, or do you get some sort of spiritual kind of exercises you can do, or meditations? And I think sometimes, there's so many options and maybe that's one of the privileges yet challenges of our church in the western kind of world, that we have so many options and so many resources and so much information that we're almost spoiled for choice. And some places if you have a copy of the bible you might be lucky. So, you

know, I think there is an aspect of having a bit of a consumer mind set with it all. But at the same time, I kind of think, well no, this is my context, this is my situation, so I feel like I have a responsibility to try and equip myself as a Christian the best I can. But it's quite hard just to know what to focus on sometimes.

One of the first aspects that struck me upon reading Judith's interview, was her reference to being in a process of seeking in relation to her faith, at the time of our meeting. She mentioned mission and evangelism as issues she was reconsidering, expressing a need to make her own definitions regarding these matters. She refers to this process as a 'shift' to her, although she does not know what exactly she is 'shifting to'. The uncertainty regarding what she is seeking reveals itself in the way Judith tries to articulate what she is looking for. Many places in the interview Judith is looking for words to describe what she is 'shifting to', it's as if she is testing out different ways of circling in the subject of a shift in her approach to faith. Sometimes it is as if she is thinking aloud, tentatively searching for the right words. She is looking for something that she is unable to define, but throughout the interview she presents different clues regarding a new orientation in her faith: *And now I think that actually what is more important is how am I pursuing my relationship with God and how am I seeking to know God, and what is it that enables me to grow sort of in depth.* In this sentence, which relates to her comments on the nature and necessity of mission, Judith is suggesting that perhaps what is more important than a faith that is orientated towards the conversion of others, is a faith that is orientated towards God, centring on her own relationship with God – then the rest might follow naturally. In these words, I hear a little bit of Clive and his approach to God that I described in the previous chapter. I am also reminded of Suzanne and her way of approaching God.

Judith rounds off her reflections concerning mission by stating that: *I'm just at a place where I want to be a bit more authentic and not contrived and target driven in my approach.* She wants to express and approach her faith in a way that feels truer to her, a way that to a greater extent expresses who she is, rather than, I guess, to represent a view and an approach that has been passed down to her from others, and that she suggests might even be somewhat contrived. She seems to be referring to a traditional perspective on mission, which requires a 'going out into the world' to evangelize and bring the Christian faith to other people, but now referring to this approach as 'target driven', rather than, as I understand it, authentically representing her natural way and reasons for relating to people. Desiring to come to a place where she can be herself and express herself and her faith in a way more convergent with who

she is, I recognize as aspects of other people's seeking as well, like Suzanne and Estelle, although their way of seeking took a different form. Judith's seeking may not have brought her to the Marsham Street meetings and the gifts of the Spirit in focus there, but she was nevertheless seeking new elements in her faith, elements that would take her deeper into the nature of who she was, and the nature of who God was. At the same time, she seems to be engaged in a discussion with herself concerning her questioning, recognizing her privileged, Western position of being free to pursue these questions, but wondering if they may represent a consumerist mind set. In her own defence, she concludes that her responsibility as a Christian has to relate to her context and her situation. Judith's questioning and assessing of different perspectives as part of an ongoing discussion with herself, also appears in relation to her reflections regarding the issue of goal orientation and being target driven:

J: And again, the whole sort of goal orientated... – but I think that's probably part of me, my personality that's quite action orientated and has that almost achievement mentality. You know, if I sort of get through the day and I feel that I didn't do anything on my day off I can feel quite down. Like as a parent doing something with my day might mean that I took Elijah to the park and I picked up a bottle of milk, but at least I did it, you know! But at work it will be something different. And it's maybe hard to switch that off completely. Maybe sometimes that's an unhealthy thing because it means I try to tick out some boxes, but then at the same time I need to recognise that it's partly how I learn and develop, so... But I do think it's important (to reflect upon faith), and I do think it's a bit scary if I just had a set of beliefs that I held on to all my life, because that was the Christian kind of scenario, that's what we should do, and without thinking about it or without engaging our brain. I think it would actually be quite a scary thing to do, and I certainly wouldn't want to bring my children up with that sort of mentality. I'd want them to question and learn and discover and explore. So, I think that's really important (reflecting upon faith). It just can be disorientating at times, but still necessary.

Freedom and limitations within church

Talking about faith in terms of goal orientation led the conversation between Judith and me on to the subject of work as a vocation, i.e., the sense or conviction that either one's job, or a

commitment to serve in a specific manner within church, is a calling from God. This subject was one that I was familiar with from my first fieldwork:

R: (...) I haven't been to that many different churches, but it does seem to me that people are very aware of those things in Green Forest, and like, I have been told most people are reflective about what they do for a job and feel like that's where they are meant to be and that's where God can use them. And obviously our jobs are...they take up a great part of our lives and we find a great proportion of our identity through our work. So, I think that must create something particular for the whole church. I don't know if you talk about it much in church, but there must be some kind of a unity on that issue.

J: Yeah, I think that is one of the real strengths of our church, and a real challenge for our church at the same time, because I think our church is full of people who are on the whole very passionately committed to what they do vocation wise, which is fantastic. And I think the church is really good at trying to get behind people and support them do what they do, and also seeks to try and give some life and energy to particular things that seem to have emerged (within church). People have said 'we want to do this', and church has said, 'yeah, fantastic, great, let's help you do that'. So that's a quite structured approach to it, but also alongside that you've got all sorts of people who, one form or another try to do their jobs or flesh out their vocation, like you say. I suppose, where it becomes a challenge is that everyone...it is so diverse, everyone's doing so many different things, but perhaps we struggle to get a, create a sense of cohesion as well to our church. What we're about together, which is I suppose a challenge of how we enable all of these strands to operate properly and well and still hold it all together, so...

R: But are you thinking of how to approach other people (who are not Christians) in that and our (the church's) identity in reaching out to others...?

J: Maybe...or just how we create a sense of something we're all working on together or we're all journeying with something together. And maybe we just can't do that, maybe actually trying to pigeonhole a church into one particular thing can never really be done, I don't know, but... I suppose the risk is that you could have a church where there's so many things going on that it's actually quite disconnected and quite disparate, so that might not necessarily be helpful either, but... I don't see how it could be any

other way, so it's kind of, you know, it's a strength and it's a challenge all in one. I think it's part of the DNA of our church, really.

R: Yeah... I guess it is a very reflective church, strong people, good thoughts. Do you feel free within church?

J: Gosh, there's a question! Do I feel free in church...? That's a really good question. Gosh! I'd have to really think about that... I guess in some ways yes and some ways no, I suppose. I feel free to speak quite openly about... I mean, I probably wouldn't speak to every single person in church about the shifts and the questions that I have, because I don't think that's always helpful, where some people might understand it and some people might find it almost as a... I wouldn't want it to be a stumbling block for other people in their faith, so... But I feel that it's a place, I mean it's an environment in which you can be honest about things that you're going through, in that sense. So yes, I feel free in that way... In other ways, maybe I... It's not that I don't feel free, but maybe I just feel a bit limited in some aspects of church, in that I'm not always sure about how church will equip me to start navigating some of the things... So, I don't think we've got the infrastructure perhaps or the time or the people to be able to help some aspects of maybe going deeper theologically, or thinking through certain issues in a bit more depth than we can manage to do on a Sunday, don't always think there's capacity to do that, so... Even though I'm free to kind of explore and have questions and want to think things through, and feel safe to do that, I feel limited by the options the church presents for me to be able to do that. So, in that sense I feel a little bit like, okay, I need to do it, I need to work it out. And then I just feel a little bit like, I don't know where to start, so in that sense I suppose that can maybe feel a little bit more enclosed, because I'm just not quite sure. So, whether that would mean I'm less free, I don't know.

– And I think the other side of it is, actually maybe in church there's also the side of the freedom to exercise responsibility, and towards the body of church, is really important as well. So, I am free to support that, or ignore that as much as I want, I suppose. So, I think that church is not just about what I get out of it, it is also about what I put in, bring to it, in terms of, you know, commitment to other people or relationships with other people or different ways of serving. So, I guess I have freedom of choice to whether I do or don't do that. But part of me exercising freedom is to take responsibility to make sure that I do contribute, rather than just sit back and consume, I suppose. So, does that make sense?

R: Yeah, that's a good point.

J: So yes, I suppose on the whole I definitely feel free, but I feel limited as well.

R: Yeah, you need to take responsibility for certain aspects of your own faith yourself, like the exploring of the content of certain theologies. Yeah...I would like to be able to explore theology in a deeper way. I guess the church service doesn't provide for that. It would be nice to have a place where we could go with questions and discuss.

J: Yes, I think that's the thing, yeah. Because, before I went on maternity leave with Elijah, I had started doing a master's in theology, in applied theology. And I partly did that because I thought that it would help provide a framework and a kind of discipline if you'd like, with going about my navigation, as it were. Then obviously I had Elijah, and it's not been as easy as I thought (laughs) to kind of carry on that study in addition to everything else. But that doesn't mean that I don't still want some guidance and thought and framework for thinking through theology. And at the moment I'm providing that myself by thinking 'Hmm, this looks like a helpful book, I think I'll read it', but it's a very sort of zigzag kind of approach, rather than sort of maybe a more constructive or systematic approach to thinking through theology. And you know, maybe, actually, that's just what theology is like. One of the best sorts of analogies I've heard is some famous, famous person from Christian history said something like 'theology is faith seeking understanding'. And I quite like that because, you know, it's that kind of thing, that rather than making it into an academic thing, which obviously it is, but the whole sense of faith seeking understanding is quite helpful. Because at least, even if I am a little bit sort of zigzag in my approach, I'm still trying to think about something that will equip me. But I do still think there might be helpful points somewhere, where other people who are maybe a bit more experienced in theology, or have more background in it, might be able to help steer me a bit, without having to do a full degree.

R: Yeah, I think the problem with trying to figure it out yourself is that it's so massive (theology), so where do you start? I mean, as a theologian you can't have the answers to everything, obviously, and you can't study everything, but at least you have a schedule, you're put on a route; this is what you're gonna go through, this is what you're gonna learn. And that's what we lack, so yeah, it is kind of a direction which is missing, which would be nice to have.

J: Definitely, because like I did history as my degree, and when I think back over the years with my history learning, you know, I certainly don't know everything there is to

know about history, because that would be ridiculous. But I would certainly learn tools and be equipped with how to read about, you know, primary sources, secondary sources, what are you looking for, what are you trying to determine from what someone is saying, looking at all sorts of different materials and trying to put it all together. So, over the years I've kind of developed... Like you say, if you were a theologian you were kind of pursuing a certain route, you'd be equipped with those sorts of different tools to help you do that, and that's something that I feel is missing, certainly...

When I asked Judith about people's professional commitments or jobs as representing a vocation, a sense that they experienced a 'higher purpose' or calling underlying their choice of work, she pointed to this condition as both a strength and a challenge. Despite the support from church towards those with a sense of calling to a particular line of work or mission, one of the consequences to this diversity, Judith suggested *might* be a lack of cohesion within church. It was more difficult to create a sense of *what we're about together*, she said, thus indirectly suggesting a sense of the church as lacking in unity in terms of its work and mission. Having heard critical assessments of what the church was lacking before, from conversations with other people that I have mentioned earlier, I notice that Judith's reflections were not mainly directed towards the spirituality of the church, but towards its mission profile. At the same time, she was uncertain about how the lack of cohesion could change, relating the diversity to the identity and DNA of the church. When Judith mentioned the DNA of the church, I think I immediately associated this to my experience of many of the members of church as highly educated and reflective people, with clear ideas of what a church should be like. I guess this association prompted my next question of how free Judith felt in church, amongst so many people of strong opinions.

I observe that when Judith relates to the issue of freedom and limitation within church, she is much freer in the way she articulates herself, than when she was describing the sense of trying to navigate her faith. It is almost as if the issue of freedom and limitation is closer at heart for her, and perhaps the flow of words in her descriptions testifies to the fact that this situation is part of her immediate experience in a very different way than her searching for answers to her questions of faith is. Her descriptions of church are part of her reality in a way that her seeking is not, in that she knows church, but she does not know the exact target of her seeking, just that she has become aware that she feels like something is missing. As she is talking, what she misses emerges more and more and it becomes clearer that direction in terms of finding

what she is looking for is something that she would have liked church to be able to provide more of. Still, she does not blame church, she exercises acceptance and understanding towards the fact that church and the people in church are not in a position to provide what she needs, and she expresses a willingness to take responsibility herself instead. Again, we see Judith's desire to approach the issues she is relating to from different angles.

A need for depth and guidance

I distinguish two aspects of need that Judith mentions in relation to her seeking: In terms of her own faith, she expresses a need to go deeper, to arrive at a place with greater authenticity on the part of her own engagement. In terms of church, she expresses a need for guidance, for her navigation across this huge map that she feels faith is. Judith often refers to depth in her description of what she is seeking, and she refers to theology as a tool that could guide her. There seems to be anticipation that these two together would equip her, in some way: *I'm not always sure about how church will equip me to start navigating some of the things... I don't think we've got the infrastructure perhaps or the time or the people to be able to help some aspects of maybe going deeper theologically or thinking through certain issues in a bit more depth (...)*. Again, Judith expresses doubt concerning church as able to meet and support her spiritual seeking and needs. The issues that she would like to think through in greater depth, she does not seem able to identify, other than their connection to depth.

At the same time as Judith seems to be relating the depth that she is seeking to theology, a little later she seems to be making a distinction between the two instead: *One of the best sorts of analogies I've heard is some famous, famous person from Christian history said something like 'theology is faith seeking understanding'. And I quite like that because (...) rather than making it into an academic thing, which obviously it is, the whole sense of faith seeking understanding is quite helpful because at least even if I am a little bit sort of zigzag in my approach, I'm still trying to think about something that will equip me.* In this comment, Judith relates theology first to 'an academic thing', which does not seem to represent the depth that she is yearning for. I think the depth that Judith seeks in theology, relates to an understanding that surpasses academic understanding, within which Judith anticipates finding something that will equip her. I get the sense that what Judith is talking about, without articulating herself clearly, are the two forms of understanding that I mentioned in chapter 1; one linked to intellectual knowledge and the other more linked to a practical or embodied form of knowledge,

where experience takes you on a route towards convictions that become your own. What Judith seeks seems to me related to a conviction that would provide her with a firmer point of view, a firmer ground to stand on, when faced with the questions she has. In this sense it may seem that it's experience of some sort she is seeking, a form of knowledge from *beyond* words, not only *from* words. It is in terms of arriving at such a place of conviction that Judith refers to guidance from church as that which could have equipped her. In lack of guidance from church, Judith mentions books that she reads on her own as providing her with at least part of the guidance that she is seeking:

(...) I think that's where things like Christian tradition and Christian history comes in as quite helpful. I'm reading a book at the moment in our small group called 'Tokens of trust' by Rowan Williams and it's all about the apostles' creed and it's used by lots of churches. And there's sort of basic statements of faith about God the Father and Jesus rising from the dead, and it talks about the Holy Spirit and just the sort of basic statements of faith. And the book uses that as a launch-pad to kind of talk about different aspects of what it means to be a Christian and to pursue Christianity. And it's a quite helpful thing, because I suppose over the years of Christian thought and faith, lots of people will have wrestled with lots of new answers of faith and difficult questions, and there will be a big variance between, or there'll be differences of perspective of different stances on certain theological issues. But at the same time people will have wrestled with certain things and come to be able to say certain big statements of faith, which I suppose is important, well obviously of course it's important. But we don't necessarily always learn the thinking that gets us to some of the statements and I suppose that's what can be missing. Or certain traditions will emphasise certain aspects, like evangelism is really important or this is really important or reading the bible, but don't necessarily always help you develop other aspects, like what does it mean to pray, or how do you read the bible... The bible isn't just a textbook or a novel, there's all sorts of different writing in there. So, what does it actually mean, and those sorts of things you know, maybe different traditions emphasise different things and will have leanings to certain directions, I suppose.

(...) When I became a Christian, there was lots of that that would probe definitely God getting involved in my life in ways that [were] surprising and eye opening and amazing. But also, as part of that you do, I think, on reflection, look back and think well,

that happened within a certain culture, within a certain culture of church, and with that comes a set of ideas and thoughts and maybe opinions or stances that you then adopt because you think that's what being a Christian is. And then as you go on you think, well, actually no, that's just one perspective, or that's one tradition or one style and some of those things I still hold on to, but others of those things I'm thinking, well, maybe I've adopted the endpoints without going through the process of how those endpoints have been established. And maybe if I had gone through that process, I might not necessarily have come to those endpoints, if you see what I mean, or I might not agree with those endpoints. And so now I think it's kind of at a point where I'm sort of like, some of the things that I used to think 'oh, yeah that's about being a Christian', actually now I'm like, no, that's not helpful, I need to unravel it all and then not come to necessarily a new fixed position. Because I suppose it will always be a journey, but there is something to be said for, you know, thinking it all through. And yet, maybe, I don't know, but it's just that sort of evangelical approach to church, where it's not always great at emphasising how to do certain things, or fill in the gaps a bit, or help you navigate through life in some ways, it seems.

In these paragraphs, Judith is emphasizing the journey of arriving at a certain point of view as equally important as the points of view themselves: *We don't necessarily always learn the thinking that gets us to some of the statements and I suppose that's what can be missing.* She questions what it means to pray and how one is supposed to read the bible, indicating that for a Christian just being told to do these activities, does not inform one of neither meaning nor method. She refers to perspectives as endpoints but questions the route to such endpoints: *Maybe I've adopted the endpoints without going through the process of how those endpoints have been established.* Again, she is questioning the journey of how she has ended up with certain points of view. In a sense it seems as if she is feeling that she does not know how she has ended up thinking the way she has been thinking, and desiring a deeper understanding of this process now, in order to feel confident that her perspective is really her perspective and nobody else's. In addition to questioning the process towards a perspective, she also questions the cultural impact of different churches. She refers to experiences from when she had just become a Christian that seemed to her to have been experiences of God's involvement in her life. Then later she seems to question these experiences, on the basis of the fact that her interpretation of the experiences then, may have been influenced by the culture that they

happened within, which might now represent a culture that she no longer sees herself as a part of. She expresses a need to *unravel it all* and *thinking it all through*. In the end, the temporary conclusion she arrives at, is that the evangelical approach to church may not be very good at *emphasising how to do certain things, or fill in the gaps a bit, or help you navigate through life in some ways*. In the interview situation, I try to get a clearer picture of what Judith means by the evangelical approach:

R: Do you mean more it isn't helpful in kind of just finding yourself...? Do you think of evangelistic then as being more progressive and about movement and mission and so that you yourself can get lost a little bit in movement?

J: Yeah, (...) there's all sorts of aspects of discipleship and pursuit of faith and spiritual formation, but churches in general just aren't equipping people to all that well, or certain traditions aren't. (...) And everyone's always said to me 'oh, it's really important that you read your bible', but I've never had anyone say to me 'this is how you should read your bible'. And I know that there's not one approach, and what works for one person is going to be different to what works for another. (...) It isn't always a lot of input coming across on how do we pray, or what does it mean. So, we're so busy sort of, maybe in the more evangelical tradition, of making sure we get involved in activities, that we'll all make an impact on the world and make Jesus known, and share faith with other people, that we then forget that actually, we have a responsibility every day to choose to follow Jesus and to be a disciple ourselves. And so, we get lost in the activity of it, and the tasks, and we don't actually seek to develop and deepen our own faith and walk, and so I think, you know, maybe if the emphasis of a church, I don't mean particularly ours, I just mean a church in that culture and in that kind of mindset, I mean there's always a sort of slight imbalance on some of those things. You see, I think that if you were in a different Christian tradition, like the SA's always been very known for its action, but then maybe there would be another Christian tradition...that I can't think of right now... There might be Christian traditions that focus much more on meditation and the spiritual kind of discipline's approach to faith, at the expense of maybe much more campaigning and justice and being involved in the world and society and making a difference, and so I think maybe every aspects of the church could, or pockets of the church could...as a whole, lean towards certain things and maybe that will always be a challenge for whatever Christian tradition you're in. It's gonna have

its natural bias and its more blind areas. That probably has an impact on how we learn, and all that kind of thing.

R: Yeah, it does. I remember when I came to Norway after having been in Green Forest [the first time], I was hoping to find a similar type of church, because that's what I wanted. And I started going to the SA in Bergen, and I was kind of expecting to hear from God in that church setting, and I was thinking yeah, this is the right place for me to be. Then at the same time, I also went to a student church at university, which is a part of the Church of Norway, and which has completely different types of meetings, where it's calmer, and you know, traditional in some respects. Then on the other hand, it's not traditional because it's students, and a really good student priest, or student priests. And what I found was, that I felt God speak to me more in the student church, which is more meditatively based, and the speeches aren't about trying to stir us to do stuff. It was more like, I guess, not really trying to get us to do anything, but the speeches were more reflective about, what did Jesus really mean here, in this bible text. And I think that in comparison to the other church, which was a lot more...it wasn't really similar to Green Forest either, it was quite progressive in wanting to see things happen, which was probably good for them, that's what they wanted to do. I couldn't identify entirely with that. But the student church made me relax a lot more because I didn't feel that there were any demands and that I was asked to do something, I felt like I was just asked to, or allowed, to be. I think that's what I felt, I was allowed to just come and be, and it was so good, although I might not have realised it to start off with, because I was more focused on you know, I should go somewhere, I should develop more and actually I did, but in a different way than I had expected. (...) I still think that, you know, like the SA is probably, well they have a long tradition of doing various stuff, which has been very essential for those who have received that kind of help. Maybe one church just can't give it all, and maybe we will become better as churches to look to one another more (...).

J: Yeah, and I suppose that's where the border serves in what it means to be church, as in the body of Christ as a bunch of believers, as an international movement, whatever you want to call it (...) The analogy of the body doesn't just apply to your own particular community of believers, but it applies to the whole body, doesn't it.

Judith continues to talk about the divergence between being told to do something and understanding what you are doing and why you are doing it, as for instance when she mentions prayer and bible reading again. Why has there never been teaching on *how* to do it, just that one should? she asks. She mentions the evangelical tradition's tendency to seek to be involved in activities as one reason. Perhaps, she suggests, the evangelical movement has become lost in activities at the expense of seeking to develop and deepen their faith and walk. It is as if she experiences the action-based approach of the evangelical tradition, of which the SA is a part, as an opposite to the depth that she is seeking herself at this time in her life. She wants to go deeper in her faith, perhaps towards a spirituality that she associates more with other traditions, although she cannot name any of these traditions. She mentions meditation however, as one of the disciplines that would probably be present in a spiritual tradition more focused on deepening faith. Judith presents a more meditative form of Christianity as a possible counterbalance to the action driven evangelical approach. I remember now that when I spoke with her, I felt that I knew what kind of spirituality she was referring to, because I felt that it resembled the spirituality that I had become acquainted with through Suzanne, and through my own experience. Rereading Judith's interview now reminds me that Clive was referring to the retreat spirituality, where silent, contemplative prayer is essential, during our conversations at the prayer weekend that I described in chapter 5. He said then that he loved going on retreats, and that he had led retreats himself. In my understanding during the interview with Judith, I felt that she was seeking a spirituality that Suzanne and Clive already represented and lived. This understanding reflects the place where I was at in my thinking and spiritual seeking myself then, where I was concerned with the difference between *being* and *doing*. I sensed the importance of being, before doing; that before we can act, as Christians, in an authentic manner, we need to know who we are.

Broken to be shared

In the last part of the interview, almost as a diplomatic conclusion seeking to also embrace the evangelical approach, Judith brings up the analogy of the body of Christ as encompassing both her tradition and those of others. Talking about the body of Christ reminded Judith of a book that she had recently read, called 'Life of the Beloved', and during her reflections upon this book, she ignited in me a feeling that *here* was the point:

J: It's a really good book, it's a really good book, really helpful. When I read it, I was like 'right, don't let this thing stop!' (Laughs) And I think it's a book he [the author] wrote for a friend of his who wasn't a Christian, and he was trying to explain the Christian faith to his non-Christian friend in a way that might make sense to him. And he used different analogies. There's one part where he talks about his life being a bit like bread. As a priest he often takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, shares it, and that concept of the Christian; that we are as Christians blessed because we are chosen by God, and sort of live lives that... we are broken in times, and things happen to us... (...) but yet God is with us in those things, and we're also broken to be shared. Like our lives we can share with other people, it's not just about us as individuals, but we're brought here, with responsibility to other people and to community, to make an impact on the world. And reading that I was just thinking... – that is a lot of paraphrasing, and I've probably remembered it all wrong, but it was quite a helpful thing of thinking about Christians in that sense, rather than a thing to learn or a thing to do... And just thinking, I was reading a book last night, where it talked about what is spirituality. And there's all sorts of senses of spirituality in the world, but spirituality has always got to, you know, in a Christian sense, always got to be focused on God and what God is doing, rather than what we are doing. And it's how we respond to that, that I suppose makes us spiritual. It's about God first, and we can miss that sometimes or forget that, I suppose.

R: That was very interesting what you said, broken to be shared.

J: Yeah, like he's a priest and... the breaking bread and stuff.

R: I was just thinking, when you feel broken, is that what you meant?

J: I think he was sort of probably using this analogy of when a priest does communion and they use a loaf of bread, and it represents different things about Jesus and how we as Christians are sort of...we take on the life of Jesus, and so in our brokenness, in our vulnerability, we can still experience Jesus, because we know Christ on the cross. His cross was broken and yet he overcame. But also, that sense of 'this is my body, broken for you', we are there, and Christ is, his body is for everybody. But also, as the church, we are Christ's body on earth, and so in that sense, you know, as the body of Christ we should also be, I suppose, shared and live amongst and be involved. And we celebrate that we also are vulnerable, and we have hope through all situations because our hope [is] in Jesus, I suppose.

Yeah, it's a very good book... 'Life of the beloved', and it is called 'spiritual living in a secular world' as a by line.

The book that Judith referred to is the same book that Edgar read from, during the church service in Green Forest, where I felt that I would be too moved to enter into the reflection, described in chapter 3. When she talked about Christ or the Christian as 'broken to be shared', this phrase reverberated in me as if it held a deeper meaning. I may not have *heard* the phrase in the same way as Judith was *saying* it, because to me the words seemed to behold a particular experience, that I felt an immediate pull towards. I became drawn to a depth of meaning residing in the words, or beyond the words, that seemed to speak to me. The sense of 'alertness' in my being, awakened by the references to 'brokenness' and the Body of Christ, felt like the dim calling of an essential 'truth' hidden in the words, hidden within faith. The brokenness that Judith was talking about, and that I became mysteriously taken by, I now feel I have a broader understanding of, than I did at the time. Given the time passed since the interview and given the connection I later saw between my embodied response to Judith's words then and the place I was at during that period, existentially and spiritually, I recognize now that it was the theme underlying much of my work, namely the concept and phenomenon of grace, that was lit up to me. The sentence '*this is my body, broken for you*' directly relates to grace and the meaning of Christ's death and resurrection, that I was eager to *know* in a way that surpassed an academic understanding. When Judith said, '*we are broken in times, and things happen to us (...), but yet God is with us in those things, and we're also broken to be shared*', it was as if the sentence was 'trying to tell me something'. I believe now that my encounter with these particular words, concepts and sentences point to an important aspect of having faith and seeking God, namely the interconnectedness between seeking God and seeking to know oneself, which was also what Judith was talking about throughout the interview. Understanding aspects of faith in an embodied sense, like concepts or phrases from Scripture, often emerges through personal experience, to become 'an element of appropriation', and in this way 'owned'. In this respect, Judith's sentence above, although it was a reference to a book she had read, which had made a huge impression on her, also seemed to be a sentence *en route* to becoming a reminder to me, that in those times when I felt broken, remember that God is with me. Perhaps it was because Judith was passing on her own experience of those words having carried that same meaning to her at a time of her brokenness, that I responded so strongly to them myself? This suggestion can only remain a speculation, whilst I acknowledge the fact that there are circumstances that

we cannot know for sure, and that our words cannot capture, because they do not yield objective knowledge. All we have sometimes, is the resounding in our bodies, of a sense of meaning residing *beyond* words, and beyond experience. It is, I guess, within this *beyond*, that faith may be found. As Judith said, spirituality has always got to be focused on God and what God is doing, rather than what we are doing. Within this scenario, it becomes *obvious* (tongue in cheek), that faith is the material of mystery.

Lizzie about closeness to God through prayer

A few weeks after interviewing Judith, I met up with Lizzie for an interview about her faith and Christian life. Lizzie was one of the women that I met in the park quite early on in my fieldwork that I wrote about in chapter 2. Having been with the church pretty much since the beginning, she had expressed in the park that she felt church had changed a lot since those early years. In her view, church was no longer charismatic; it was too academic. She had also said that she felt church was at present in a transition phase. Remembering our short conversation in the park, I was anticipating learning more about Lizzie's stance on church matters, as well as her personal faith.

R: I'm interested in what faith is for you: What is important for you in faith, what do you talk to God about, what's on your heart, who is God for you, how has he come to be that person for you...?

L: Oh, I really should have thought about this... It's hard questions to answer. How you view faith changes so much with where you're at in life. Two years ago, many elements would be different from today. Obviously being a new mum, feeling quite tired (now). Not finding time to pray, which is something that is important for me, intercession, God putting people on your mind: Major part of my faith, prayer being the crux of it. It's a two-way thing, chatting to God, as if he was a close friend – because he is a close friend. Him chatting back, challenging me... But being a new mum, last year, I was feeling exceedingly dry, difficult to be disciplined. I don't cope with solitude, because I don't work with structure... [She means that she is not a structured person.] So, at the moment, it's quite difficult to find time to pray. Then when I do, I'm stuck as to what to pray for!

R: *That's really interesting. I feel the same way [that it's hard to find time to pray]. How does that make you feel, when you don't get time – do you feel guilty?*

L: *Yeah, I know I shouldn't, but I do feel it, and it distances you from how you perceive God is for you, in your daily walk. I'm artistic, so I'm motivated by inspiration, people talking about God gets me energised. Being separated from all that, like I'm not in a small group, not in prayer group, so cut off and feeling that I'm not flourishing in faith. I'm definitely an extrovert; I definitely need community to feel good about the fact that I'm walking in faith. So, what's he [God] put into my faith? Definitely prayer, so I feel rubbish. I would like to be in a place that I'm not at the moment. (...)*

R: *Why is prayer so important, what is it with prayer, how can you talk about prayer (in general)?*

L: *Even if I'm not praying, I know that God's always there, but I need to keep my relationship going with him through prayer.*

R: *So, it is the use of your faith through prayer that you miss?*

L: *Definitely, I was thinking about this the other day. Just before getting pregnant I was in a [prayer] triplet with Suzanne and Vivien, and that was really exciting, it was quite experimental. You know, when you're with your husband, you are close, and you know each other very well. But it's great to have that with other people, to feel close, feel comfortable to share pictures, maybe two of you had the same picture, and that is exciting! You really feel that God is talking to you then. Say, we were praying for someone from church – Suzanne started inviting me to things, really pushing – no, Suzanne doesn't push; encouraging me to have words for people. Not always, but sometimes I have a little whisper from God. Once I felt that God was saying to someone 'Don't be afraid to have a second baby', and I didn't know this person was really scared of this. So, then you start crying your eyes out... But this really impacts people's lives!*

R: *So, did you feel those words, or...?*

L: *It was like a thought.*

R: *And you knew who it was for...?*

L: *I was praying for this person, and I was saying to God; 'Is there something you want to say to this person?' And it wasn't what we were there to pray about. It was a thought – was it my thought or from God? – And then you go through that whole insecurity thing, but you just have to try it... But you don't want to say something which is really sensitive...*

R: But you did tell this person?

L: Well, I get quite hot...

R: What do you mean, like being embarrassed?

L: Yeah... It feels like I'm going to explode, unless I say it. It feels like unless I say it, it builds up inside.

R: Was it the next time you met this person that you shared it?

L: No, the person was in the room...and that was really exciting. Wonderful that God was doing something for this person and wanted me to be part of it. When I see this little girl (the 'second' baby) I think that I was part of her story...

R: So, it does feel good for you to be involved, you feel alive in a sense...?

L: Yeah... But it shouldn't be about yourself, but it's hard...

R: I know, but you can't escape that some part of you will rejoice.

Seeing Lizzie's interview in relation to the interview I had with Judith, one of the aspects I find interesting, is how Lizzie was describing her experience of prayer, whereas Judith was questioning why there had never been any teaching on how to pray, thus expressing her desire to learn about prayer as a discipline. This circumstance suggests to me, or corroborates my impression, that the spirituality within one and the same church, Green Forest, differed from person to person, or from one 'peer-group' within church to another. Lizzie was more aligned with Suzanne and Clive's approaches to faith and expressed her faith as an intimate relationship with God, whom she described as a close friend. She was more specific than Judith about what she missed and what she wanted in her faith, pointing to prayer. She had an experience already of what she was missing, because it was something she had engaged in before becoming a mum, whereas Judith was to a greater extent seeking to find out what she was missing. In that respect my own experience of seeking at the time, would seem closer to Judith's in that I was not always entirely certain about what I was looking for in terms of my spiritual orientation. Lizzie, however, identified her need for prayer to keep her relationship with God going. Prayer was an essential element for her relationship with God, both privately and together with others.

In a sense, Lizzie was picking up the thread from the conversation between Suzanne and myself about intercessory prayer earlier. Having used to pray with Suzanne and Vivien, she mentioned prophetic elements within intercessory prayer, such as receiving pictures and words for someone else, exemplifying, through the story of the woman who was afraid of having a second child, how the prophetic could have significance for the actual lives of members of the

community. The words Lizzie felt were from God to the woman, spoke into a particular situation in this woman's life, which Lizzie knew nothing about beforehand, providing the faith and courage necessary for the woman to make a vital decision for herself and her family. Lizzie's story also provided an example of the inner process leading up to her giving the prophetic message. She first described how she specifically asked God if he wanted to say something through her, upon which she had a thought emerging in her mind. Feeling insecure as to whether the thought was from God or only from herself, the sense of becoming hot, feeling like something was building up inside of her, that would make her 'explode' unless she shared, became the decisive element for her sharing what she felt God was saying. However, Lizzie also mentioned the more difficult aspects of prayer, when seemingly unanswered:

L: But the ultimate side of that, say we were praying for something for a long time. When it doesn't happen... You put yourself on the line belief-wise and when it doesn't happen, it's hard. You're starting to question it; did I make it right in the first place, or hasn't it just happened yet...?

R: So, do you just go away from a setting like that, or does it just form your faith in a particular way?

L: Well... Say healing... Rachel, our pastor's wife who just passed away – there's a whole lot of things I don't understand. I think churches can get very hurt when members of the community die, say from cancer. That's normal. But you hear about healing; like a lot of Anglican churches are praying for people on stalls...

R: Which is probably affected by the revival in Lakeland, Florida?

L: Yeah... For me every time that comes up or someone is sick, and they don't get healed, I never understand why. And I feel responsible; don't I pray in the right way? But maybe I'm just wrong and it was God's plan. Then other places lots of people get healed. Then you feel a bit funny about prayer.

Lizzie's references to unanswered prayer, expresses her uncertainty about the issue of prayer; it is difficult to know for sure whether prayer 'works' or not, and why it seems to 'work' in some cases and not others. Prayer, or the outcome of prayer, is impossible for the believer to control. In the interview I had with Estelle earlier, described in chapter 5, she also mentioned this aspect of prayer as problematic, when she spoke about Rachel's death. Both Lizzie and Estelle brought up the possibility of getting hurt by such instances, as well as pointing to the

questioning of faith itself, that might follow. However, they also both seemed to have held on to their faith in God, although struggling to understand. So far, it seemed to me that Clive's approach of acceptance rather than the attempt to make sense and understanding of the outcome of prayer, was the more peace yielding option.

Wanting more of the Holy Spirit

The question of prayer and healing made me think about the Marsham Street meetings at this point in the interview. I knew that Lizzie had not been to any of the meetings, but I wondered if she was familiar with this form of charismatic Christianity from TV, like Estelle had been, and if so, what Lizzie thought about these kinds of meetings. She must have known what I was going to ask, perhaps due to my mentioning of Lakeland, because she answered before I had finished articulating my question:

R: Have you been watching...

L: I have God channel... I haven't been to anything. But one of my friends in HTB²⁶ has started a market stall, selling tea and coffee, and offering prayer. (...) I think sometimes I want to pray more, and learn how to intercede for people, because I think there's so much more to learn. And sometimes I feel frustrated that in our church the only persons...there are only a couple of people to learn about intercession from; Suzanne is one of them, and Miriam and maybe Clive. And I find that frustrating because I would like to pursue that in our church. But it's never going to be a priority in our church.

R: Why?

L: I don't know, I guess historically... I don't know...

R: What is the main part, the main thing, in Green Forest? Is it possible to say?

L: Academic understanding, theological wisdom, friendship. I would say that is our church. And it is amazing in some ways; you really get challenged to get deeper.

R: Yeah, it is a deep, solid church. But that little thing is missing – which isn't a little thing...

L: Well, I always will be one of those persons who will complain about church. But I miss the old days and the talk about the Holy Spirit.

²⁶ Holy Trinity Brompton, a well-known Anglican Church in Central London with a charismatic profile.

R: Did you talk more about that in the old days?

L: Yeah.

R: Why was that?

L: I don't know... maybe the type of people, because our church has very much changed. It is actually an amazing church; people are wonderful and do incredible things. Well, one reason; when we have a meeting on the Holy Spirit, we always have a panel...

R: Sorry...?

L: Well, we've not had anyone speak about the Holy Spirit or from their personal experience, but a panel of three or four people to talk about what they think about the Holy Spirit. And I would like to have teaching about it, not just people's opinions about it. I find that difficult to our church. And I don't feel that that helps my faith. I don't know, maybe the old charismatic is seen as foolish...?

R: So, you don't think this church is charismatic?

L: No, it is not charismatic, not at all; we are evangelical. But not charismatic – but maybe that's wrong? (...) I would say it was charismatic earlier, but the leadership has always been careful that we didn't get too carried away, since it was the Salvation Army. And many didn't like us in the beginning [other churches within the SA], because they thought we were rebellious, some thought we were a bit of a cult, but now we're very mainstream – although compared to many other Salvation Army churches, we're still different, but not rebellious... But also, that reflects the ages of the people. Where people come from theologically have shifted, you do change as you get older, when you've got children things change... (...) We were always...it was the Toronto blessing at the time of that [the start of the church, I presume]; that [the charismatic aspect] was always quite controlled, so some things broke out.

R: So, the church was affected, but tried to control it?

L: Yeah, the leadership always wanted to keep it a little at a distance, to make sure we weren't just getting carried away that way, but also grounding ourselves theologically. Although, say HTB is very grounded theologically...

R: So, do you go to HTB?

L: No, I started off at St. Pauls, a sister church to HTB.

R: So, you went there before you came to Green Forest? So, they are more charismatic but still theologically grounded?

L: Yeah, so the two can definitely live side by side. I miss that side. Sometimes people think the charismatic church is just hand in the air, see the outer appearance; I don't want a church which is outer appearance, I don't particularly want to look weird... I'm not after that experience, maybe when I was 21, I quite liked the idea of falling over, being overwhelmed by the Holy Spirit, but now...

R: You're ok if it doesn't happen but would like to have more of a sense of it...?

L: Yeah, more spirituality in my Christianity. (...)

In this part of the conversation, Lizzie referred to prayer in different ways. At first, she was enthusiastic about the untraditional way of offering prayer to people as a product or a service at a market stall. I remembered that she had spoken enthusiastically about the market idea of prayer when I met her in the park earlier on in my fieldwork as well. Obviously, prayer was on her mind as a subject to which she kept returning. Along with her passion for prayer however, followed frustration over the fact that her own church did not give her good opportunities to pursue her need to learn more about prayer, to intercede for people. In this respect, her voicing of the desire for opportunities to pursue different aspects of prayer and spirituality in more depth, seemed a reiteration from the conversations I had had with Suzanne and Judith.

On my request, Lizzie listed academic understanding, theological wisdom, and friendship as the most essential characteristics of the church in Green Forest. These characteristics she then seemed to see against another characteristic more present previously, the talk about the Holy Spirit. By this remark, she pointed to an issue that several people had already mentioned to me, and which I do not think referred simply to *talk*. Lizzie was referring to an *experience* that she felt was more present in the earlier days of the church, when there was more talk about the Holy Spirit, and when the talking about the Holy Spirit was related to a different way of *relating* to the Holy Spirit: *I would say it was charismatic earlier* [the church]. By referring to the charismatic element, Lizzie was pointing to the belief that the Holy Spirit is active amongst believers in the world, in a way that can be witnessed through the gifts of the Spirit. What Lizzie said about the Holy Spirit was also quite similar to what Estelle had said in the interview I had with her earlier: Estelle had described the church as dry and referred this condition to her perception that there was no 'Holy Spirit stuff' in church anymore, just teaching. I felt that Lizzie was expressing a related assessment of the elevated position of teaching when she was describing the main characteristics of the church as 'academic

understanding and theological wisdom'. A little later Lizzie said, in relation to the church's custom of having panels of people talking when the subject was the Holy Spirit, that *I would like to have teaching about it, not just people's opinions about it*. In this sentence she uses the word teaching to refer to a form of learning, which leans on experience or practical knowledge, rather than intellectual knowledge, i.e., that she wants to learn about the Holy Spirit by way of doing or engaging, rather than by way of just hearing about it. The reference to learning about different aspects of faith in a way that provided greater depth than the intellectual could, was also a made by Judith.

Lizzie and Estelle pointed to many of the same aspects concerning their personal faith and what they were seeking after. They were both interested in the more charismatic aspects of faith, and both expressed a desire to learn more about and grow in qualities considered gifts of the spirit within the Christian church. Estelle had mentioned prophesy and healing, and Lizzie particularly mentioned intercessory prayer, which also encompasses the prophetic dimension as well as healing. Lizzie especially, seemed to associate the charismatic with prayer, or at least she identified that prayer constituted the major reason for her interest in a more charismatic church. More than Estelle had, Lizzie also expressed a longing to feel close to God and had recognized that prayer was the means for her *to keep the relationship with God going*. Earlier in the interview, however, she also pointed to fellowship as essential for her relationship with God: *I'm artistic, so I'm motivated by inspiration, people talking about God gets me energised. Being separated from all that, like I'm not in a small group, not in prayer group, so cut off and feeling that I'm not flourishing in faith. I'm definitely an extrovert; I definitely need community to feel good about the fact that I'm walking in faith*. Lizzie was expressing that being close to both people and God was important for her, even interrelated, and that prayer was an element within both. Her last comment about wanting more spirituality in her Christianity therefore made me think of Suzanne, and my next inquiry to Lizzie concerned their relationship:

R: So, what happened with the trinity then?

L: Ehh...I had a baby... The trinity is still going but it's a duo now... I haven't seen them for a bit now, and I regret that, because I miss the friendship, never mind the praying bit.

R: I miss praying with Suzanne, in Norway. But if I lived here... But it is difficult with children...

L: But not that difficult...! I think it's a roller coaster the first year (of having a baby). And I thought the business was failing (...) So I have to sacrifice a lot of time with friends...and to work, just work. It's been really difficult.

R: I found it really difficult to pray because I've been on my own. (...) I find that many have the same experiences. I find that the thing I've gone through; moving to a new place without a network, feeling alone, that's what life is like when you've got small children, especially for women.

L: It's surprisingly lonely! You don't think it would be, because you've got a little person with you!

There are obviously many elements involved in living a Christian life. What becomes clearer through Lizzie's reflections, is how important the Christian fellowship is for her relationship to God, in helping her engage in activities that *keeps the relationship with God going*. When the community has had to become second priority because of her obligations towards motherhood, she expresses surprise at how lonely life with a baby can be. I was the one mentioning feeling alone first, but Lizzie was quick to pick up on this word. In such a situation, the need for a God who is close, may have become more acutely felt, and may have made more obvious the insufficiency of a theological and academic approach within the church services, to provide the sense of companionship, spiritual and human, that Lizzie seems to miss.

Jessie: Longing for the quiet time with God

A few days after my interview with Lizzie, I had arranged to meet Jessie for an interview. Jessie was around during my first fieldwork as well, and since then she had got married and had a baby, a little son. My family and I had Jessie and her husband stay over in our house a few years after my first fieldwork, when they came to visit Bergen for a long weekend. I was now meeting Jessie in her house on one of her days off from work. Before the interview, I had emailed her some of the questions I was interested in, and when we sat down to start talking, I asked her if she had read the mail. She apologetically admitted that she had not had the time. I repeated some of the questions like 'who is God to you' and 'how do you experience faith', and as she started to reflect upon these questions, I recognized that many of her experiences and perspectives were familiar to me from conversations and interviews with others:

J: It's a huge question; who is God and how do we find out about him...? A lifelong journey.

R: What's important for you in your spirituality, your spiritual life? What are your aspirations?

J: I think it would be to always keep finding more and more out about God, become more and more like Jesus, and hopefully I can do that through different means; my friends, reading, thinking, and the community in church. All of that helps on a lifelong journey. I guess lots of things are important.

R: Do you think you think about it a lot, or does it come alive in certain settings, like in church? – It's easy to be reminded of God there...

J: Yeah, this is bad, but I think of it more when I'm tired and desperate. So, when things are well, and I feel like I'm coping... So, a bit more when I'm tired and down; I think I should pray more and read the bible more – that's when I think about it a lot. It more features in my thought process then... which I always feel guilty about, although I try not to.

R: It's more difficult after you've had children...

J: Yeah...although after Noah was born, I had a whole new understanding of God; him being a father and creator. I mean, children add to the confusion and chaos and just not being able to sit down and think. Having Noah has taught me a lot about God, his father nature, how patient he is. So, he (Noah) has been part of my journey.

R: Are there particular instances when you've been moved by new insights?

J: When he was born; the whole childbirth, how shocking it is, and how amazing it is. He was part of that insight. I think that was a really big step in my eye. There were two conflicting emotions I had when he was born; I didn't have the easiest time and felt abandoned by God, because it was awful and everything I prayed wasn't answered, or not in the way that I wanted, so the shock of feeling abandoned. And then the miracle of having a baby, and that was a big step for realising how amazing God is, how amazing creation is. So that was a really big stage in my journey, I guess. I realise how patient God is – a bit how I relate to God, more like I relate to Noah now; understand more about what it means to have a child now, and learn to communicate with a child, how patient one must be.

(...)

R: Where do you find your quiet time now in your busy schedule – if you do?

J: Yeah, that's the big challenge at the moment. When I'm tired I get more frustrated... I feel like a quiet time needs to be that I take time to settle down, sort of whole hour or longer, and can go away, be uninterrupted. I don't know why I have to find God in that space, but it helps me just to have that time and know I don't need to do something else for half an hour. But I don't have that time anymore, I have to create time when walking with the pram or cycling to work. So, I'm trying to carve out time like that, trying to work it out like that. Do you have any useful...?

R: No, I'm thinking like you; just have to learn to try to grab snippets of time when I'm walking somewhere. But I've never liked that either – I like the meditative space that you create when you sit down.

J: Yeah, and from God's point of view; if I really want to talk to someone and they say 'I have to go somewhere, will you walk with me and we can talk then', I always feel like they're not really listening, I don't have their full attention, because they're on their way to something else, and I think, I hope God doesn't feel...

R: I'm sure he understands... I think he must because this is so common. Every mother I have talked to says the same thing and everybody feels guilty about it.

J: I know. And I think if you constantly feel guilty about it, you're never actually gonna get any praying done, so you know, walking with your pram, saying to God 'I'm really sorry...' So, I'm trying not to feel guilty and trying to make those spaces when I can. Yeah, I'm sure he understands...

R: It is interesting: Why do we have these thoughts, why do we so easily feel guilty about how we are as Christians, as if it was a contest...?

J: I think part of it is that we compare ourselves with other people. I know I do. So, from some speakers and other people I've heard, talking about how they get up at six in the morning to have an hour's quiet time, reading the bible and praying and I think 'that's how you do it!' But I can't get up at six in the morning, Noah is up at half six anyway, I'd just be exhausted! That works for them...

R: They're probably morning people...

J: So, I don't know why we always feel guilty instead of just getting on with things. For me I think it is because I compare myself with other people. (...)

As in the interview with Lizzie, Jessie and I talked about guilt. Jessie was the one mentioning the guilt first, and I was quick to pick up on the word. As far as Jessie was

concerned, she seemed to feel a similar kind of guilt as I did in relation to not praying and reading the bible enough. A little later in the interview, Jessie gave me another example of a situation where she'd had an immediate feeling of guilt:

J: One thing for me; my job is part of my calling as well; (...) I'm where God wants me to be, so don't have to think about it anymore. I was very challenged by what Tom Sign said in the speech on Sunday, thinking about your calling and what you're called to do as a Christian. I already know – then I realised (from what Sign was saying) that it is always unfolding, so that was challenging. Then I immediately felt guilty, thinking 'Oh, I haven't thought about this before, oh this is terrible...' I just released the feeling of guilt.

It is interesting how Jessie related with guilt to an instance that brought a new understanding to her. It is as if she was taken aback by her new realisation; at first feeling good about the fact that she already knew what her calling was, then realising with a shock that a calling is something that is constantly unfolding. By the realisation that she had not thought about it this way before, she released the feeling of guilt, almost by pointing a finger at herself, saying 'You should have thought of this before!' Jessie's guilt in this situation seemed an almost automatic response to a thought process unfolding in her body. Her response seemed to involve a dismissive and judgemental attitude towards herself and her perceptive abilities, where the instant judgement was that she was 'not good enough'. The sentence that Jessie thus passed upon herself activated its own form of punishment.

Practicing the presence of God in a busy life

Although Jessie herself did not make this link directly, upon rereading her interview, it somehow strikes me that she very quickly drew a contrast to her tendency to focus on what she seemed to see as her shortcomings, which produced guilt in her, by a reference to a different way of relating to God, that she longed for. In the next part of the interview, although frankly it was one of my own prompts that brought us there; Jessie described a longing to be able to withdraw into a quieter space, where she could cultivate her relationship to God in a more focused way:

R: *You sent us a book some years ago, that was very nice.*

J: *I did?*

R: *Yeah, it was... "Brother Andrew" ...? That was a nice book; I didn't finish it all but read parts of it.*

J: *Oh yeah, I remember it now, it was "Brother Laurence: Practicing the presence of God". – Just a little book. (...)*

R: *I just thought about that on my way here.*

J: *Yeah, we talked about that when we were over, I guess. Yeah, just in the everyday...*

R: *But obviously, we have these role models from the saints... But they were all alone, they didn't have a family life, so they had more time to sink into prayer, which we don't. So, we should have in a sense something new to compare ourselves to and not feel...more involve God in our daily life, and not feel that we should have to be conscious all the time of being Christians. I think we are far away from achieving that at the moment.*

J: *Yeah, and I think that certainly in Green Forest, people are so busy with stuff.*

R: *Within church you mean?*

J: *Yeah, you tend to get caught up in that, and feel guilty if you're lazing about a bit. So yeah, I think it would be different if you lived in a remote Scottish island... That really appeals to me... Have you ever heard about Iona?*

R: *Oh yeah!*

J: *I'd really love to go there. My dad's been there, he went on a week's retreat all by himself and he said it was just beautiful, because the air is so clear; it's so long from pollution. He said it felt like the veil between heaven and earth was so thin, he really felt like he could touch and taste heaven a bit. I'd love that – I love the Celtic Christianity.*

In this section of the interview, one of the conflicting feelings related to the spiritual life was brought up: The desire to live closer to God, as the saints seemed to have done, and the difficulty of managing to live such a life in today's busy world. In Jessie's translation of this conflict, she held up busyness and the expectations to be actively engaged in church, and the accompanying guilt should one fail to commit oneself, as a contrast to a more meditative spirituality. As a reference to this spirituality, she brought up the remote island of Iona, to the north of Scotland, where a community of believers started a retreat centre, offering a period of

time out for those seeking God in the simple life, far away from the fuzz and buzz of modern life. Like Judith had done when she referred to the limitation of an action-based church, Jessie was holding up a different tradition of spirituality than her own, a spirituality emphasizing meditation and inner experience. In the next part of the interview, the focus was upon how to integrate a sense of the spiritual life into this everyday life, which seemed occupied by the mundane:

R: How do you really manage to pursue spiritual life? We all have too busy lives, unless we come up with a different definition of what it is...

J: What, of spirituality?

R: Yeah...

J: Yeah, I think we can be spiritual and busy... but how? I don't know... When I think of spirituality, I think of the Celtic community, Franz of Assisi...: Seeking God in the quiet, in calm places. Yeah, spiritual in a piece of city is a whole different thing. I'm glad I belong to a church that always questions that, stooping for answers, challenging each other, doing a...[group/course] on spiritual formation...looking at those questions of how we can seek to be more spiritual, how can we find that quiet time. I'm really glad we can question it and seek an answer together. Someone suggested that families should form a group and give each member a day off. We're going to try and do that²⁷.

R: Yeah, I'm sure that is helpful, I guess one needs others' help in growing in all respects.

J: So, on some days we have a day together, and if it's your day off, you can do whatever you want. I think I will go to the beach and just walk and think... Also, we try to do things, like Noah is going to his grandparents for the weekend in two weeks, and my husband and I can hopefully have time to pray. So, we're trying to carve time out...

²⁷ In relation to personal faith, the church was setting up faith formation groups, aimed at spiritual life and spiritual growth, an issue I will discuss further in chapter 8. As part of one church service, Clive had made specific suggestions concerning how people could find time to focus on faith and spiritual life. One suggestion was that people formed 'prayer triplets', where three people met up to pray together regularly, for mutual encouragement and to pray for church. Another suggestion was that three families got together once a month for a family fun day, but each time one person from one of the couples would have the day to him/herself, to devote to spiritual time. Jessie mentioned the family fun day as an initiative that she and her family would get involved in.

R: Maybe it's as simple as that; like going to visit someone doesn't necessarily happen unless you set down a date. Maybe you just need to do the same for time aside²⁸?

J: Yeah... Feels weird putting in the diary 'Today I will be spiritual' – doesn't sit comfortably with me; slightly bad that it's something that has to be put in your diary.

R: But it seems like we can't get away from a certain structure. I would like for my spiritual life to just happen naturally and for there to be no barriers, but I don't think it is possible to get that anymore... You need a structure of sitting down and praying.

J: Yeah, especially when you become part of a family and have other people in your home, then you're a part of their life as well. And you need a kind of structure. (...)

Yeah, I find it difficult to get into that mind-set to sit down and pray. It's not always easy to use those moments. I like walking; I think when I walk... So, doing the pram thing is great for me, just praying while I'm walking. I have to do lots more walks... (...)

One aspect that I find interesting about what Jessie said in response to the question of how to be busy *and* spiritual, was how the reference to church changed when she talked about church as a place for questioning issues of spirituality. Where the perception of church as busy seemed to represent a stressful element in Jessie's experience of church life, she here testified to a different experience of church, stressing how reflections upon and discussions about spirituality was a part of the church's life and aspiration, that she appreciated. She brought up the church's recent initiative to help people integrate some private time for seeking God, expressing her feeling that church was supportive of her needs, as well as her family's intention in taking part in this initiative.

In many respects, the interview with Jessie emphasized what many of the mothers with young children in church revealed to me: That they had little time and energy to pursue their spiritual life, a condition that often led to a sense of guilt and dissatisfaction with themselves and often with church. It was difficult to pursue the activities formerly engaged in as vital elements of one's life of faith, due to both job- and family situation. Therefore, activities like prayer, bible reading and taking part in various church engagements many women, for the sake of other compelling concerns and duties related to motherhood, as well as work and family matters, felt that they had to put aside. It was not easy to integrate into one's practical life spiritual- and church related concerns while looking after a baby, for which many women

²⁸ Time aside was a term often used within church for a personal, private time to pray.

consequently felt guilty. In the interviews, the conversations about guilt often served as attempts between those interviewed and me, to encourage a different perception and experience of life, which did not embrace guilt, but instead sought to acknowledge and accept the circumstances of not having time for spiritual- and church engagement to the same extent as before. In this respect, Jessie's comment that she liked to walk and that she could do prayer walks when going for a walk with the pram, was an example of her attempt to add a spiritual space and focus to one of her new routines as a mum.

Redefining spirituality

The three women I interviewed in this chapter had all been working before going on maternity leave, in jobs they experienced as their vocation, or 'calling'. In this sense, their jobs were already invested with spiritual significance, a sense that what they were doing was important to God, in terms of their reaching out to the world around, and in accordance with the evangelical tradition of church. Being outside of the context of their vocation due to maternity leave or a reduced work position, called for a redefinition of their spiritual lives after becoming mums. In some ways, I think it was this process I was witnessing in the interviews I had with them, in which they expressed a longing for a different way of relating to God or church. The spirituality referred to but not specifically named or defined by Judith and Jessie, expressed a more meditative orientation of seeking the presence of God in the quiet and in prayer. Lizzie, defining herself as an extrovert, did not express a longing for the quiet, but she mentioned prayer and small group that she had previously participated in together with others, as activities related to her faith that she missed. What all the women pointed to, was an experience of missing something in their spiritual lives and in church, where a number of aspects both related to their own personal lives and the approach of the church, were considered.

The longing for and need to feel closer to God, to me seemed to point towards a spirituality more related to the contemplative and mystical traditions within Christian history. Other than the references to a quiet, meditative spirituality made by Judith and Jessie, or Lizzie's references to intercessory, prophetic prayer, the books mentioned by Judith and Jessie, were all within the tradition of a contemplative spirituality. According to Thomas Merton, who was a monk and contemplative within the Cistercian Order from 1941-68, spiritual formation or contemplative living is essentially concerned with four dimensions of life, within which one explores the relationships that determine who we are: relationships with self, God, others and

nature or creation. Contemplative living is described first as the awakening to an awareness of who one truly is, then as the contemplation of life experienced from a God-centred perspective (Montaldo & Toth 2011). In Jessie's concluding remark she said something that I often came to hear at the end of an interview; that the contemplation of life bidden by the interview situation had provided the opportunity to see one's life in a new perspective, making one aware of aspects of which one was most of the time unaware. As Jessie expressed, this recognition often yielded a form of comfort:

J: Yeah, talking about these things made me think about... I don't often think about the journey I've been on: I'm caught up in the moment. You realise when you think about it where you've come over a period of years, how much God's done. – Which helps when you're feeling a bit tired.

Jessie's words remind me of Judith's reference to spirituality in her interview: *I was reading a book last night, where it talked about what is spirituality. And there's all sorts of senses of spirituality in the world, but spirituality has always got to, you know, in a Christian sense, always got to be focused on God and what God is doing, rather than what we are doing. And it's how we respond to that, that I suppose makes us spiritual. It's about God first, and we can miss that sometimes or forget that (...)* Drawing upon the definition of spirituality that Judith shared, Jessie was engaging in a form of spirituality when she was gazing back upon her life and realizing how much God has done for her. Drawing upon the definition of contemplative living offered by Merton, she was also involved in the contemplative spirituality described by him, by expressing her awakening to the presence of God in her life.

I feel that my material suggests that everybody who was genuinely seeking God, sooner or later found themselves on a journey that led them towards a deeper knowledge of who they were, and towards the necessity to accept the circumstances that they were going through at the time, which in turn brought God more clearly into focus for them. In this respect, I think one can also sense a deeper form of longing within the sense of guilt that the women expressed to me. Descriptions of the situations provoking guilt were often portrayals of areas in life formerly experienced as meaningful. The prayer life and small group attendance that Lizzie missed out on after she became a mother, had been significant experiences in her life earlier, fuelling her faith and interaction with God, as well as immersing her in a fellowship. It was not only guilt she expressed, but also a longing for and missing of these engagements. The expressions of

guilt pointed to and arose out of a circumstance or context begging for acceptance, rather than judgement, like when Jessie felt guilty because a new perspective was mentioned in a speak in church, that she had not thought of herself before. She recognized afterwards how she herself had released the feeling of guilt. In terms of how to relate to feelings of guilt, Clive was the role model par excellence. When I had met Clive for the interview earlier, I had also brought up the issue of guilt with him, to hear his advice on the matter. Clive was quite clear in terms of his standing, and said he never accepted any unjustified feelings of guilt; he rebuked guilt, he said. If he knew that he had done something wrong, like being too harsh with his children, he would say sorry, but never harbour vague feelings of guilt. In one respect this attitude to oneself, of grace rather than guilt, may have been an equally important aspect of a redefined spirituality, as the seeking of a meditative, quiet space. This perspective is in tune with Merton's view on spirituality, in which he insisted that our spiritual life is our everyday lived experience, with no separation in between. As for Judith, Lizzie and Jessie, their longing for a more contemplative spirituality can possibly be read as their entering into a process of acknowledging a broader perception of spiritual life, in which they no longer would have to feel guilty for not performing to the same standards as before, but could embrace that all of life, at any time, is part of spiritual life.

The Presence of God

And your strength will equal your days.

Deut. 33:25

An underlying inquiry for chapter 7 relates to a question that I had been concerned with in relation to the attending of the meetings at Marsham Street from the beginning. I was wondering whether seeking to experience the presence of God represented a self-indulgent form of spirituality, i.e., whether it served a mere self-gratifying purpose, rather than a transcendent purpose of connecting me to God and the world around. At this stage, about halfway into my six-month long fieldwork, I sometimes felt as if I was losing my grasp of what exactly I was looking to write about. Any sense of firm direction seemed to have slipped between my fingers. Most of the time my lack of definite direction was ok and did not cause any problems for the interviews; I still had my initial concepts of faith, embodiment, knowledge, experience etc. and despite a simmering confusion and uncertainty underneath, I held on to these. In retrospect, I see my sense of confusion as related to the divergence between *experience* on the one hand, and *intellectual reflection* on the other, not having merged the two properly. In relation particularly to Marsham Street, I was exploring the sense of the presence of God, trying to describe what was going on in my body through an ‘inner’ investigation of these moments. I had not, however, considered the presence of doubt and uncertainty arising in my body regarding the stage of analysis and reflection afterwards, where my feelings and experiences were sometimes ‘deconstructed’ by my mind. The two interviews I present in this chapter, which both broach the subject of the presence of God, are more analytically focused than the interviews in the previous chapter, which were more expressive of personal longing and seeking. Providing me with different perspectives than the ones I was used to hearing, these two interviews took me into the depths of academic, theological thinking concerning how to relate to faith, allowing me a chance to consider the ‘academic’ approach from the perspective of those who thrived within this approach towards church life and spirituality, through which I

could also clarify my own positioning in terms of what aspects of the presence of God I was seeking. I give a reasonably large space to the last of these interviews, because the discussions we had added to my understanding and seeking in a significant way, thus also bringing the autoethnographer more clearly into the text.

Caroline: The presence of God as an aspect of relating to others

I knew Caroline from a small group that we both took part in ten years earlier and had arranged to meet her for an interview at her house. I explained that I wanted to write about faith as embodied knowledge, to look at the encounter or experience of the presence of God as elements in a process of faith formation. Caroline picked up on the word experience and started to reflect on the word:

C: I remember having experiences, and what I would have called defining moments in my teens, and maybe just about until my early twenties, situations where I'd feel that I had a new understanding of something. Well, some situations I guess as a younger teenager, situations where I'd think 'Okay, I have quite an experiential understanding of God' in a meeting or something. And I remember a couple of times, feeling that I was aware of the presence of God and that I kind of either was making a commitment at that point or renewing commitment quite strongly. They feel as if they were quite important moments. But we [in her small group] were talking about this the other day, I can't remember why, thinking that perhaps although they felt like turning points, I guess you could say – or faith formational moments – any kind of place; they felt like something. I think they were actually made up of multiple experiences beforehand, so they couldn't have come about in the absence of the rest of my life. So, they were a community, kind of. They were a result of lots of interaction with people, we'd been trying to understand God and stuff like that, and then there were a few moments that kind of felt like key moments – and were, but actually could have happened in the next day if something had, you know, if it had rained and I hadn't gone there. It wasn't that it was a one-time only possibility, it was just that these moments were kind of, you know, you were having a journey (...). I remember that as a teenager you were encouraged to feel like that, and you were, or I was, encouraged, within a kind of charismatic tradition to have quite big feeling experiences, and see them as knowing the presence of God.

Now what I feel much more is; I know the presence of God in, at times when...say I'm really annoyed by someone at work. And it comes to me that I suddenly see things different now, I suddenly see things from their point of view. Or I suddenly think 'This really isn't a big deal'. I get a completely different perspective on it, which enables me to behave to them in a manner that's much more appropriate. So, if I'm feeling quite angry with someone, or annoyed, or frustrated, or whatever, I then suddenly see things differently and it takes that feeling away, so that in my interaction with them I'm... Well, what I try to think of everybody I come across is that everybody is a child of God; everybody is made in the image of God. Everybody, you know. And I should treat everybody like that, including people that annoy me at work, you know, and people that let me down or sort of harass me or all of those things. And it's at moments, maybe at work, when I suddenly see things differently and I'm able to see that, then now I feel that's when I see the presence of God. And that's when I feel the presence of God. It's in situations where I feel like I've had an insight that's made me more able to treat someone like they are a child of God, and so treat them really with lots of respect, or with lots of love, and with lots of honor. Stuff like that. So, I feel, because to me that makes sense, that the presence of God would gradually change me, and teach me, and show me people for what they really are, rather than make me feel kind of fuzzy and warm. In an experiential situation as a teenager – I'm not saying they were wrong; I don't think they were wrong, and I think that some of those things are very general, and some of them really help you make a commitment and turn on. But to me it makes much more sense to feel the presence of God, it's much more logical that I would feel the presence of God in this situation, where I need God to guide me on how to behave. I need God to make me see what someone else is feeling so that I behave appropriately towards them, rather than, say, necessarily on a Sunday morning in church, singing, when actually we're just, kind of, standing and singing and actually we're all nice and there's no stress. So, for me I think, and I'm not saying the presence of God isn't there, I'm just saying for me that's where I recognize God more, in the day to day.

Caroline related to experiences of the presence of God in a different way than I perhaps alluded to when I presented my questions. Rather than refer to particular experiences and portraying the meaning these had had for her, she put experiences of God's presence into a wider context, and in a generalized form, where it was not only the moment of the experience

itself that mattered, but the incidents leading up to the experience as well. Caroline referred to experiences as defining moments, which she also portrayed as *made up of multiple experiences beforehand, so they couldn't have come about in the absence of the rest of my life*. She expressed the view that her defining experiences were not dependent on a limited time and place, because they were already a *community* of interrelated events bound together by *lots of interaction with people, trying to understand God* and being *encouraged by a charismatic tradition to have quite big feeling experiences*. She related the concept of an experience of the presence of God to the environment and culture of a charismatic tradition, and associated this context of both feelings and space, to a moment for making a commitment to God or towards faith: *And I remember a couple of times, feeling that I was aware of the presence of God and that I kind of either was making a commitment at that point or renewing commitment quite strongly*. Seeking the big feeling experiences was not the main ingredient in the formation of Caroline's faith at present, however, and she seemed instead eager to dissociate the experiential aspects of the charismatic tradition from a general perception of the presence of God. Her sense or feeling of the presence of God she rather described as experiences that occurred in situations where her interactions with other people were at stake, and it was in these contexts that Caroline now expected to see or hear from God: When she needed guidance in terms of how to behave towards others.

I noticed that Caroline referred to some experiences of God's presence as *fuzzy*: *So, I feel, because to me that makes sense, that the presence of God would gradually change me, and teach me, and show me people for what they really are, rather than make me feel kind of fuzzy and warm*. I recognized the reference to 'fuzzy feelings' in relation to the concept of the presence of God from conversations with others earlier. It seemed to me that 'fuzzy feelings' was a description used derogatory of feelings involved in an experience of the presence of God, which was considered self-indulgent, in terms of representing merely the seeking of a sense of personal elation, and calling it seeking God. It seemed important to Caroline that the presence of God had a purpose beyond making herself feel good, and that a purposeful situation would involve guidance or direction. In expecting an experience of God to involve direction or guidance, Caroline was expressing the same desire that I had seen in many others; a desire or need to know what to do in a specific situation. It seems obvious that my reference points to experiencing the presence of God were different from Caroline's. I was in a phase of exploring and experiencing the charismatic tradition that Caroline described as having been a part of in her youth, but which she seemed to distance herself from at the present time of her life. Being aware that she was not seeking to experience the presence of God in the same way as myself

and many of the others that I knew, I still applied my own reference points as I tried to dig deeper into Caroline's perspectives. I asked Caroline whether her experiences of the presence of God in certain situations 'just happened' or were sought after:

R: So that kind of comes when you haven't sought it?

C: Yeah, it does. (...) There was a guy who was kind of effectively bullying me, and had previously bullied people at work, then that was obviously a very difficult situation, and there were times that I was incredibly frustrated or incredibly upset or whatever, and I couldn't see through it, but there were other times when suddenly I saw things differently. I felt sorry for him or realized that actually it wasn't...whatever he did, it wasn't a big deal compared to what happens in the rest of the world, you know, all the time. And I saw things from a different perspective, which meant that on the whole, that situation wasn't as bad as it could've been. You know, the reality of God in that situation meant that I could handle it more appropriately, that we could have some conversations outside of that that would let off steam, and all those kinds of things. (...) And again, that's where I'd see God. Because it's that realization that everything is so much bigger than just me, because you know God is outside of all of this, but he cares for all the individuals within it. And somehow, by taking it back to God, I'm able to think about it differently, I'm able to have a perspective that doesn't come from what's within me.

R: So, you definitely felt that it came from God? Praying, you had a new perspective; it feels like a sudden insight?

C: Yeah, I do, I feel like it's not that I've sat there and thought about it, and thought about it, and thought about it, and suddenly, you know, finally come up with a different way of seeing it; sometimes it's just this refreshing kind of like 'No, this is how it is'. And yeah, I think it's God. I mean, I don't sort of hear a voice or anything like that, and I don't think God always shows you in dramatic ways. Sometimes it can come through thinking, or sometimes it can come through something somebody else has said.

But actually, because of the overriding perspective of the fact that God is outside of all of this, yet holds all of this in his hands, we are sustained constantly by God. He made every person, and he knows every person intimately. Loves every person, you know, whoever they are, whether they acknowledge him or not. God cares massively for them. And whatever kind of level of frustration I have, or whatever someone does to me,

it's nothing compared to, in a sense, that Jesus gave up everything for us, despite the fact that we constantly throw it back at God. God is such a gracious God. (...)

R: Yeah, I get what you mean. But you mean that when you have this insight, obviously, it doesn't have the effect that you belittle what you experience, but actually lifts you above?

C: Yeah. So, in terms of something like the bullying situation, it doesn't make me think...yeah, I don't feel belittled.

R: You wouldn't try to repress your feelings?

C: No, it's more from a positive point of view. So, I think that, compared to what's going on, this is nothing. I think more in the other direction, which is, this little thing might be happening, but there's so much good stuff. I've been given so much that actually this little thing isn't really...

R: Worthy of all the attention...?

C: Yeah, yeah. And also, if you are thinking...the thing of thinking that everybody is made in the image of God, and everybody is loved by God, also means you can't really take that route of belittling the problem. Because if you just belittle the problems and say, 'It's not really a big problem', you also belittle them as well. That sensation wouldn't give grace to them, whereas if you think of it from a more positive point of view, then you also tend to think that 'There's a reason why they're doing this'. I might not know what it is, but actually...they didn't get up in the morning and want to do this. They didn't set out to be like this. You know, behind whatever facade I'm seeing there is someone who's made in the image of God, who's got some real...you know, they're gonna have some really good things going for them. I just can't see them at the moment. So, again, if you just belittled it you would never...it would never give you a positive angle on the other people, and I think without that, you can't really get away from the problems.

Caroline had a way of reflecting upon her experiences and the situations that she was in, which involved seeing things in a bigger perspective, which enabled her to lift herself above difficult circumstances. Coming from an academic background within which she was also currently working, she engaged with what was happening on an analytic level, where she sought an understanding that extended beyond her own immediate concerns and experience. Such a form of reflection or analysis may have a soothing effect in certain circumstances, yielding a

sense of some control in an otherwise difficult situation. Caroline was not referring to the relief of a difficult situation as related to her own mind-full control, however. What seemed to give her a grasp of a situation was *the overriding perspective that God is outside of all of this yet holds all of this in his hands* and that in this way, *we are sustained constantly by God*. I am not entirely sure what she meant when she said that *God is outside of all of this*, but in the setting of the interview, I understood her to mean that she saw God as being above the situation, or encompassing the situation, like when she said previously in the interview *it's that realization that everything is so much bigger than just me, because you know God is outside of all of this*. In reference to the bullying situation, she pointed to this perspective also as the reality of God in that situation: *the reality of God in that situation meant that I could handle it more appropriately and that's where I'd see God*. When Caroline referred to the perspective of God as being *outside* of the difficult situation, she was at the same time stating that the reality of God was thus *in* that situation, and she was also thus identifying how the reality and presence of God looked and appeared to her. She was using similar phrases as other people had done in earlier conversations and interviews with me but locating the sense of God specifically in situations involving other people and involving her response in such situations. There is a fundamental confidence in God expressed through Caroline's story, related not only to her analytic reflection but to her personal experience as well: God was expected to, and experienced as, getting involved in her life, particularly the part of life concerning how she related to others. Caroline's image of God expresses the belief that God is always there, present through his love and grace, and she did not seem to need any 'big feeling' experiences to justify or strengthen her faith. Recognizing that Caroline seemed both independent and practical in her approach to life and to her faith, I asked her if God's guidance was something she had been seeking specifically:

R: Have you prayed particularly about...that God speak to you in these situations?

C: No, I think it's because I'm a doing person, and not a reflective person particularly.

R: You sound very reflective, so how can you say that?

C: But I'm reflective about doing things. To me, what you do... For me, I'm much more likely to see the presence of God in something I'm doing, than sung worship. For me, that's not as much where I'm going to see God, 'cause I'm not actually doing anything. And for me, it's the everyday that's important.

R: So, to sit down and meditate is not your style?

C: No.

R: *But if you engaged in... I mean if you read something, which is intellectually stimulating, then...*

C: *Yeah, that works for me. Thinking about stuff actively, that's okay, but just kind of... There are times when I'm maybe more actively engaged with God in other ways. So, if I'm reading some kind of quite challenging theology book that's really making me think about God, or house-group is doing something that's really making me think about God, or I'm praying or something. If those things are happening, I'm much more likely to see God in the everyday than times when I'm just racing around, and I haven't really had much time to pray or to read or anything like that. Then the days go by and I don't notice. But if I'm taking time regularly, within the course of the day, to engage purposefully with God, then in the everyday I'm more likely to notice him than times when I'm just not engaging very much. Because I guess otherwise, if I'm not praying, I'm not reading anything at the time, then God's kind of just at the back of my mind somewhere, whereas if I'm thinking more consciously about him regularly, then I see him where he is, rather than just missing him because I'm in such a rush.*

I think the reason I feel the presence of God in everyday situations is because I tend to get on and do stuff and be active and be engaging with people. For me there's no point in believing in a God that isn't going to affect my every day, that doesn't make sense to me.

R: *You mean then, as in you being affected towards other people, or being able to show God to other people through actions? You don't mean just going about your day and suddenly feeling God's presence, feeling that he loves you? You mean more in a practical way, in a sense.*

C: *Yes, I do. I guess it would depend on who God said he was. You know, the Bible indicates that God is a person who is very involved in people himself. We've got a 'people God', and for me, if my relationship with that God doesn't change the way I have relationships with other people...it doesn't make sense. I guess for me, to recognize the presence of God is to see him, in a sense, as he is in the Bible, which is involved in lives, and therefore he's gonna get involved in me and how I interact with other people.*
(...)

R: *So, you haven't felt that you've been without the presence of God? Or aren't you the kind of person to worry about that? I mean since you became a Christian.*

C: I've never felt that... I can't comprehend believing that God would take his presence from me, but there are times when I can't see it. So, I don't ever feel like God is taking his presence away from me or God has turned his back on me or that kind of thing. Because I...in a sense I know that that can't be true, I don't see that in reality. I do believe that God is with everyone. And people go through a lot, lot worse. I mean, that does come to a point of maybe sort of sometimes belittling stuff, but God is with the people who are starving, who are beaten and brutalized, and all of those kinds of people. I don't believe he takes his presence away from them, or he's turned his back on them, so how could I possibly believe that, with everything I have – I just can't...I can't calculate God taking his presence away from people, because I just don't think he does. But I think that sometimes it's much harder to see, it's much harder for individuals to recognize it. So yeah, there are times when, I guess... (...) I worked in recruitment for two years, and I hated it. And at times I was pretty depressed and pretty...well just pretty depressed really. Now then, I didn't ever believe that God had taken his presence away from me, but sometimes I just couldn't see outside of the situation. I just would be buried, miserable about where I was, and find it very hard to, I guess I'd find it very hard to look to God and say...well not to say anything, I'd just find it very hard to think outside of what...you know; it was just a horrible place to work. And if you work in a horrible place, you're there most of your waking hours, five days a week, yeah, it's just not nice. I think probably then there were times when I couldn't see God, 'cause I just couldn't see anything really.

My question to Caroline concerning whether she had sought God's counsel in relation to the difficult situation she had experienced earlier, was in a sense in reference to the many conversations and interviews that I had already had with other people, who had expressed this manner of seeking God for answers in times of trouble. In her response, Caroline referred to a *reflective person* as more likely to choose the approach of seeking God for answers, than herself, whom she described as a *doing person*. In this distinction between a 'doing' - and a 'reflective' person, she touched upon one of the issues that was broached in the previous chapter as well. When Judith for instance, had been expressing a desire for a more 'reflective' spirituality, she was also seeing this spirituality as a contrast to a more 'active' spirituality. Caroline was not, like Judith, discussing different types of spirituality in relation to the church, but in recognition of the fact that *people* are different in terms of spirituality. Another aspect of her spirituality

which she identified, related to worship; *I'm much more likely to see the presence of God in something I'm doing, than sung worship. For me, that's not as much where I'm going to see God, 'cause I'm not actually doing anything. And for me, it's the everyday that's important.* Again, Caroline defined herself in opposition to a characteristic, which must be said to be quite common within a Christian fellowship, namely the music and the sung worship. In every service, there will be a time, normally at the beginning, set aside for singing songs of worship, which to many people is an essential part of the service, allowing for a participation, and an opportunity to feel one's spirit uplifted by the music. For many people, like for instance Suzanne, who mentioned worship music as something that would normally make her feel stirred up and emotionally engaged, the music was also a space for sensing the presence of God. Caroline, who was obviously aware of these common conduits to a sense of the presence of God, was stressing that her engagement and sense of the presence of God, was related to her either *thinking about stuff actively* or *taking time regularly, within the course of the day, to engage purposefully with God*, as well as *engaging with people*. Although Caroline, like other people, also referred to periods in life where she was not being conscious of God all the time due to busyness, *then God's kind of just at the back of my mind somewhere*, she did not express feeling guilty in relation to these situations, like some of the women interviewed in chapter 6 had. Caroline seemed to express a clarified and unproblematic perception of who she was and of who God was for her. She had defined herself with ease, unapologetically, in opposition to other well-known character traits, like the reflective and meditative ones, within church.

There seemed a certain strength harbored in Caroline's perception of God, in her belief that God is always there, whether she could feel his presence or not. There is a form of comfort and reassurance to the perspective that a sense of God's absence is not the same as God's actual absence and the sense of God's presence is not the only indication of God's presence. There was a time, however, when Caroline was referring to a particularly difficult situation where she could not *see* God, because the situation she was in was too overwhelming and clouding her vision of anything other; *I just couldn't see outside of the situation*. This context was the closest Caroline came to describing a sense of being without God, or of finding herself in a situation where her belief that God was still present, could not combat the *feeling* of his absence. It seemed a situation of utter hopelessness, for her: *I just would be buried, miserable about where I was, and find it very hard to, I guess I'd find it very hard to look to God and say... well not to say anything, I'd just find it very hard to think outside of what... you know; it was just a horrible place to work.*

Caroline's description of being trapped in this horrible experience draws my mind to parts of Scripture describing situations of difficulty, terror, and hopelessness. To experience that God seemed absent is referred to in biblical texts from the Old Testament until the new. – Even Jesus experienced the sense of God's absence: In the ninth hour of his crucifixion Mark writes that Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachtani?*" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"²⁹ The psalms were also often written as deeply felt groans for God to answer people and rescue them from situations of terror or grief where they felt alone and it seemed as if God had forsaken them³⁰. The psalms often conclude their groans and complaints with a recognition of and trust in God for salvation, despite the experience of the hardships in the moment, thus expressing an awareness of the fact that the circumstances of life will exert an influence upon one's interpretations of life at a given time. I see that in some ways, Caroline's approach to difficulty had similarities to the old songs of the psalms, knowing that despite the feeling of being forsaken, God was still present – although Caroline's groaning might have been less strongly expressed than many of the psalm writers.

Jeremy: On embodiment and the life of the mind

I met Jeremy for an interview a few days after I had met Caroline. Jeremy had been with the church from the start and was at present part of the leadership team. I explained that I was interested in the experience of faith and embodied faith, which normally steered those whom I was interviewing in the direction of their own history and experience. Jeremy, however, went in the opposite direction, asking me to specify in detail what I was thinking about when using such concepts. I was not aware at the onset of the interview, that my perspective on embodiment, seemed quite the opposite to Jeremy's, forming the background for the questions he asked me. Although his questioning made me a bit 'sweaty' at the time as well as aware of the gaps in my understanding, his extensive knowledge of theology helped me refine my thoughts concerning different forms of knowledge and particularly the way experience and intellect have been differently highlighted within certain churches:

J: You're writing about embodied faith?

²⁹ Mark 15:34.

³⁰ See for instance psalm 22.

R: I would like to write about the language of faith and the way it dwells in our bodies in a sense, so when I talk to people, I normally ask them about their experience of faith.

J: So, when you talk about embodiment, precisely what do you have in mind with that?

R: I read a book by Merleau-Ponty, about the way he wants to address the body as the starting point for whatever comes after that, whatever notions, or ideology or whatever, so I guess I would like to focus on the body, because I see that as the starting point for any new knowledge that we might gain. And I want to consider faith as knowledge and look at the way faith brings us knowledge in a different way than when you read something or the way it is different from theoretical knowledge. (...) I would like to try and grasp some of what makes it (faith) alive when you are a Christian.

J: (...) So when you talk about what makes it alive rather than what makes it theoretical, I guess you're associating the theoretical with something that is life-less and inadequate to communicate what's going on. Is that the problem with the theory?

R: Yeah, I think so. Obviously, you can read a book and you can feel really inspired by it, and also theory can bring out life, but I think the mental capacity has often been elevated, and I guess it's [the thoughts about analytic theory versus experience] also in line with phenomenological philosophy.

J: Yeah, that makes sense. I was partly asking about it and partly thinking about it, because my feeling is always that within the Salvation Army, and I think also within the evangelical church, one of the kinds of common dividing line is often between the so-called 'head and heart'; that sort of mental knowledge of something as opposed to lived experience. And in the Salvation Army and other evangelical traditions that division is always made in order to affirm lived experience over mental thought and knowledge, which is why generally within the evangelical church the kind of intellectual endeavour is always played down and there's no capacity, no space for it, because it never seems the definitive thing. (...) And that evangelical division never really knows what to do with the intellect, so always makes for, kind of embodied things. Well, that's my take on that, and so as a consequence of that I think there's something quite problematic in that, because of course in the evangelical tradition there's not a lot of space for intellectual thought, because it just doesn't fit in, and it's always seen as secondary. And there's lots of other reasons for why that is so, and so I guess partly because of what I do and because I think theology is important, I'm looking for a different way to reconfigure that thought line, so we don't make a division between head and heart, but we cut it a

different way. So even in terms of the language you've used, I would say that the problem isn't to move from theory to embodiment, but to move from a disembodied set of thought to an embodied set of thought. That would seem to me a more helpful move to make than from theory to embodiment, because I wouldn't want to associate theory with disembodiment.

R: No, I wouldn't either and I come from a tradition which is protestant Lutheran, which puts a great weight on teaching.

J: Yeah. (...) I think we think in language, we think in experience, we don't think outside of that. So, in that sense knowledge is always embodied. But I also...I don't want to write off more abstract modes of thought, so that's why I'm quite reluctant to kind of divide things in that way. But yeah, we think in action, we are shaped by our experiences, by our backgrounds, shaped by a language that we use, a language that we inherit. (...) So, in that sense it's always embodied (...) in terms of experience. But I wouldn't want to completely separate them out from sort of parts of the intellectual tradition.

I guess I'd want to reconfigure that intellectual theological, philosophical tradition so that it allows for those things to kind of have a major place. (...) The terms we use to describe things are important, because we always...we don't think purely, we think in language. And if we think in language, the terms we use will shape the ideas we then come up with, but the binaries we're working with and we're operating with can always be undone, rethought, turned around, and that seems to be quite helpful. (...) Theologically, that tends to be where I come from. I am interested in language, I'm interested in the way you think in language, and I'm excited by the flexibility that brings us, to kind of think differently.

And I guess I'm very interested as well in ideas of embodiment. For me that means a lot of things. It means that the physical world is important, it means that to integrate with other systems of thought is quite key. Inevitably, if you think...if you place a lot of emphasis on the idea of God becoming incarnate and entering into the world...(...) We're³¹ always trying to go to different subjects, different ideas and do something with them, rather than perhaps count the Christian tradition I grew up in, which tended to a place which is far more in saying 'this is right and this is wrong', and

³¹ I am not sure who Jeremy is referring to as 'we' here, but I assume he is relating to others who are involved in theological thinking. He might also have been relating to the church leadership, of which he was a part at the time.

you know, 'be careful of all those nasty things they might teach you at university, 'cause they can lead you astray'. But instead of thinking that way, the idea of the incarnation leads us to take it in and doing something about it. So, what I hear and think about the term of embodiment, that's what I tend to think about.

R: Ok, yeah, you make something your own.

J: Yeah...and that Christian theology is committed always to doing this, to work in word and to be doing something with what is and what exists in the world, rather than seeking to kind of step outside of things. (...) So, I don't know, what do you think? Either about that or the term embodiment or other things that means something for you?

R: Embodiment I relate to the Christian faith as one way of learning about God, or getting to know God, that leads you to a more personal relationship.

J: So, you think...It sounds to me a bit like you think of embodiment in terms of experience, quite heavily.

R: Yeah... Some people say there's a difference between belief and faith and that belief is more something that you think upon, and faith, that's when you start to go with God in a sense, go with, and learn to trust probably more. And you can say the same things with different meanings, obviously. You can say, 'Yeah, I trust in this', and it's words, but you can also say those words and know the impact they have in you and that they are real in a different way. And there's something there... (...) And I think that different things come alive to different people, and just look at all the different churches that grow up.

J: (...) There's an older kind of theological division [that] goes back to, probably goes before them, but it goes to Augustine and Aquinas, and it's an argument – I mean, not literally because they're several hundred years apart, but it's an argument really about how we make decisions about things. And Augustine is a voluntarist, and he believes basically that you make decisions through an act of the will and that's outside of our intellect. And in the Augustinian tradition we might know something, but that is different from really having faith in it. I might know that I should give to the poor, but then I might not actually do it, and it's the will, right, it's the kind of the battleground about whether I do or I don't, whether I employ my will to act on the things that I know. And so, in that Augustinian tradition, it means that sin is not because of a lack of knowledge, but because there's a lack of willpower or an overabundance of willpower if I choose to use it in the wrong way. And that kind of Augustinian tradition is the tradition that

again the evangelical church tends to inherit, right, and in that tradition, it doesn't really matter what we know, what matters is what we will, what we choose, the decisions we make. (...) Whereas Aquinas sees the whole thing very differently and Aquinas says that if we don't do something, it's because our knowledge of it is defective in some form, to some level.

R: So, if we do something then it's because...

J: It's because you know it, you generally understand it. So, for Aquinas, if I don't give to the poor, right, when they have need, then this is because I haven't understood something properly, I haven't understood the call on my life, that everything I have is generally God's, and that I'm meant to live sacrificially and generously and, you know, all that stuff and care for others. So that for Aquinas there's a problem in my understanding rather than in my will. Ultimately, I'm not sure he is completely right, but I'm quite interested in recovering more of that sort of intellectualist Aquinas' tradition back into our church. (...)

I guess I would want to say, as I think you have in mind, that if we believe something it involves action, it involves trust, it involves doing, it involves practice. I don't think there is such a thing as just kind of abstract ideas that we hold but don't act on. I think that if we don't act on them, if we don't embody them in some form, we don't really hold them. And the reason why I'd want to make that stand, is because otherwise you just play down the life of the mind as never kind of important, and I'm looking really for a way of thinking theologically that allows the life of the mind to be important. Because obviously, I believe that things have to be embodied, you know, I think things should be practiced, I don't think theology is just an abstract set of ideas, I think it should be worked out in community, and all that stuff, but... I want some way of connecting all of that kind of set of beliefs with the idea that thinking is important. Aquinas seems to me to give us a better opportunity to say 'Actually, if I really understand God, that would translate into action and it would make a difference in the way that I live in the world'.

R: Yeah, so my understanding would be what leads me forward, what leads me on.

J: Yeah, I just think it seems a lot healthier for the life of the mind, generally, for you just find a place for it because you start to say, 'Actually if I really understand something it will make a difference'.

R: Yeah. (...) Embodiment of course involves automatically the mind because, I mean, even if you have an experience in your body, you have to translate it into a language, through your mind and through your thinking that you can hold on to. – So, you can't rule out either.

At some level, I felt that Jeremy and I were talking past one another. It seems we were using certain concepts in different ways, especially the concept of embodiment, which seemed to be already heavily loaded with specific thoughts and perspectives for Jeremy. My distinction between the knowledge of the body and theoretical knowledge might have been an unfortunate choice of language, thrusting Jeremy at once into a discussion which really had its proper context within the evangelical tradition he came from. When I expressed my interest in experience, I spoke from the perspective of a Protestant Lutheran tradition often said to focus too much on intellectual, theological teaching, a tradition that had not always embraced experience as an innate part of faith, resulting in the neglect of the experiential side of faith and the life of the body. Jeremy came from almost the opposite side, a Christian tradition that finds its roots within Protestant Methodism, which originally focused on strong spiritual experience as the vehicle to the knowledge of God. As Jeremy stated, *in the Salvation Army and other evangelical traditions that division is always made in order to affirm lived experience over mental thought and knowledge*. When I had said earlier, in reference to why I wanted to write about embodied knowledge, that *I would like to try and grasp some of what makes it [faith] alive when you are a Christian*, I was not aware that to Jeremy this may have sounded as though I was at the same time stating that theoretical, intellectual thought does not make faith come alive: *So when you talk about what makes it alive rather than what makes it theoretical, I guess you're associating the theoretical with something that is life-less and inadequate to communicate what's going on. Is that the problem with the theory?* I remember feeling slightly confused at this point, not feeling that I had a complete grasp of the situation and the question I had been asked, which is why I answered *Yeah, I think so*. I guess I was feeling a bit taken aback, but not managing to articulate my perspective very well I referred to the position I was coming from: *the mental capacity has often been elevated*, which to me was a reference to phenomenology and the perspective that all theoretical thought comes from the body's grounding in the world, thus also being embodied. I had made a reference to this perspective at the start of the interview: *I read a book by Merleau-Ponty, about the way he wants to address the body as the starting point for whatever comes after that, whatever notions, or ideology or*

whatever, so I guess I would like to focus on the body, because I see that as the starting point for any new knowledge that we might gain. And I want to consider faith as knowledge and look at the way faith brings us knowledge in a different way than when you read something or the way it is different from theoretical knowledge. When Jeremy said that he did not want to set theory or abstract knowledge as the opposite of embodiment, I agreed with that perspective, but due to the distinction between embodied and theoretical knowledge that I had made, I had given him the impression of seeing theoretical knowledge as disembodied. Merleau-Ponty however, showed how intellectual theory is anything but disembodied. This point is stressed by Elizabeth Grosz, when she refers to the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, concerning the interrelatedness of mind and body: “The body and its modes of sensual perception are not mere physical/physiological phenomena; nor are they simply psychological results of physical causes. Rather, they affirm the necessary connectedness of consciousness as it is incarnated; mind, for him, is always embodied, always based on corporeal and sensory relations” (Grosz 1994: 86). In a sense, both Jeremy and I were concerned with the unity of body and mind but focusing on different ends of this spectrum so to speak, we struggled a little to find this common denominator, having come to our understanding through different thinkers, philosophers, and theologians.

When Jeremy described the intellectualist tradition of Aquinas as emphasizing understanding as the most important aspect for action, I recognized this perspective as Kierkegaard’s concept of the element of appropriation, which referred to the arrival at understanding through a moment of revelation or insight. This form of understanding, sudden or gradual, was seen by Kierkegaard as born within the individual and as having the potential to inform a person’s orientation and action in life, from within. The life of the mind, the way it had been highlighted to me by both Kierkegaard and Merleau-Ponty, as a part of the body, and the body as being in the world, was very much an aspect of my perception of understanding as a phenomenon of the worldly grounded, contextual body. Moreover, like Jeremy’s concern with the way the mind had been undermined within evangelical Christianity, the *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1962) was a commentary upon a period within the history of philosophy and psychology where the mind had been elevated as superior to the body. My understanding of embodiment at the time, was that it related to a way of emphasizing the experiential dimension as an integration of, in this case, both emotions, thought and experience. This fact I failed to be nuanced enough about. When Jeremy was referring to Aquinas’ understanding of decision-making, he expressed a wish to bring this kind of thinking back to

the church. He considered the Augustinian tradition to be the one that had influenced evangelical church thinking the most, in terms of its tendency to say that 'this is right, and this is wrong', focusing on the will and will power as the most important features for the ability to act upon ones' beliefs, and do what is considered 'right'. This latter perspective points to the influence of certain Christian ideals as contributing to a sense of not being 'good enough', that I explored in chapter 1.

A thought that struck me after talking to Jeremy, was that the way Suzanne was living out her faith, seemed very close to what Jeremy was describing as the Aquinas' way of perceiving understanding as the most essential factor for action. Suzanne was always seeking a personal understanding of what the word of God meant to her, and for the way she lived her life, and this understanding ignited her action. To me Suzanne exemplified the process involved in embodying the word of God, the formation of embodied faith, and this recognition also made me think that Suzanne and Jeremy, who were perhaps perceived as representatives of different spiritual approaches within the church in Green Forest, were closer to each other than they might have realized. I find it interesting that through Jeremy's words, it was Suzanne who stood out to me.

Embodiment and communality

The concept of embodiment and experience seemed to have a slightly different significance for Jeremy than for me, in his case more directed towards the collective body rather than the individual:

J:(...) I think my other kind of random and general observation about embodiment is that, as we think about embodiment and experience, we have to find a way of doing so that takes seriously the importance of The Body, the church body, so community. Because there's quite a lot of philosophy and theology around that is focusing very much on experience, but it's very much an individual thing, and that seems to be quite problematic as well. And partly I like the way embodiment – because it brings out physicality, also brings out the communality as well; the fact that we are part of the body, the church body, social body, in terms of society, which has other parts with which we interact and outside of which we're not...we're not independent. (...) I think it's a really rich kind of theological idea, because it just helps us to bring out lots of things

that are really important: To connect to the world, to think about the integration between thought and action, to think about the kind of communal nature of church life.

Jeremy was clearly more concerned with the communal body of the church, than the experiential aspects of the individual body, which he found problematic. The purpose of experience and embodiment was to be found in their application to the whole community. His moving of the focus from the individual to the collective meaning of embodiment, drew my mind to the discussions of the differences between people in church in terms of spirituality, which I had become aware of through the journeying to Marsham Street, as well as from conversations and interviews with people. Yet everyone also highlighted the essence of community that they felt, through their sense of belonging to the church, despite the differences. Jeremy embraced a perception of community, which *emphasized* difference as a constituent part of a true Christian fellowship:

R: Although I'm not writing about 'church' – I'm not focusing on the fact that this is a corps within the SA – it has struck me that people are quite different in Green Forest, I mean, you meet all... Not all sorts of people, but you know, people are strong in their opinions and in their beliefs and in the special or particular journeys that they're on and the routes that they take. But there is still a strong sense of community, and that's amazing, I find.

J: Yeah, I think that's true.

R: And people look to involve each other, and to be involved in each other's lives. Someone once said to me that where people are very different in their thoughts on faith, the sense of community will [weaken], that you can't have real fellowship. I think you have that problem if you have a narrow definition of fellowship. Fellowship could maybe be seen as something felt, and maybe you feel fellowship or sense it more if you're with someone who's similar to you, but that doesn't mean to say that when it doesn't feel like that, it's not fellowship.

J: Yeah, that's helpful, I think on a note I certainly agree, I think genuine fellowship or generally ideas of the Body of Christ has to involve difference, because if you get together a group of people who are all the same, then this isn't the church.

R: No, because the church consists of different needs.

J: Yeah, and there has to be those differences kind of working together and connecting together if you've got genuine fellowship. But, yeah, definitely there has to be difference. The most helpful thing I ever read on this was a book by a guy called Colin Gunton, "The one, the three and the many", and in that book he basically talked about... Say in the Western culture you've got this struggle between the one and the many, you know the kind of needs of the individual and the needs of the community, the desire to have some sense of unity but also the desire to kind of have a sense of difference. And we're always struggling to hold the two of them together, and something like multiculturalism is a good example of this as well: Multiculturalism is trying to hold the two together, but always struggling to do so. And Gunton's argument is that both are important, the one and the many, right, and they have to be held together, and they're held together with the theoretical help of the doctrine of the Trinity. Within the Trinity, you have the three in one, and you don't have one without the others, so there's interdependence between them, but you have genuine difference between Father, Son and Spirit, who live for and give to one another. (...) If you kind of can map all of that stuff back onto life at church, yeah, I think there is a thing, I mean, not totally unique, but quite unusual about Green Forest, because I think we have just some really different people, really, really, different people, and yet there's something that connects them all together. And that something is wrapped up with the kind of story of God that they've been through and that they're believing that they're involved in. We see it in different ways; sometimes you're speaking to different people at church. But occasionally, in the last few years, we've done a panel discussion at church on Sundays, which have always been quite fun; to take a semi controversial topic, invite a three or four people from church and then someone, I find, quite a few of them have chaired this kind of discussion between different perspectives. And for me it's kind of been a very interesting way of just highlighting the differences you've got between different people at church. I think you've got a couple of ultra-charismatics and then you've got other people that are pretty sceptical as to whether there's any miracles at all, and somehow, they're going to have a conversation together. And that's quite exciting I think, I mean, goodness me, how we manage to hold it together, but somehow, we do manage to hold people together, which is a good thing.

Jeremy is expressing a very different perspective here on the panel discussions, than for instance Lizzie did when she referred to these in the previous chapter. She wanted church services to nurture her inner, spiritual life, and meet her needs for practical teaching on the Spirit, which the panel discussions did not do for her. Jeremy clearly sees the panel discussions in light of a perspective that wants to show and embrace difference of perspective and opinion. In this regard he was saying the same as Clive, who had stated earlier that one of the visions of church was to celebrate difference. The panel discussions can be seen as an expression of this vision. Jeremy was thus also expressing that he was concerned with the life of the fellowship, and the importance of holding it together despite personal differences between its members. His perspective was very likely an expression of his position as part of the leadership team, which Clive was a part of as well, although it was also clearly a part of Jeremy's own personal interest and preference: To come across 'different' thoughts that would make him see something in a new way, Jeremy said he found inspiring. The concept of difference seemed a source of inspiration and stimulation for further reflection, and the existence of difference between others and himself did not pose any threat to his sense of being. Caroline had expressed a similar perspective to Jeremy and had stated that diversity and difference of opinion would be positive for the formation of faith, because it would encourage one to stretch and encounter new thoughts. Upon recalling the interview that I had with Jessie, which I presented in chapter 6, I note that not everybody responded to difference in this way. Jessie for instance responded by feeling guilty when she encountered a perspective that she had not thought about before, and a new idea thus first constituted a threat to her sense of self.

During this stage of my fieldwork, one question emerging to me, concerned the issue of how so many different people could function together as a whole and feel content about the part they were playing within the community, and the opportunities they felt they had to pursue the type of spirituality that best expressed who they were. I already knew from previous conversations and interviews that functioning within the fellowship was a problematic issue for some, but so far, no one had expressed that these feelings outweighed the sense of belonging to the community³². The question remained; how could people or the church deal with the reality of different needs in a real, practical way, and not just academically? There was a growing

³² In the years after I left Green Forest, a few families chose to leave the church, and started attending other local churches, where they felt they had better opportunity to pursue their vocation and spirituality more holistically.

awareness in me that the concept of difference and the reality of living with difference were two separate issues, not at all simple to handle for a Christian fellowship.

The presence of God as moments of consciousness

I found what Jeremy was saying refreshing and interesting, and I enjoyed the depth of theological thinking that he invited. Interviewing Jeremy gave me a chance to get a better understanding of the presence of God from a different theological point of view than what I was accustomed to hearing. After speaking to both Caroline and Jeremy, who had reflected upon the presence of God in more theologically informed ways than most, I realized that relating to God and experiencing God as present in life does not involve emotion and sensory experience to the same extent for everyone. At the same time, I felt that I did not get a clear picture of how Jeremy specifically related to his faith in his daily life, outside of his reflection upon it, and this sense inspired me to try to bring the focus from his reflections upon faith, to an account of his experience of faith:

R: When you go about your faith in your daily life, what intrigues you the most, or when do you feel your faith the most – or is that the wrong way of looking at it [for you]? Because you know, in a busy life, you haven't got time necessarily to sit down and pray and to be in a meditative kind of phase where you feel that you receive in a sense; you haven't got time to seek to receive. And we have this idea of ourselves as Christians and how we should live our life and how we should commune with God, and then when we haven't got time for that, you know, sometimes you might feel guilty about it. But like you say, the mind is important as well, so I'm just thinking that maybe in our [Western] culture we put a lot upon ourselves and allow guilt to come in, whereas faith isn't always about feeling, I mean God is obviously present whether you feel that he is present or not.

J: Yeah, I think sometimes the language of feeling that we employ is just... there's nothing wrong with it, but it's just quite constricted. I tend to think that what we're looking for in faith is a way really of linking everything we're involved in, everything we're about, with God, so that everything, every single part of our lives can be connected to God in some form. And for that to work there needs to be, I guess, some level of consciousness about the fact that that's what's taking place. Because otherwise,

if in a sense God becomes everything in your life, then he can very easily become nothing and you just kind of forget all about him. So, what makes that difference between sort of faith being something real and meaningful, and something that isn't is, I think, those kind of conscious moments of connection where we see that what we're doing and what we're involved in, what we're thinking about, what we're committed to, and what's taking up our time and our attention, is related to God, and that becomes a conscious thing. And that kind of conscious awareness, not of God in an abstract way, but that what we're involved in is related to the triune life of the Father, Son and the Spirit, these kinds of conscious moments I think can come in a lot of different forms. Feeling is one of those forms, like when you kind of feel close to God and you feel that this is what God wants us to do, you feel excited about God or whatever else. So, there's nothing wrong with that feeling, but it's just perhaps a little constricted or narrow because there's other categories that you might use to describe your kind of conscious awareness of God. There might be more aesthetic categories for some people, like a sense of beauty. Some people think very much in terms of practical action, when they're doing something, this is how they're meeting God. Others might think on, I guess what we might call a sort of more intellectual level, and you know when they're working through some kind of mathematical problem is how they connect with God. So, I think there's nothing wrong with the feeling, it's just that to try and describe our culture's awareness of God purely on an emotional level, I think constricts the life of faith too much. Because there's just a lot of things that don't fit into that, and for some people, like myself – I'm not a very emotional person, obviously all of us have emotions, but I'm not hugely emotional. So, I don't really have very, very strong emotions about lots of things, most of the time. So, yeah, if my understanding of faith was that unless I was kind of feeling very close to God – if I thought, unless I feel close to God, I have no faith, then I'd be in real trouble, right, because I just don't really think in that way. I tend to think in other ways, so I think it's worth trying to expand what we mean when we talk about feelings, so that it's not purely an emotional activity or exercise, because I think it just doesn't work for lots of people and it just misses out on other ways in which we connect with God. So, I would tend to think that we're looking for some level of conscious awareness about God, and it's not that our faith is wrapped up in those conscious moments, it's that our faith is wrapped up in everything. But the conscious moments are things that help us remember that, you know, when you washed the dishes yesterday, somehow this

has got to be connected to a life of faith. Because if it's not, then you'll start to divide things out and take some bits of your life and not others, and that just gets you into a sort of trouble. So, we don't want to go there. So, we want something where everything in our lives is linked back to God in some form, the exciting things, and the unexciting things. For that to be so, I think there's just got to be, you know, moments, times, periods of kind of conscious connection. But we shouldn't ever be saying that those conscious moments are the moments when we're close to God, just they're the moments when we're helped see how everything what we do connects back to God. That's how I tend to think about it.

R: Yeah, I know, I totally agree, that's wonderful.

J: And within that language, there is kind of mapped prayer on to that as well, so I think that everything we do can be an act of prayer, but everything you do will only be an act of prayer if there's some conscious times when you're thinking a bit more consciously about your communication with God. Now that might be that you take some time to go and pray at some kind of function or it might be that you're involved in a liturgy at church, where that's a kind of a moment where you pray as you do at other times, but in a more formalised sense and that can help you remember. But actually, all those thoughts that are part of the day are wrapped up prayers to God, and that's a way I find it helpful to think about how prayer is working in my life, [to] see everything in my life as an act of prayer. But in moments...there needs to be some kind of more formal or more conscious points at which I'm acknowledging that that's what I'm doing, otherwise it just kind of dissipates and you know, everything being an act of prayer it becomes nothing really as an act of prayer.

As Jeremy had expressed earlier, he found a focus on individual spiritual experience problematic, a point of view that was visible to me through the fact that he did not talk about himself and how he was feeling. In this part of the interview, he clarified his perspective upon the language of feeling, stating that he found it quite constricting as a representation of a person's faith. Sharing that he himself was not a very emotional person, it made sense that his perspective on, as well as experience of faith, encompassed different expressions of faith. Jeremy acknowledged and referred to feeling as a form of conscious awareness of God: *And that kind of conscious awareness, not of God in an abstract way, but that what we're involved in is related to the triune life of the Father, Son and the Spirit, these kinds of conscious moments*

I think can come in a lot of different forms. Feeling is one of those forms. What I understand Jeremy to be talking about through the concept of conscious awareness of God, is different ways of relating to God; *conscious awareness, not of God in an abstract way* – which indicates that Jeremy is perceiving that having a conscious awareness of God is a way of relating to God in a personal manner. From how Jeremy described himself, it became clear that for him theological reflection constituted an important way of becoming aware of and relating to God in his everyday life, where the moments of conscious awareness of God emphasized that his life was connected to God. In the same vein he mentioned *other categories that you might use to describe your kind of conscious awareness of God*. A few of these other categories that Jeremy mentioned was the aesthetic, as in a sense of beauty, or practical action, which he said for some people represents where they meet God, or for some, which I think included himself, a more intellectual level. All these categories were described by Jeremy as different means of connecting with God. It seems like the concept of a conscious awareness of God was Jeremy's way of talking about the presence of God. Again, his choice of language emphasized his preference for intellectual categories, rather than emotional ones. Although as he said, one cannot be consciously aware of God all the time, it is the fact that one has moments where one does become aware of God, through different means or categories, that shows that one's life is concerned with the relationship with God, and that one is connected to God. As Caroline did, he expressed the perspective that we're not closer to God in the moments of conscious awareness of God, *just they're the moments when we're helped see how everything what we do connects back to God*.

As I have worked on Jeremy's interview to integrate it into this chapter, I feel that I understand better another aspect of the confusion that I felt concerning my own experiences of seeking the presence of God at Marsham Street. I realized after talking to Jeremy that part of the reason for why I felt unsettled about my desire to feel close to God, was related to the distinction between 'spiritual' experiences and 'ordinary' experiences that I indirectly seemed to be making. What Jeremy expressed was a perspective that did not seek to make this distinction, but which rather enabled the all-encompassing view that everything and nothing can be of spiritual content depending on the extent to which your awareness embraces different experiences as connected to God. There is, however, also an unsettling aspect within this perception to me, which seems to suggest that spiritual life would thus be founded upon the abilities of one's own awareness, rather than *that which makes one aware* in the first place, i.e.,

God. Where does God fit in if my relationship with God relies on my remembrance of being aware of him? This was a question that played on my mind in the aftermath of the interview.

Experiencing God through mediation

As the interviews in this chapter show, there were other ways of describing and conceptualizing the presence of God in everyday life, than the ones related to emotion. I was used to thinking about the presence of God as moments where God felt real and present, and which some people had expressed a longing for, because such moments stirred a sense of God being near and communicating. Such experiences, often related to the Holy Spirit revealing himself through the gifts of the Spirit, were aspects of the Christian life that were often expressed and negotiated by the speakers at Marsham Street. I was in a form of discussion with myself about what to make of the experiences of the presence of God that I had myself had there, like the experiences of falling over in the Spirit. I was wondering whether I could trust that these experiences were of God, or if on some level I had ‘created’ them myself, through my own emotional engagement. This inner debate led me to bring up issues, which sometimes – I now see – related to the personal questions I had concerning Marsham Street and experiences that I’d had there, in some of the interviews I conducted. Jeremy was no exception, and not giving up the attempt at getting a clearer insight into Jeremy’s experience of faith, my questions kept circling around the subject of emotions and experience:

R: So how do you feel that God speaks to you?

J: Well, I have a kind of a very strong theology of mediation, by which I mean, I don’t think we interact with God immediately, directly; it’s always through something. I think even if we think we hear the voice of God, this is God speaking through language, through a particular language system that holds a set of assumptions and thoughts and everything else. And so, I think this kind of carries through everything, you don’t experience God directly; we experience God through the world, through people, through things, through... I mean, even when Moses kind of sees God as a burning bush, it’s a seeing through a figurative object and so for me that’s kind of strong to my theology of everything really, which is that we don’t experience God immediately, but we experience God mediately. And because of that, when I think about how do I hear from God, I don’t ever expect to hear from God directly, because I don’t think such a

thing is possible. I mean, I don't really think I hear God speaking in a voice, but even if he did, I don't think that is direct anyway, because I think it's still shaped by expectation and by language. So, yeah, I hear God through things I read, people I meet, experiences that take place, events that happen in the world.

R: But I guess that could...that's the way of talking about it, and, you know, whenever people would say 'God said this and this to me, God's done that and he's shown me that', that would always be through some form of media. So, I'm not asking when does he directly speak to you, but what are the media – because I think this is very linked to who we are and our personalities and what inspires us. And I feel inspired when I write, it's like... that's one area for me that I can go into and where significance stands out in a different way than...

J: Yeah, I guess for me, some history is wrapped up with what I read, so that means that text is important, and the arts are important, but particularly texts. And I'm not just thinking about the Bible, but literature and writing. Also, conversation and dialogue is important, I think, about how I hear God (...) I think conversation is crucial to how I understand. And in that respect, I'm really very influenced by the German philosopher Hans Gadamer, who's kind of got this idea of interpretation, where he says that interpretation is always like a conversation and meaning is a conversation. So, meaning is not just something I have but you don't understand or that you have and I try to discern – so he's saying that meaning is an event, it happens as we talk.

R: That would be in line with what I've read and kind of feeds into what I'm doing.

J: Yeah. And so, to bring all of that back to the question you asked me 'How do I hear God?' Well, I hear God in conversation with others as we interact.

R: And in what sense do you mean that? I mean, do you see something God given in it, or is it because within a conversation something suddenly stands out to you and brings light to one of God's characters (characteristics) or do you think that's because God's character is within conversation, I mean, if I make myself clear...?

J: Yeah, I think both actually... I mean sure, practically, you have a conversation with someone who says something you haven't thought about before, and so, that's certainly true. But I also think that that active conversation is itself, a kind of, always a sacramental or divine act, because this is what is taking place within the triune life of God, a conversation between Father, Son and Spirit. Robert Jenson is very helpful on this, where he talks about that the starting point for everything is Father, Son and Spirit,

in conversation, and they invite others into that conversation. They invite the whole world into that conversation. So, it means that even on the simple level, when I'm in a conversation or part of a conversation, then there's something in this act itself that is sacramental. It's not that God is that conversation, but this conversation reminds me of what is the very, very heart of God, which is an interaction between others – Father, Son and Spirit who invites us in. So, it's both, I think, when I'm in conversations with people, yeah, people tell me things about the character of God that I hadn't thought about, but also the conversation itself is a reminder of just something about who God is, so both.

R: So, conversation is very meaningful to you.

J: Yeah.

R: So, when people say that they've been spontaneously healed, or you know, like the concepts of being baptised in the Spirit [falling over in the Spirit] and they have a strong sense of God's presence and that's the language, which is being used anyway, and people fall over... I mean, would you rephrase that in a different way since when you use the word spontaneous it seems to signify something, which is immediate and direct. So how would you talk about that?

J: Yeah, I guess I would rephrase it. But obviously I always want to be open to the supernatural because it seems to me theoretically there's no problem with the supernatural, because if God's God then stuff can happen, so that's right. So, yeah, I don't think anything is ever immediate. So even if someone is ill, and someone lays hands on them and they get better, there is always levels of mediation in this; from very practically that the hands are being laid, that the person hasn't been healed for life, because they're still gonna die one day, so the healing is partial, it takes human form, it's always mediated.

R: So, you would say that anything that God does in the world is related to the specific contexts, which involve specific people with specific belief systems, or forms of faith and types of language, so it will fit in a formula in a sense... Not formula, but you can see why people are being touched in a specific way and in a specific place and differently in a different place.

J: Yeah, I think so, and I think that's why certain kind of more charismatic manifestations of faith are particular to a certain tradition, I mean, like in the revivalist tradition you are far more likely to have lots of people coming together for a big

meeting, getting very excited and falling over. I don't think this is kind of pure God, I also don't think that they're making it all up. I think there is often something of God here, which is great, but it's all mediated and it takes a particular form, it's shaped by expectations and experience. If I'd gathered together 50 charismatics and brought them to a room, and 50 high Anglicans and brought them to a room, I know who is more likely to fall over. – And it's not because they're fabricating it, but it's because I think God is often doing something, and that's great, but that God's activity is always mediated through our concepts, our language, our expectations, what we inherit.

R: Yeah, so charismatics would have a different type of openness to that.

J: Yes. But there's different types of openness, but there's also a different form that the openness might express itself through. So, if you're a high Anglican you'll expect to meet with God like a high Anglican would expect to meet with God, but if you're a charismatic your expectation is that your meeting with God is likely to involve physical manifestations and so, you know, if you're expecting it, that's more likely to happen. So, it's not that charismatics are more open to God, nor less open to God, I mean they're just open to God in a particular form and that's how God's activity, I think, tends to then manifest itself.

R: So, it's not really...I mean these things are often what has been characterised as either right or wrong, or true or false.

J: Yeah, and I think neither of the couple work, 'cause you can't kind of write off all of this stuff. Probably often, you know, God has been doing stuff, and that's great, but it's not... I mean, I suppose I remember thinking about it when...is it in Pensacola where people started kind of having gold teeth?

R: Yeah, yeah.

J: So, this is kind of...or saying they did, I mean, lets presume that some did, then, I mean, again, we wouldn't surely want to say that God's chief response to a world where thousands of people starve to death, is to give some people gold teeth, because that would be ridiculous. But nor do I want to say that they're all making it up, so I think at some level God's activity would be mediated, so we're shaped by expectations and culture and context allows us to say that, you know, there is something of God in this, but it's not kind of pure God, immediately given.

Jeremy's response to my question of how he experienced that God spoke to him, introduced me to his perspective on a theology of mediation, which focused on the different media through which one may feel or conceive that God is speaking to one. The point Jeremy was making, was that he did not consider that God spoke directly or immediately to people, but indirectly through various modes or agents, like language, people, things, the world. In this sense, his perspective seems to be somewhat in tune with the philosophy of Levinas, who said that we cannot see God, but we can glimpse his trace, his presence, in another's face, another's life: "Divinity is a Third Person beyond being, which cannot be defined by Itself, nor covered up or uncovered; it can only be glimpsed in His profile, left by his *trace* in the face of *the other*" (Levinas 1996:72).

Specifying the media through which he would hear God, Jeremy conceded that *yeah, I hear God through things I read, people I meet, experiences that take place, events that happen in the world*. Areas that he mentioned as significant for his way of relating to and hearing God, were connected to language, communication and meaning, texts and literature, writing, the arts, and conversation and dialogue. Of course, one can argue that everything in life is somehow related to language as the creation of meaning. For Jeremy however, more than anyone else that I met, the various aspects of language were a major part of, and an object for his conscious awareness and reflection, and stimulated him to keep asking questions and pondering upon various aspects of faith through the application of theological thought. In this respect, when he related to the charismatic tradition, he considered the particular form these meetings would normally take, as mediated and shaped by specific expectations and experiences found within certain cultural contexts: *God's activity is always mediated through our concepts, our language, our expectations, what we inherit*. Within this perspective, the most important question was not whether something was right or wrong, true, or false, but the perception that God meets us where we are at, in between pure God and what is purely human. His questioning of certain events, like the revival in Pensacola where people claimed to have got gold teeth, happened on the basis of a wider perspective, related to the image of God that one wanted to sustain, and how such a happening or miracle would affect the image of God, in a world where thousands of people starve to death. I recognize this questioning also from the conversation that Estelle referred to between herself and Clive in chapter 4, when they talked about the weight loss miracle at Marsham Street. Clive expressed the perspective that surely God would not be interested in performing a weight loss miracle when there are children in Africa starving. What

is certain, is that neither Jeremy nor Clive would appear to be interested in appealing to God for either gold teeth or a weight loss.

The body as subject and object

Throughout the interview, Jeremy shared his interest and ability to question concepts and phrases commonly used within the Christian culture, demonstrating a spiritual orientation drawing on intellectual inquiries. Through Jeremy's perspectives, I was allowed a glimpse into a different perception of the Christian life, and an approach where academic reflection and understanding played a great part. Having been taken into the 'depths' of academic thinking and relating to faith, I had realized and felt, that for at least Jeremy and Caroline, their academic thinking represented a vibrant and inspiring way of relating to faith. On the other hand, this engaged way of relating to academic reflection did not seem to be the experience for everyone, like Lizzie, who missed the charismatic influence that she felt had been stronger within church earlier, and who found church at that present moment as being too academic. Being an academic myself, I found the perspectives that Jeremy presented highly interesting, and I found his reflections quite captivating on a theological level, although I also felt uncertain about how to unite theology and experience through his perspectives.

One of the conclusions concerning the perception of the presence of God that I drew from Jeremy, was that an experience imbued with a sense of God's presence was a combined experience of person and God, where form and content related to a person's expectations, culture, and context. Still, this perspective did not entirely satisfy my need to understand the essence of an experience – or of one particular means of mediation for that sake – from the perspective of the experiencing subject – unabridged. Neither did it give me the impression that God was playing a significant part for the body involved. I did not feel that I disagreed with Jeremy's perspective, but in terms of experience, I think I felt that the strong reliance on person, context, and culture as the determining aspects, or as the explanatory model, of the form and content of an encounter with God, seemed to pluck God out of the equation. Somehow, the 'mystery' vanished with this perspective for me; when everything could be determined and foreseen based on culture, what was left to be expected from God? In this perspective, God to me seemed just another agent of culture and custom. Where was the God of the extraordinary, the God of unfathomable depths, the God for whom everything was possible, and the God of

whom great things were to be expected, in this perspective? God as the ‘orchestrator’ of the unexpected seemed left in the shadows and not talked about.

Looking back at this interview in the process of writing where I find myself now, I understand that it was the context of not being entirely able to grasp the perspective of the experiencing subject, that caused me to feel a sense of confusion and ‘dissatisfaction’ in relation to the perspectives that I had been presented with. Overall, I felt that I agreed with Jeremy’s perspectives, yet I felt a little bewildered at the same time, but I could not figure out why. I now perceive that the ‘unsettledness’ I was feeling related to the fact that although we agreed, we came to the same issues from different angles, and gazed from different perspectives. One of my own deepest interests concerning faith was directed towards the personal impact or fruit of spiritual experience for the formation of faith. I was interested in spiritual experience as a phenomenon in itself; I wanted to see it from the ‘inside’, from the perspective of the body. This perspective differed from Jeremy’s perspective, in terms of his being more analytically distanced. Through a point made by Elisabeth Grosz, I realized that my problem with the perspective outlined above was linked to the methodology of how to relate to the experience of being in the world. Grosz’s text reminded me of the difference between relating to the body as an object and the body as a subject. The body seen or related to as an object, i.e., ‘being-for-itself’, is ‘transcendent’, or asserts a priority, over the body seen as subject, i.e., ‘being-in-itself’, or the immanent body. Grosz points to Sartre as a representative of this perspective, in his giving precedence to consciousness and reflective self-consciousness. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an object, but the condition and context through which one is able to have a relation to objects. Grosz points to the body in Merleau-Ponty’s view as both immanent and transcendent: “Insofar as I live the body, it is a phenomenon experienced by me and thus provides the very horizon and perspectival point which places me in the world and makes relations between me, other objects, and other subjects possible. It is the body as I live it, as I experience it, and as it shapes my experience that Merleau-Ponty wishes to elucidate. Phenomenological reflection on the body reveals that I am not a subject separated from the world or from others, a mind somehow cut off from matter and space. (...) I am not able to stand back from the body and its experiences to reflect on them; this withdrawal is unable to grasp my body-as-it-is-lived-by-me” (Elisabeth Grosz 1994: 86), Grosz says. It was not that I disagreed with Jeremy, but more that this particular form of reflection that related to the person, the subject, the body, in a more objective way, from a distance, disabled my grasp of my body-as-it-is-lived-by-me, which was, ultimately, my primary ambition. Although I at first had felt a little uncertain about how to

express what I was writing about, because I had lost my own firm grasp of direction, the interview with Jeremy, due to his clear perspective on his own theology put me back on track, by holding up both our similarities and our differences, helping me to re-embrace my desire to explore faith as embodied knowledge.

In terms of a perspective on the church in Green Forest, the interviews with Caroline and Jeremy strengthened my awareness and acceptance of the many ways of seeing, experiencing, and talking about the presence of God that existed among people who shared a Christian faith and orientation. At the same time, I had recognized that a reflection upon spiritual experience that sought to understand these experiences in terms of context and culture did not satisfy my need to understand, through a phenomenological approach, the process and formation of faith as embodied knowledge to different individuals. Through this recognition, I think I was also more able to understand that what people might have been missing when they described church as dry, was an approach that was personally engaging and stimulating to them, making them more able to grasp and sense their body as lived, and through the grasp of their lived body, their lived experience, come closer to God. In this perspective, I see the seeking of an experience of the presence of God in a new light, where the ambition is not to have big, nice, fuzzy feelings for its own sake, but to experience personal engagement, becoming spiritually awakened, relating to the condition and context which the individual body constitutes. From this point of view, I cannot see the seeking of the presence of God even through the focus on emotion at Marsham Street as mere self-indulgent spirituality, but as the expression of personal preference related to the type of person one is. The more urgent question emerging from this chapter, relates to how such deeply different ways of approaching and experiencing faith that I had become aware of, would influence the fellowship. This question was ultimately at the heart of the concern for my participants as well.

Searching for transformation

I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance, and that you cannot tolerate evil men (...); and you have perseverance and have endured for My name's sake, and have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have left your first love.

Revelation 2:2-4

In the middle of October, the Church in Green Forest presented the first of several letters from previous members of the church. These members had been asked to send a letter to church where they would say something about the image of church that they were left with now that they were distanced from it. The letter reading was part of a new approach from church where the leadership team seemed to attempt to get a more external image of the church, as well as relating to a shared past. The first letter was from someone called Andrea Briggs and her family, who had been living in Green Forest for a couple of years, and then moved away last year. I had never met them, but I had heard mention of them from some of their closest friends in church, who still missed them. The letter referred to a recent visit to the church in Green Forest, where the service did not meet all their expectations, accompanied by the comment that the church was not perfect in every way. However, to the family who had moved away, the aspect of fellowship was standing out as the most essential characteristic of the church. The conclusion to the letter was that the services or church Sundays might not constitute the most special element of Green Forest, but rather the friendships built through the frame of the church fellowship. The assessment of church made in the letter felt like a confirmation to me of the impression of church being a bit dry, or somehow spiritually lacking. Of course, I did not know if the letter writers referred to a spiritual dryness as the condition for imperfection, but those were the associations coming to my mind. Judging from the descriptions offered by the letter writers, as well as by many of the present church members, the church in Green Forest seemed however, a very different church to me now, from the one that I had left after my first fieldwork.

This church, which when I left it last had seemed so expressive about its vision to be a church and fellowship focused on its members and the community it was a part of, full of energy to act out the vision and full of expectation towards what God could do, had metaphorically been shot at. Like a bird with bleeding wings, it lay on the ground, wounded.

This chapter gives particular focus to the church in Green Forest concerning what the leadership was trying to do, through the new vision of the church. As part of this vision, different activities, and contexts for coming together were set up, such as mission groups and faith formation groups, the first focusing on ‘reaching out’ to other people, the latter on ‘reaching in’, i.e., focusing on personal spiritual growth. Through the interviews I was conducting at this period, I learned that people responded differently to these new strategies, where some were positive, and others more hesitant towards them. In this chapter I reflect more upon what I would define as the ‘action-based’ approach of church, which I see the mission groups as an expression of: A spiritual orientation influenced by the perspective of church as moving forward through social action to change the world. Not at all a foreign perspective within a church belonging to the Salvation Army, but as we will see, a debated one. The idea of ‘the first love’ may be seen as a reflection of the desire of the leadership to help people find their way back to a place of ‘living faith’ again, facilitated in part through the establishing of the faith formation groups. I start the chapter by sharing a service that took place in Green Forest, as well as a few meetings from a church retreat during the same period, and begin my reflections concerning church based on my own sense of being present at these meetings, and what I felt was communicated to me through my body.

A conscious moment of awareness

At the end of one of the services in Green Forest in October, the congregation was invited to a moment of reflection and prayer. There was going to be a love feast, a symbol of remembrance of the last supper and the breaking of bread by Christ before his crucifixion. A small table covered by a purple cloth was set up at the front. On top of the table, stacks of white plastic cups, juice cartons, and a basket of torn pieces of bread were placed. The blackcurrant juice symbolized the blood of Christ, and the bread symbolized the body of Christ. As soft classical music played in the background, people wandered towards the front to help themselves to juice and bread. I felt a faint longing for the weight and solemnity of the tradition related to this ritual in my home church in Norway. The equivalence to the love feast in the Lutheran church

is the Holy Communion, a sacrament for which one gathers and kneels around the altar, is offered bread and wine by the priest, along with the words, “This is the body of Christ” and “This is the blood of Christ”. I remembered the sense of the presence of Christ that the Lutheran ceremony of communion often inspired in me and pondered whether this sense of presence related to the perception that the bread given is seen as the actual body of Christ and the wine as the actual blood of Christ; there is a real presence of Christ believed to be the essence of the ritual in Lutheran terms. The solemnity of this ritual at home, offered a moment of reflection and awareness of Christ in me. Now I left my seat and joined in the movement towards the front to take part in the ritual in Green Forest. Despite my longing for the traditions of my own church, I felt, perhaps a little to my surprise, solemnity about the love feast and I felt that there was a sense of presence about the actual breaking of the bread even without the ceremony with which I was most familiar. I was experiencing a form of conscious awareness, to use Jeremy’s terms, which connected with me, and confirmed me in the surroundings at that present moment.

Having returned to my seat after the love feast, not expecting anything more, I suddenly felt as if God was speaking to me: As I sat in the silence, I had a sense of being told that I was a rightful part, that I was a part of it all as well. I felt that I fitted in, as if I were meant to be a part of the Christian fellowship there. It was a good feeling, which kind of grounded me, made me experience a sense of belonging, and took away as well as made me aware of a sense of being an outsider, being someone who did not really belong there, only visiting for a time, which I had been carrying with me. The sense of being a rightful part was one that instilled in me that despite the characteristics of the outsider, I belonged: At that moment at least, my sense of belonging felt stronger than my sense of estrangement.

Later, as I have reflected upon this episode whilst writing it into my thesis, I find it interesting that this latter sense of belonging, which related to an awareness of God and the feeling that God was telling me that I belonged, seemed to happen at a point when I did not expect to belong. I had felt emotionally present during the breaking of bread, but I had also been longing for something else, a different form of ceremony, which I related to a stronger sense of presence, even stronger feelings, and in which I expected I would have a stronger sense of belonging, due to my theological adherence and previous experience. Yet, in the midst of mildly conflicting emotions, suddenly becoming aware of a deeper sense of feeling like an outsider, I had felt that I belonged even here, independently of my personal preferences, sensitivity and theology. The sense of belonging that I came to feel in this situation was not

founded primarily upon a preceding sense of belonging, brought on by emotional resonance with my surroundings and the others there, but by an experience of God being present *with* me. The incident let me glimpse a God independent of place and atmosphere for speaking, and independent of my seeking, for expressing his care and direction. I got the feeling that it was rather I, who had expressed a dependency on place and atmosphere for hearing.

Allowing myself as the anthropologist to think freely, from the perspective of the Christian, the incident of feeling God telling me that I belonged, makes me reflect upon the interview I had with Jeremy. Our discussions had strengthened my understanding of how our different personalities and preferences constitutes our different orientations towards God and the spiritual life. My view on spirituality was from the perspective of the individual's way of seeking God. Jeremy, on the other hand, had spoken about what types of encounters with God are most likely to happen in different kinds of churches and cultural contexts, more from the perspective of the encounter itself. We had both, in different ways, foreseen what was expected to happen through people's seeking of God, based upon an understanding of context; me regarding personal experience, Jeremy regarding the expression of God, both in relation to an expectation emanating from the context in question. The experience in the church service I described above, led me to enquire more deeply into the domain of my emotions in connection with my spirituality. I recognized that my definition of a spiritual experience to me was closely related to the stirring of emotion that I expected would shed a form of revelatory light upon my being and my existence, in a particular moment. The sense of belonging that I felt in the service in Green Forest, induced an understanding of God's independence of place and atmosphere, expectation, and context. This recognition added the element that I had felt was missing from the perspectives on seeking God discussed in the previous chapter, where the experience of the presence of God or a conscious awareness of him seemed dependent on a conscious effort to see and hear him. Not negating this perspective, the experience in church became testimony of God being at the centre of attention, being the one acting first: not him responding to me, but me responding to him. Perhaps it is easy, within the Christian church, to hold up the perception that our relationship with God depends on the actions that we take, whereas the perspective of God acting first becomes secondary, making God himself less important in the equation than our own efforts. The assessments of both Judith and Jeremy of the evangelical church as sometimes too concerned with right and wrong, with action and program, comes to mind. This conversation regarding the difference or relationship between our actions and the interventions

of God, will continue throughout this chapter, through the reflections of several members of the church.

Church retreat at Sunbury

A specific context stirring discussions concerning the place of action and program within the church in Green Forest, happened at a church retreat in the beginning of November, held at a conference centre called Sunbury. I had been to a retreat there with the church in Green Forest during my first fieldwork, and this former retreat, which lasted two days, I had greatly enjoyed. As the term retreat indicates, time was given to the private space of personal reflection and seeking of God. The recent retreat, which was a day retreat, turned out to be different in form and content to the one I had been to before, and both the retreat's focus, as well as some people's reactions to the retreat in retrospect, were informative for me in terms of understanding the vision of the church, and people's positioning towards this vision. I refer from my fieldnotes:

The speaker for the day retreat was Steve Holmes, a theology teacher at a university as well as a church pastor. Holmes speech or seminar was a part of the program for the day, with three sessions, and the theme was hope. He started talking about the times of the Enlightenment, and how hope was affluent in those days: There was hope in what man could do. Via power point, he showed expressions of this magnificent hope through art and music, poetry, and pieces of history. His talk was very interesting, he was a good presenter, almost shouting out parts of his talk in a way that made the speech feel like a performance, adding little funny remarks here and there. I had never thought of the history since the Enlightenment in this way, or the sense of hope that must have been pervading among people. This period was the time for the founding of the Bible societies and the great missionary movements, also hugely invested with hope, Holmes said. In the second session of his speech, Holmes moved on from the Enlightenment into Modernity or even Post-modernity. Presented with the same type of enthusiasm and performance as the previous speak, the ambiance was somewhat opposite to the first one, and hope had been swapped with a sense of depression: So, what if man had the power to invent all sorts of technical stuff, where did it really get us? There were wars with millions of injured due to new types of war equipment. The view on reality started to become more fragmented, and the loss of hope was inevitable. Everybody lost hope in the 'great, big things', even Christians started to believe that they could not make a difference anyway. The hope was no longer to save

man in general, but to save at least oneself. Referring to Lyotard, Holmes said that the definition of Post-modernity is the rejection of the big story. There are only loads of small stories. Holmes went on to describe a sense of underlying doom in this era, which, he said, Munch had ingeniously managed to express through some of his paintings, *The Scream* in particular.

In the third and concluding part of his speech, Holmes talked about the hope that we have in Christ, and that it is important to see that we have a greater hope than Post-modernity presents. He was urging us as Christians to see that we have a calling to transform the world we live in. When he uttered the phrase 'to transform the world we live in', it caused a sense of personal inner urging to me, like a need to engage in this transformation myself. However, despite experiencing these words as standing out, the third session did not make the same impression upon me as the two former ones had. The last session did not hold the same quality as the others in terms of knowledge, content, performance, or the enthusiasm given to the presentation. It was as if the crescendo had been spent during the first two sessions, but I was still waiting for the climax, the final and greatest revelation. The climax never happened, rather faded out in a quiet diminuendo, also reflected in the speaker's more mellow voice. I had been hoping for a summing up that would hit me in my gut with its weight and significance, but the conclusion felt more like something that I had heard before, a general truth that I believed in, but which did not have the power of a life-transforming message. I guess I was hoping for an 'Aquinas' understanding of the kind that Jeremy had referred to, an element of appropriation, a revelation that would connect me to the particular context of hope that the speaker referred to, providing me with the incentive to act. But Holmes never specified what kind of transformation the world needed, and how to achieve this. The two former parts of Holmes' talk referred to historic periods, which we could all relate to and enjoy gaining new perspectives on, because the historic events conveyed a description of a past reality. The last part related to a future, which somehow did not seem less distant after Holmes' reflections, due in part to the lack of a concrete connection to my actual, lived life.

The day after the retreat was an ordinary church Sunday in Green Forest. Steve Holmes gave the speech, as the day before:

Holmes was speaking on Revelation, I guess as a conclusion to a series on Revelation in church recently, and I found this speech better than the last session yesterday, again because it referred to something more tangible, like written, biblical texts. Holmes talked about John

being at the island of Patmos and receiving the revelations given by Christ for John to proclaim to the seven churches mentioned in the book. John was to write what he saw in the visions he was given, about what was now, and what was to take place later. Holmes talked about Jesus conquering death by dying and laying down his majesty. The reflections upon Jesus from the book of Revelation made an impression on me, and the images of Christ pointing to Jesus' majesty felt as though it made it more tangible for me, in a sense, to grasp the character of Christ in relation to his sovereignty. The effect that hearing about the person of Jesus had on me, confirmed to me the essence within my spiritual orientation of wanting to know Jesus. This emergent exercise of 'looking to the face of Jesus' was not an orientation directed towards taking up a particular action for me, but towards a deeper sense of knowing Christ. I was encountering my own need for an inner knowledge of Christ through Holmes' words; a deep sense of longing immersing itself into my body.

In Holmes' speech on Revelation, he talked about how Jesus passed a judgement on each of the seven churches, in terms of what was in their favour and in terms of what Jesus had against them. Holmes gave particular mention to the first one of the seven churches, of which it is written: "I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first" (Revelation 2:2-5). Sitting in church hearing these verses, I could not help but feel that I was in the church that had lost its first love, and that I too was responsible for letting this happen.

Was this the intention behind the speech, I later wondered, to present me with my failure, and to inspire me to take action against this failure, to reawaken that first love? In addition, had the intention behind the theme of the speeches at the retreat the day before, also been to reawaken people to the responsibility that they as a church had to change the way things had become? I do not know, and I never thought to ask anybody in the leadership team what their thoughts had been when choosing the subject that Holmes presented. Nevertheless, to me these speeches felt like an attempt to create an incentive to act upon something that nobody had really declared what was, in big letters. What was this first love, and how had that love been inspired in the first place?

Inspiration for action

After the retreat and considering other services in church from the same period, I got the impression that the choice of theme for many of the speeches at the time, may have been no coincidence. It seemed to me that the leadership wanted the congregation to hear a particular message related to a desire to inspire people for the kind of action that would transform the world, and which was considered the true calling of the Christian church. In support of this perspective, came another incident which also happened at the retreat. One of the founders of the church, Aaron, who was also a part of the leadership team, handed out and presented a small article or letter that he had written. This letter served both as a confession of his journey of faith, as well as a motivational pamphlet for others in church. I was not present when Aaron presented his article at the retreat. During the meetings, there was a crèche for the toddlers, and the parents took turns of looking after the kids. Aaron must have spoken and handed out his article when it was my turn to be in the crèche. Therefore, I did not read the article until a few days later. Since the letter was handed out to people, I presume it was never meant as a mere personal confession, and I therefore share extracts from it.

In this article, the reader was invited to reflect upon what a life of faith should be, as well as suggesting a specific plan of action to achieve a living faith. First Aaron referred to his middle-aged life as quite comfortable, consisting of his job, mortgage, house, and family concerns, i.e., a fairly average life and lifestyle. Comparing his present lifestyle to the life he'd had as a young man who had just become a Christian, he emphasized the contrast as substantial. He became a Christian at the age of 20, and the following years had been a faith filled adrenaline rush as he took all sorts of risks in obedience to God, he had written. Although recognizing that his young age and position in life were important contexts for his ability to take risks in the past, and which his present responsibilities made more difficult, he still encouraged risk as an important aspect of the Christian life. "If I understand the Bible stories I was raised with, if I know anything of the great heroes of faith, who have lived throughout history, I believe that risk is critical to living faith. I have discovered the following formula to be accurate: Faith – Risk x Comfort Zone = Stagnation", the article read. The point that Aaron was making throughout the article was that the lack of risk in a Christian's life would eliminate the need for God, the need to trust in God, and ultimately lead to laziness: – "When I don't take genuine risks, I am less fervent in prayer. When I avoid the place of uncertainty, I stick with what I know and cease to grow. Taking faith-filled risks within our comfort-orientated lives is a

powerful antidote to spiritual impotency. The more risk averse we choose to be, the less opportunity God has to build greater depth of character within us. I know that, I have lived that, but too often these days such things are a distant and somewhat romantic memory. I am not alone – there is a vast army of ‘ex-young radicals’ out there, whose lives, like mine, are too often caught up in the tyranny of the mundane. Our kids’ education, our pension plans, our career paths, our mortgages – our upwardly mobile existence too easily dulls us to the call of faith. Where we were once inspired by the moving stories of faith and courage, we now feel guilt or for the truly broken – cynicism. We were once the Missionary Militants – we are now as radical as Mothercare³³!”

There was a sense of war cry as well as regret seeping through the words of Aaron, for what was once, seen through his eyes, a reality filled with expectations and endeavours. Although no harsh judgement was passed on those who had failed, in the article, there was still an inclusion of the reader or the listener in the judgement that Aaron passed on himself and the church. Whether the usage of the pronoun ‘we’, rather than ‘I’, was a rhetoric strategy to induce identification with Aaron’s cause is not for me to say, but the article clearly expressed a call to arms, from a mighty warrior seemingly become war veteran, trying to awake his fellow soldiers and making them aware of a descending fog clouding their vision. There was no lack of acknowledgment or suggestions as to what had happened to the spirit of courage from earlier days, in the article: “We find ourselves here for all sorts of reasons. For some it has crept up over the years, for others they simply made a choice. Some ‘grew up’ and dismissed their early adventures as immature. Others ‘believed’ deeply but ended up being damaged by the church or falling when it got tough. Others became ‘disappointed evangelicals’ – the hype didn’t deliver, and the spin that followed didn’t convince. Thus ‘Risky Faith’ was a casualty of life lived and many of us retreated to the shallows of our self-imposed comfort zones”. The grown man was trying to recall some of the zest and energy from his youth and pass it on to the rest of his men by way of referring to that, which is not changing, and therefore still at hand. “The great news is – we are not the first to end up here, and this isn’t the end of the story. I am the same guy who took risks those years ago. I am a follower of Jesus; I have been called, gifted, and filled with the very essence of God Himself. Yes, I have been disappointed; yes, I am a bit battered and bruised, but fundamentally I am that guy! And in case I forgot, He is still the same God! He can still provide in amazing ways; He can still shape circumstance; He can still dig

³³ Mothercare is the name of a clothing franchise selling clothes and accessories for children.

me out of holes. He is that God! What will I do? What risks will I take that can once again put me in that place of dependency and faith? – Easy to ask, more challenging to live”.

In the last part of the article Aaron suggested some practical ways of taking risks within the lifestyles that most people were living, like for instance giving away something valuable or a large sum of money, something which it would cost to give up, to someone who needed it more. He suggested ‘going public’ about one’s faith in the workplace, praying for opportunities to share one’s faith with others, or even offering to pray for someone with genuine needs. Another option involving a big risk could be to downscale one’s job to have more time to serve the poor or others in need. The next suggestion may have seemed the opposite of the former, encouraging staying in one’s job rather than seeking what was now called ‘the calling cop-out’. This suggestion related to the need for Christians at different workplaces. Other risky decisions could be to move to a more disadvantaged neighbourhood to live out one’s faith in that community. Another suggestion involving limitations to material spending, proposed imposing a luxury tax upon oneself every time one bought a luxury item, or set a limit to spending and committing to giving the rest of one’s finances away. One could also offer a spare room in the house to someone in need. Aaron related to his suggestions as options, encouraging people to come up with their own as well. At the end of the list, he stated that risk is about putting yourself in a place where you have to trust in God in a way that matters, and he clearly believed in the need to engage in this way of life, which would hone and refine our faith, taking us to deeper places with God. The conclusion to the paper stated that living with risk had “the possibility of leading us to a fresh encounter with the living God, revisiting that which we once knew, for God is all that we need”. This sentence emphasizes that Aaron as well, just like Suzanne and many of the others that I spent time with, felt that something in the spiritual life of the church, encountering the living God, seemed lost in comparison to the older days. Estelle and Lizzie, as well as others, had used the term ‘dry’ in their descriptions of the church at present, which for them was an indication that the prayer life as well as engaging with the spiritual gifts were suffering. Aaron’s response to the condition of the church, which he had identified as related to a lack of dependency on God, was to refer to and encourage risk-taking and simple living, for the sake of entering a place of trusting in God.

There was a lot of passion in Aaron’s article and the way he spoke of the past had the potential to make you almost sick with longing for such heady days again. I recognized the sense of wanting to get to that special place with God that the article stirred in me. It was a similar sense of expectation that some of the meetings at Marsham Street had stirred in me of

wanting something almost desperately, longing deeply for something that you could almost feel, but not yet had. This comparison made by me, of a similar type of expectation stirred by Aaron, as well as Marsham Street, seems a bit odd to me now, in retrospect, since the differences between what Aaron stood for and what Marsham Street stood for at the time, seemed a much more striking feature than similarity. However, was not going to Marsham Street for us also in some sense related to taking a risk, desiring, and daring to trust in God in a new way? There is another condition that the aching sense of longing reminds me of: the feeling of being in love with someone. Might it not be, that the letter that Aaron wrote, was his expression of the desire to find his, and the church's, first love again, and that he, through his letter, had shared his perception of what the first love referred to? The descriptions of the fervour and intensity of both engagement and level of action in the early days of his Christian walk, and the early days of the church, seemed his plan of action for regaining the first love, that Holmes had talked about in his last speech. In this perspective, the attitude of desiring to get out of the comfort zone, and the incitement from Aaron's article to take risks, may also be reflections of a particular aspect from the history of the Salvation Army, of the soldier engaged in the battle for justice and a new and better life for the poor and destitute. The Salvation Army was founded upon the ideal of an active Christianity, which stated that 'doing was everything' and that the whole world was its parish (Hattersley 2000). Within this perspective of a Christianity producing results in terms of mission and social work, the concept of comfort would appear as a hindrance to the 'original' progressive spirit of the Salvation Army.

Commitment

I met Aaron for an interview the day after the retreat, i.e., the Sunday that Holmes had his last speech. I got a ride in Aaron's car to him and his family's house. In the car, I mentioned something about Marsham Street, I think our conversation had drifted towards the subject of realizing more of who God was, and I said a little about how these meetings had added to my experience and recognition of God. I felt that Aaron immediately expressed scepticism towards Marsham Street and the meetings happening there. He said that you had to remember that when people met up for a meeting in this way, there were different cultures, pasts, presents, and personalities coming together. There would be no sense of journeying together for all these people who would most likely never meet again. It seemed Aaron's impression of Marsham Street consisted in a load of people coming together for an emotional boost of faith, only to

leave again a few hours later, no strings attached; no commitments made. He then asked if many people from church were going, and I said no, only a few, sometimes only two. I said that I had felt that through the meetings, I had come to realise more what a great God we have, that Marsham Street had made me aware of that again. Aaron did not really comment, and I got the sense that he did not want to approve of my perception. His scepticism confirmed my sense that not everybody approved of the type of church and the kind of meetings happening at Marsham Street.

My immediate conclusion to Aaron's comments in the car was that he was probably opposed to the charismatic elements of faith expressed at Marsham Street. During the interview with him however, it soon became clear to me that this was not the case. I started the interview by asking Aaron about the defining moments for his faith, and many of Aaron's stories involved charismatic and supernatural experiences. Aaron's opposition to Marsham Street could thus not be about the charismatic aspects. As I mentioned earlier, I had not read his article before the interview, and hence I did not know about his ideology of risk at the time when we met up, nor how this ideology also implied his perspective on church. Little did I know that the style of the Marsham Street meetings with their focus on experiencing the presence of God through an 'outburst' of his power, represented almost the opposite of the life of faith that Aaron had proposed in his letter. Aaron's idea of church involved people committing themselves to taking part in the fellowship not only through showing up in church, but also to committing to doing the tasks that the church should be doing. It is within this perspective of church that Aaron's encouragement to take risks must also be understood. His hope to inspire people to revive their faith and renew their relationship with God through a greater dependency and trust in him, was based on a perspective of an active church putting itself out there for the sake of humanity, for the sake of a suffering world. Yes, he was trying to inspire the church to march again, perhaps in the image of the Salvation Army in days gone by, but he was himself marching at the front, willing to face the risks that would also meet him personally. It was not long into the interview before Aaron presented an example of a risk that he had taken himself. For the record, I do not think this was the sort of risk that he encouraged the others in church to take:

A: I got involved in a fight once, with some drug addicts, and this guy was stabbing another guy in the back with a knife and I intervened. He was trying to kill him, stabbed him several times. By the time I got hold of him, he'd stabbed him several times in the back already. And, anyway, I managed to disarm the guy. I took the knife off the guy.

But I got cut, and I got some blood on my hand from one of them. Don't know which one it was, it was just blood everywhere. And all four; hep c and two of them were HIV positive. So, for six months I was having tests you know, to see if I got the virus. And the reason I mention it is actually, people said, why would you bother? You know, someone said to me; 'Why would you bother trying to help someone like that? Those people have made their choices, they're drug addicts'. Ok, well, that's the Jesus way, you know, that's the whole point. So, I thought a lot about that decision at that particular time. Because I knew what I was doing when I went into it. I knew there was a possibility... I knew these guys were drug addicts, it was obvious. And I knew that some of the blood around would have been infected with something. I made all those decisions, and I thought about it and I thought; No, actually, that's what we're called to: Called to lay down our lives as wasteful. Now, hopefully not physically, but you know. And it didn't turn out bad, thankfully. But I think that was a quite defining experience for me because I had to look myself in the mirror and say, 'Did I just give my life away cheaply?' – Which I thank God I didn't have to, but... I remember thinking at the time, 'Nah, I think that's the Jesus way'. That was quite...that was an interesting six months!

Unlike the risk Aaron shared with me in the interview, the risks that he spoke about in his article were not about living a hazardous life in terms of jeopardizing one's safety. More than anything, the risks that Aaron outlined related to living more sacrificially to share with others, be it the gospel or one's material resources. Taking risks involved reaching out to people in need, to exemplify the love of Christ. As he said, when he referred to his reasoning before entering the fight between the drug addicts, *I think that's the Jesus way*. Aaron had committed to a lifestyle where he was willing to make the sacrifices that he felt were asked of him in the name of faith. For Aaron, taking risks and living sacrificially, even to the point of being willing to lay down his life to save a drug addict from being killed, was a way of acting upon his faith, which involved more than a principle, a philosophy or an ideal; taking risks involved both his and his family's lived lives. On my request, he told me about risks that he and his family had taken as well, and most of these risks concerned decisions that would affect their lives long term. Many years ago, the family was planning to adopt a little girl from South Africa who had lost her parents due to HIV and was therefore living in an orphanage. In the end, the little girl's grandmother turned up before the adoption took place, and the girl went to live with her. To lose the little girl had been a tough experience for the whole family, who had prepared

themselves in every way for their new situation, which then never happened. Living with an awareness of other people's needs and the willingness to do something about that, was clearly a conviction for Aaron that he lived. I got an impression later in the interview – perhaps not of this conviction's very beginning, but at least of an experience that was a defining moment for Aaron's orientation in life and mission:

A: I remember sitting in a (church) service once, and a few weeks before this service this guy had spoken a prophetic word over me about what God wanted me to do with my life and what I should do, and I remember thinking at the time: 'Wow! Nice thought, but not me!' And I was in this service about six weeks later, it was a communal service, and there was a group of evangelists. I was very insecure, didn't know anybody there, I was on my own.

R: So, this was when you were younger? You hadn't met your wife then...?

A: No, I was in my twenties. I was working for the Salvation Army, and I was at this place and I didn't know anybody who was there at this conference, and it was horrible. It was 400 people there, I knew me, that was it. And I was reflecting in the middle of the communal service about this guy's prophetic word to me, and it was all about helping the Salvation Army to get back to its roots – that's where the Roots conference³⁴ came from. That's where it all came from (...) – and being a voice for the poor and being used by God in different places around the world – whole bunch of stuff. And I remember saying to myself: 'Lord...I can't do it Lord, I'm too weak, no, I just can't do it, I haven't got it'. Anyway, this guy comes up, turns around, it's this bloke called Tony (...), I didn't know him at all. He said 'Hi, I'm Tony', I said 'Oh, hi'. He said, 'God has given me a word to speak into your life'. I said 'Oh, has he?' (Laughs). And he gave me the exact same prophesy as the other guy gave. So, I'm sitting...my jaw is down here! (Flabbergasted) 'So' he said, 'Let me pray for you'. And so, he put his head down and he said; 'There's one more thing; God says; You've just been doubting my word to you. Now stop doubting, have courage, and do what I've asked you to do, 'cause I'll be with you!' (Laughs) So I'm sobbing like a baby, I'm this boy! Oh, my life... It was amazing!

R: Wow, that is amazing!

³⁴ Roots was a conference held once a year in England, to focus on, as Aaron said, the roots of the Salvation Army, and to try to bring inspiration to members and corps of the SA.

A: Yeah. So that has defined my life. My life's been missionary since then, you know. I seek to be an advocate for the poor.

To add to the impression of Aaron being a person of action, I share a little snippet from a later part of the interview:

(...) There are some people that are a lot brighter than me, I know that, but I'm reasonably bright. But what I do have, I have enormous capacity. I get stuff done. I get a lot of stuff done.

R: And resilient?

A: Yeah, I keep going. I've found it harder as I've got older, just because of physicality, but I do get stuff done. And I don't mind if they say that, you know, on my gravestone; 'This man got a lot done!'

Aaron was a man of action; there seemed a short way between experience and action for him. I know that many others in Green Forest would agree with this description, because Aaron was known as a quite directly spoken, action-orientated person, and being one of the leading figures in church he was also a person with influence upon church, and hence a person of reputation. For this reason, I think that when Aaron shared his thoughts in an article, which he presented at the retreat, he did so because he wanted to see a change in the way Green Forest Community Church related to the vision that the church had once been so expressive about. These were elements that none of us who went to Marsham Street regularly would disagree with, since in fact we kept returning to and discussing these issues ourselves. What I found interesting was that Aaron's call to arms, risk taking, and sacrificial living had surged from the same sentiments of spiritual stagnation within church that had drawn some people to start going to Marsham Street. The awareness of something 'missing' in spiritual life, clearly inspired people to resort to different strategies for attempting to move into a future holding a stronger and more viable spiritual presence, that could transform the lives that people were living. There seemed to be a general acknowledgement that church needed a change of some sort, which by the leadership team had been conceptualized as 'a restructuring'. The church approach to a sense of stagnation seemed to involve a form of restructuring of the activities that the church offered and that the members were invited to engage in.

A restructuring of church

The first time I heard about the restructuring of church, was when I met up to interview Jonathan quite early on in my fieldwork. He told me that the leadership had had a new vision for church that they were going to start putting into motion during the autumn. What this vision was, Jonathan did not expand upon then, as our conversation went onto other themes. However, through different services as well as interviews during the autumn, I gradually learnt more about the new church vision, which among other things involved the setting up of mission groups and spiritual formation groups, which I have mentioned earlier in this chapter. The mission groups were set up first, each of them representing different activities for people to engage in. One group was a gospel choir, rehearsing once a week. Another group called community celebration looked to reach out to the local community, like the street or neighbourhood where people lived, to try to create a communal event of some sort, like a fun day, a picnic, or a barbeque etc. Another group concerned human trafficking, aiming to discuss this issue and try to find out to what extent this abuse occurred in the area of Green Forest, and to consider how one could engage oneself in the fight against this crime. Two other groups were a youth group and a group focusing on children and families. The mission groups were opportunities for people to focus on different ways of expressing their faith through engaging in social action. Everyone was encouraged to join one group and commit themselves to the activities of this group for one evening a week, for one year. The groups called spiritual formation groups were set up to encourage people to address their personal faith, spiritual life, and growth. In addition to these two groups, the church announced a course called Credo, which would be theologically based, and run by persons in church with a theological background, to provide people with the opportunity to discuss in more depth theological issues of concern to them.

The groups and course that I have described above, reflected the leadership team's attempts to inspire and help people and the church towards bigger engagement and commitment, with the ultimate vision of a living faith, and consequently, a church expressing a living faith. From interviews and conversations with people in the period after the launching of the idea of the mission groups, I learned that for many people the mission groups stirred mixed emotions. People positioned themselves variously in relation to the mission groups, some expressing an initial scepticism, whereas others expressed that one of the mission groups was something they were happy to commit themselves to. One woman I interviewed said that she and her husband did not particularly identify with any of the mission groups so far, and that

they felt that how they fleshed out their mission was more through their day-to-day jobs. Taking part in one of the mission groups on this background would to her feel ‘tokenistic’, by which I guess she meant that her and her husband’s engagement would be something they did for the sake of doing it, but without fully immersing themselves in the activity. Another woman said she would have felt more positive towards the mission groups had they been called servant groups instead. For her it became an issue that the background for the activities of the various groups, which were all in different ways aimed at reaching people outside of church, was mission, i.e., with the conversion of others in mind. She was uncertain about how she felt about the whole concept of mission at the moment and thought that people should at least be made aware of the fact that mission was the intention. For this woman, taking part in a group with the intention of serving others would sit more comfortably, and would have been more conducive to a perception that enhanced the awareness of how to live the gospel in daily life, by doing something for others without a hidden agenda. Another person felt that the mission groups represented a program aimed at getting people more actively engaged in terms of mission, which was an intention that she was a little sceptical about, because it felt a somewhat enforced approach.

I spoke to many people who had reservations towards the mission groups, but I also spoke to many people who saw the mission groups as an opportunity to enter deeper into a matter that concerned them. One man said he felt that the human trafficking group was something that he could commit himself to and welcomed the initiative to get involved in an issue of such importance and concern. Other people felt that the mission groups facilitated a desire they had already had, to become involved in their local community, but not known how to bring into reality. For some people, the mission groups offered opportunities to try something new, like becoming part of a gospel choir or learning more about human trafficking. For others the focus of one of the groups coincided with their own sense of calling to particular areas or a particular group of people, like their neighbourhood or young people as a group.

I think commitment might be a key word for the underlying message brought forth through the various initiatives in church at this time. The leadership team wanted to encourage and facilitate a greater commitment to that which they considered the call upon a Christian’s life; to reach out and change the world through the gospel, and to regain the ‘first love’ for Christ. The creation of the mission groups seemed an obvious example of the aim to set in motion a form of action directed outward, towards others, whereas the faith formation groups,

and Credo were to provide for the inner and mental life, through an inward orientation towards God.

Faith formation in everyday life

In addition to the mission groups about to become realized, some activities aimed at offering a socially inspired service already existed. One of these was Play Mate; a meeting place for parents and toddlers for a couple of hours on a Tuesday morning, which I referred to in chapter 4. Play Mate was originally started because the church wanted to reach out to families with small children, but its character seemed more of an informal occasion where people met up for the sake of being together. To me, it never felt like a church arrangement – at least not to start off with. Parents would meet up for an hour or two of socializing with other parents, having a cup of tea and a biscuit whilst watching their children play with each other. Faith was an unassuming element of the interaction; sometimes being the subject of conversations, however mainly residing as an aspect of people's knowledge of each other, especially for the women from church, who shared the knowledge of each other's faith. Other parents from outside the church would also be aware that Play Mate was run by a Christian organisation, although there was no direct evangelization going on. After the introduction of the mission groups, the set-up of Play Mate changed a little, as one of the women who had joined the children and families group started doing a short Bible story and some singing with the children. The idea of mission was thus implemented into an activity formerly without the element of visible evangelism, yet I would say that the social interaction at Play Mate remained informal.

I would often meet Jenny and Estelle at Play Mate. Since we also shared the experience of the Marsham Street meetings, we sometimes continued reflecting upon these meetings when we met there. Play Mate thus became a setting where it was natural for those who were a part of the church in Green Forest to bring up issues of faith. These conversations happened as we were engaged in doing something, like tidying away the toys, or putting the cups and biscuits away. It was an on-going conversation about faith that expressed that we had something in common, and that we felt enough of a sense of belonging to the same fellowship and to each other to share our views and feelings. Of course, faith was not the only topic of conversation; issues concerning our families or work/study situations might be brought up as well. The fact that faith often did feature as the subject of random conversations, however, shows how embedded faith was in our everyday lives, and how faith at the end of the day was something

that bound us together. Going to Play Mate became so familiar and such a natural part of my weekly routine that I often experienced being there as just a part of life. At the same time, Play Mate did not constitute a place and an event where I expected to experience the spiritual extraordinary, or have a deep insight about faith; the experience of being at Play Mate seemed too mundane for that. I felt that I went there to be sociable, have a chat with whoever was there that day, and allow Hannah to play with other kids. Play Mate was an event that filled that day with some activity. The truth was that sometimes life was a bit boring, and I felt alone, especially during the first part of the day when both Erling and Malene were at their respective schools. John was in Norway to work for a month at a time, and during the periods of his absence, I had to fill the days as best I could with meaningful activities for all of us. Play Mate was a welcome break to the monotony of some days, but as I saw it, not of great anthropological, nor spiritual significance.

Then one day something happened that kind of lifted the ordinary veil, revealing a previously hidden significance: One Tuesday as I was walking home after having taken Erling to school, I suddenly realised that I was really looking forward to going to Play Mate. I felt a sense of excitement at the thought of going there and meeting everybody. I remembered how I was always greeted by the others who were there, and how someone would come over and ask me how I was doing. I recalled the cosy gathering of people around the counter, sipping teas or coffees and sharing little snippets of conversation. I always felt that I was welcome, and I realised that I also felt like a natural part of this fellowship. Being in this sense of excitement and gratitude towards Play Mate and the people I met there, I suddenly had an insight: I felt that I understood that the way I was welcomed at Play Mate was how God welcomed me. It was as if it dawned upon me, as an effect of the previous reflection, that I was welcomed and accepted by God in a similar manner. I felt at that moment that the interest that I was shown by the others represented Christ's love expressed through their human action. This realisation seemed to whisper to me that although seemingly mundane, the 'everyday' kind of being together at Play Mate held its own spiritual significance, although often hidden to my ordinary eye. I recall Jeremy's perception that everything in life is part of life in God, it just depends on our seeing it. I had experienced one of those moments where I had become aware of this condition. After the realisation however, another thought crept up on me, this time concerning the discussions and conversations about the dryness of church. I wondered if it could be, that when people had pointed out to me that they felt like there was something missing in church, it was just the spiritual significance of the fellowship, which was hidden to their ordinary eye? Was the sense

of dryness more a matter of perception and interpretation, than actual reality? I thought to myself.

Stepping out in faith and the non-structure at Marsham Street

I met up with Suzanne a few days after the interview with Aaron and after the visit to Play Mate. Reflections from both events occupied my mind and influenced the subject of our conversation:

I said to Suzanne that I had been thinking about the social aspect of going to Marsham Street: – “We come there, and we don’t know anybody else. If we did not have a social fellowship outside of there, if these meetings with God, however great, were the only thing we had, would we not still feel rather lonely after each meeting? If we had no one to share what happened with, wouldn’t we feel lonely?” I asked her. Suzanne did not respond immediately. She seemed to have to consider what I had said. I suggested that maybe the strength and significance of the fellowship at Green Forest was not really recognised. I was referring to the assessment of the church as dry. Suzanne did not seem to connect with what I said, and her lack of immediate enthusiasm made me try to explain myself better. I tried to go around my reasoning a second time. My thought was that if it had not been for the sense of bond between people in Green Forest, the fellowship might have disintegrated given the fact that many people had expressed a lack of a sense of God speaking through and within the fellowship. At this, Suzanne nodded. The interview with Aaron fresh in my memory, I referred to my impression that his response to the sense of something missing in church life, was to encourage a stronger degree of reaching out to the poor in the community. My last comment seemed to wake Suzanne up: – “Did you read the article that he handed out on the retreat?” she asked and continued: “He’s kind of saying it all there, but in terms of church. Rather than saying that we are lacking the direction of God, he is saying that we have become comfortable. I know what he is saying, but I don’t think what he suggests will do all that. As for the various mission groups that have come about, I can’t see how this will change anything and entail a risk, in the sense that Aaron was talking about taking risks. In terms of stepping out in faith, all of the things aimed for by the mission groups are do-able. They do not involve stepping into a realm where you would have to rely on God. Maybe for each individual who committed themselves to one of the groups it would mean stepping out, of course. But as a church, there is no stepping out”. Suzanne had

obviously been reflecting upon Aaron's article and the suggestions he had made. She was concerned with the same issues as Aaron had brought up, in terms of how to be engaged in a living faith but saw the solution differently than him. As Aaron, Suzanne was not only interested in the spiritual life of the church for her own good, but on behalf of the church. Suzanne then referred to a Christian speaker who had said something profound. He had said that we would never be able to reach the ideal calling of God for our lives, because the last part of the calling we could only do in his strength. Thus, in a sense, God had always added a bit of his own doing into our callings or called us to do more than we could manage. Suzanne thought this was great, because it stressed how we cannot fully do things in our own strength. After a moment's pause, she added; – "Marsham Street's about what God can do, and church is about what we can do. In church, we have the mission groups and the structures of different programs, and it is easy to fall back on the structure. At Marsham Street there is no structure". – "I need to remember that for when I come home so I can write it down, because that was good," I said. – "It was, wasn't it!" Suzanne responded half astonished! – "I don't know where it came from, I haven't thought about it before!"

What Suzanne pointed to in her assessment of Marsham Street versus Green Forest, was that the meetings at Marsham Street provided a stronger experience of a God for whom nothing was impossible. What the meetings offered to those of us who went there, was a sense of expectation that we would 'see' this God, and that we could actually meet with him, commune with him and expect from him. Concerning Green Forest, Suzanne expressed the feeling that the expectations for something to happen were more directed at the members themselves: If one wanted to see change, one needed to get involved oneself. Suzanne would be the first one to agree with the necessity of personal involvement within church, and she was always ready to serve others. However, she also felt that within church one had stopped expecting anything from God outside of human capabilities. For her, the lack of expecting from God also meant a lack of trusting in God, although her perception of trusting in God was different from Aaron's perception of trusting in God. Without explicit words, she seemed to make a similar statement as those members of church who had said to me before, that church had become too academic. In these former interviews and conversations, the term academic had been used to describe an unfortunate turn that church had made, from being more spirit filled to becoming more theoretical. A little bit later in our chat, Suzanne herself used the term academic to describe aspects of church with which she found it hard to engage:

I asked her what she thought about the church retreat on Saturday. She said it was okay, but it did not do anything special for her. She knew that many people found it very good, and connected with it, but she just did not. She could not remember anything that had been said, which I guess was a reference to the talks by Steve Holmes. The only thing she could remember was Aaron's article. That was what had stirred her up the most. The rest was too academic, she said. The way the program for the day had been set up, with several speeches, was not what she associated with a retreat. One of the reasons for why she had gone on the retreat, was because she had thought there would be some ministry, by which she meant the opportunity to be prayed for and receive specific guidance from God. There had been nothing of that sort at all, she said.

Contemplative life and community life

Keeping in mind one of the early conversations with Suzanne, referred to in chapter 3, where she talked about how she had discovered that she did not trust in God, I see this last conversation as expressing Suzanne's spiritual orientation as still directed towards seeking to trust in God. The focus of a retreat should be God and ones' personal relationship with him, in Suzanne's view. It was a day aside for people to consider their life and be able to ask for prayer if they wanted to. This would not involve the intellectual mind trying to come up with solutions, but the entrusting of one's life to God, seeking God's counsel through prayer. The retreat we had just been to, however interesting its theme, was not focused on providing for an individual experience of personal renewal and refreshment through specifically seeking God's counsel, but more on the message one wanted the church to hear and act upon. Suzanne's perspective makes me recall Steve Holmes' words at the retreat: "We have a calling to transform the world we live in", he had said. The theme for the retreat, as well as the initiatives for restructuring the church, seemed to be the leadership team's response to a sense of need for transformation. In essence, I think what Suzanne and many others voicing similar points of view were talking about, could also be related to perceptions of transformation. This suggestion reminds me especially of something Clive said to me when I met him at his office once. He talked about contemplative life and community life. He said that first came contemplative life, and the contemplative life would influence the community life, which was then secondary. As a church leader, one of his concerns naturally related to the church and the way church could affect the

world around it through its mission. Interpreting Clive's words as a comment upon the issue of transformation, his perspective indicated that a transformation of community life would have to start with each person through their personal transformation, but without personal transformation or communal transformation as the aim.

After the conversation with Suzanne, I felt that my suggestion that the experience of dryness may be a matter of perception, was flawed and a result of my own perhaps 'wishful' thinking. I had to recognize as real and important the stories of those who struggled with church and their spiritual life. If all I wanted to say was that people in church just talked past one another, then I was failing to take those who struggled with a sense of spiritual loss seriously. In fact, the truth as I had to see it in the end was that people were not talking past one another; they were actually saying different things. I needed to accept the fact, that however interesting and appropriate I might find a theologically- or action-orientated spirituality, I needed to accept the feelings, reflections and experiences of those speaking out on behalf of a sense of 'dryness'. Their perspectives were also testimonies of the desire for transformation, pointing to how transformation could come about for this group. I think this incident, where I had to reconsider my attempt at coming up with a 'quasi-diplomatic' explanation for people's sense of a spirituality gone dry, made me acknowledge and fully recognize my proper task and subject of exploration in the field: With renewed clarity, and also relief, I saw that rather than try to produce an overall portrait of the spirituality of the entire church, my focus needed to relate in particular to the attempt at understanding the spirituality of those people who felt that church was 'a bit dry', and who therefore directed their spiritual seeking towards other approaches to the Christian life, that what they felt their own church expressed during the time of my fieldwork.

'Thinkers and Feelers'

Reflections upon what might be missing in the 'academic church' came to expression in the two following interviews, from the perspective of two women who defined themselves more as 'feelers' than 'thinkers'. The effects or consequences of a church being considered too academic in its approach and outlook, or as prioritizing 'thinking' above 'feeling', was described by Gaby, the woman that I met in the park quite early on during my stay in Green Forest. She expressed very clearly that she saw a link between the 'academic' condition of church, and her own faith and relationship to God. She described herself as having become more and more

cynical over the years in Green Forest, and referred as an example to a healing incident, which had occurred while she was living elsewhere with her family and attending a different church. She seemed to see her own cynicism, by which she had first met the prospect of her being healed, as an attitude fed by her previous years in Green Forest and that she felt was a significant attitude of this church, or of the 'loudest voices' in it:

G: One kind of amazing thing that happened was that I felt God speak quite powerfully. And I'd actually been having a lot of problems with my stomach, and that morning I was healed. And I didn't realize for a couple of weeks, when I actually wasn't having problems with my stomach anymore. But that was quite an incredible moment because it was something that I wasn't expecting. At the end of the service the church leader had quite a profound word for somebody in the congregation, who was having a stomach problem, and I went forward and was prayed for, and it just never bothered me after that. And just things that would normally bother me, like certain foods that I would eat, or certain things that I would do, it just didn't happen from that moment.

R: So, you didn't think necessarily that "Oh yeah, I have been healed now"?

G: No, because I'm quite cynical, and quite skeptical. And sometimes I feel that that's... I often feel that actually being in Green Forest makes me more cynical.

R: Makes you more cynical?

G: Yeah.

R: Why is that?

G: Because we're in a church with a lot of educated people, a lot of thinkers, a lot of theologians, and sometimes just plain faith can go out the window, because everything is rationalized. And I think in Green Forest we have a great mix of people and where they're at with their beliefs and their spirituality, and I feel like there's this kind of scale of, sort of, thinkers to feelers, if you know what I mean. So, on one end you've got the real theological thinkers who argue every point. And on the other scale, you've got people who just say "Oh, let's just pray and wait and believe", I guess the faith end of the scale. And I find that, actually the more I've been in Green Forest, the more cynical I've become, and the more questioning about things I've become. So, when I was in this situation in this church, and the church leader at the front stood up and said that he had a word for certain people, I'm thinking "Yeah, right". You know, that's not gonna be real, or how do we know if it's just made up? But the reason that I knew that it was real

is because he got the whole congregation to stand up and I started shaking. My knees started quivering. And it was almost as if I knew that it was gonna be something about me.

R: Before he'd said it?

G: Before he'd said it, yeah. And just before he said it, I had a really bad stomachache, which was one of the problems that I'd had. And then, when he said, "there's somebody here with a stomach problem", my stomachache just went away. And I carried on shaking. I mean, he talked about a few other people as well, so it wasn't just me going forwards to be prayed for. There were other people for different illnesses, or situations or whatever. And when I went forward to be prayed for, I cried inconsolably, which is a bit unexplainable. And I didn't feel any kind of massive wave over my body, or shiver or anything sort of, you know, no kind of out-of-body experience or anything like that. But I was shaking, almost like a nervous shaking. And I walked away from the prayer feeling that I didn't know if anything amazing sort of had happened, other than I thought it's never a bad thing to be prayed for. Even if you're not healed specifically, it's never a bad thing to be prayed for by somebody. So, I just walked away thinking "Great. That was really great, lovely of the lady to pray for me". And we just carried on with our day, and it wasn't till later on that I thought "Hang on a minute, I've not had another stomachache", and then the next evening "I've not had another stomachache", and the day after. And then I thought well, let me eat this particular food that always gives me a stomachache, but I ate it, and it didn't give me a stomachache.

R: So, you ate it to test it out?

G: I ate it to test it out, yeah. And after about a week I said to my husband "You know I haven't had a stomachache since that day I was prayed for" and he was like "Well" – and he's more cynical than I am, and he said "Well, maybe you're healed." And I was like "Well, if he's saying that, maybe it's true." And that is something that, kind of going back to the being cynical thing, that is something that I think has become worse in me over the years being here in Green Forest. And I can't blame anybody for it, because I think that it's my own responsibility about how I think and what I believe, but I've mentioned it to a couple of people, close friends here in church, and they don't disagree, that it's easy to become cynical. But I wasn't sure whether it's just you grow up; you realize a few realities from when you first became a Christian and everything seems like you're walking on clouds. And then you settle back down to earth and you kind of get on

with living your everyday life of faith. – Or whether it is actually something to do with being in an environment where maybe the people with the loudest voices are the ‘thinkers’, rather than the ‘feelers’. (...)

R: Are you talking smaller groups now, or church service?

G: Church service, mostly. (...) What I found in Green Forest with small groups was that it was a real opportunity to realize more the gifts of the spirit. So, in smaller group settings where it felt safer, closer, people would be more open to praying for each other, and sensing God saying something specific to each other, or maybe, you know, more prophetic things. And I really, really appreciated that. But I do think that there were certain people in church who congregated those kinds of smaller groups. For example, I was in a small group with people who enjoy that kind of thing, praying and prophecy and things like that. And I found it wonderful. And my husband deliberately was in a different group that was very much about discussion and reading and thinking and arguing cases, and stuff like that. Our groups were worlds apart, which suited our personalities perfectly. But that (her husband’s group), to me, kind of represents the largest scale of the people represented in our church, the thinkers. So, I kind of feel like on one end of the scale you’ve got the theologians, and on the other end you’ve got the... ‘Suzannes’! You know what I mean?

R: Yeah, they are quite the opposites.

G: Yeah, and that’s kind of how I feel our church is. But the theologians... their voices tend to be louder in the congregation. And the ‘Suzannes’ tend to be more quiet and reserved. So, there are lots of people like that, but probably that’s not the voice or the... not opinion, but the message that’s kind of given out is more from the other spectrum, I think, from the people who stand at the front at church and give an impression of who we are as a congregation. I don’t know if that’s unfair to say. Yeah, I’m not sure.

R: I think you’re right in your judgment, and I mean, that’s a fact in a society where everybody has a voice, then some voices will be heard above the others. And what is spoken out will have to influence the whole, in a sense. I think that’s always the case. I know that makes perfect sense. And I mean, if you look at it, Suzanne is very soft spoken, she’s not gonna be the one who shouts the loudest, unless someone kind of leads her...

G: Pushes her.

R: Yeah, yeah, and asks her specifically "What do you think?"

G: I think the other thing though, with Green Forest, is that the leadership of the church really wants it to be welcoming to people who are not used to church settings, and I think it's almost a deliberate point not to have anything on a Sunday that's too, sort of, alien or scary to visitors. So that they can walk in and feel welcomed and feel comfortable and, sort of, loved by the people there. And things like prophecies and deeper prayer meetings, things like that happen separately on a smaller group basis and less so on a Sunday morning. I'm not sure if that's totally correct or not, but that's my understanding and my impression of Sunday mornings.

R: When I was here ten years ago, there were Sunday meetings or prayer meetings or, what did they call it, ministry evenings.

G: I think now they're just relooking at the whole thing and starting to set up more specific groups and prayer meetings, and like 24/7 prayer and things like that, which I think will be better. And I think it's at times like that where you get some real powerful things coming out. And I'm looking forward to that, and I've come to the point where I think "Okay, I've gone too far, I've become too cynical". It's not good, and I feel like I've gone away from something quite important about my faith, what having faith means. – Not being able to rationalize and reason everything but being open to the fact that God is a sovereign God and has power to do anything. And there are obviously times when you kind of feel beaten down, like when you pray and pray and pray for something and it doesn't happen, and you don't understand why. Like recently, with Rachel's death, and the amount of prayer across the world that went on for her. And yet, through her illness and through her death some incredible things happened. But you still questioned God, you know; "Why? Why did you heal me of my stomach problem when you didn't heal Rachel of cancer?" Big questions like that. But I think it's okay to ask those questions, you know, and we may never completely understand the answers, but I want to be... I don't want to shut God off and say "Right, I'm never gonna pray for anything again, because you didn't answer this prayer or that prayer." So, when these new things start, the sort of more prayer meetings, more prayer worship meetings, more 24/7 type events, I'm gonna make sure that I get involved and get back into, sort of, the 'feely' side of the spectrum.

R: Yeah, I think it is easy to repress the emotional side of having a faith because, you know, it brings out the fear of just expressing yourself really, rather than God. But I mean, it's not right that that side should just still.

G: And I think... I think there is a healthy balance. (...) And I think each person relates to God in their own way, which is absolutely fine. And I really believe that God meets people where they're at; and if they're down in the dumps, God meets them down in the dumps, and you know, pulls them out. And you've got situations like Marsham Street, where I think people probably worship God in a different way from what I do, doesn't mean God's not there. I think God meets people where they are. And I don't think that I've got it all right, but I think God meets me where I am as well. And often in the little things that we don't expect, or we don't see, you know, not just in the big meetings where we expect God to show up. But in a way, I kind of wish that Green Forest was a bit more how it used to be. I think when Green Forest first started people were really going for it and all out and nothing stood in their way of, kind of, anything. It was kind of all for God. And again, it's that thing; have people become more cynical, or have they just settled down and got to grips with reality of living life and living faith all in one?

Gaby was perhaps the most vocal of those I spoke with, in voicing the perception that the approach of the church had influenced her faith in terms of cynicism. Expressing the sense that there was something spiritually missing in the life of the church, the voices of many others' that I had spoken to also rang through in what she said. Specifying that she missed the approach of plain faith that would say 'let's just pray and wait and believe', her comment reminded me of Suzanne's concern with the decrease of the intercessional aspect of the church services. Gaby also particularly mentioned Suzanne as one of the voices that she would have liked to hear more from in church. In mentioning prayer as an area that she longed to be more involved in, she pointed to an essential element in a conscious and active practice of relating to God, which suggested a contemplative approach. Through mentioning prayer, Gaby seemed to express that she was missing the experience of the presence of God, perhaps as she had experienced this herself during the prayer through which she believed she had been healed. Regarding other perspectives that Gaby mentioned, I was already acquainted with some of these, like her reference to the services as deliberately inexpressive of charismatic characteristics, to be more welcoming to 'outsiders'. This comment seemed a repetition of Estelle's description of the services as 'user-friendly', as one of her explanations in the interview I had with her, of why there seemed to be 'no spirit' stuff in church anymore.

One of the main messages in what Gaby was saying seemed the perspective that whereas theology might inspire some people, it might have the opposite effect on people less

‘theologically inclined’. Different people have different needs in terms of spiritual nourishment, and for Gaby, and many of the others I spoke to, their faith seemed dependent on something other than theology for maturing and thriving. Whereas for the ‘thinkers’ new thoughts and ideas might provide inspiration enough in themselves, for the ‘feelers’ new thoughts and ideas needed to be *felt*, ‘sunk down’ into the body more specifically through being associated with and grounded in lived life, and in an experience of the presence of the Spirit *outside of* the realm of thinking. Strangely, it seems that at the end of my fieldwork, the distinction between intellectual and embodied knowledge that I had made and sought to pursue in the beginning, somehow emerged more clearly again as an issue also negotiated among members within the church in Green Forest themselves. Through different words, a similar concern with the distinction between intellectual and lived, was expressed by others as well, in relation to their understanding of living by faith.

In terms of Gaby’s own faith, she seemed to have come to a place, which on hindsight provided her with a sense of personal revelation or spiritual awareness, expressed through her words *I feel like I’ve gone away from something quite important about my faith, what having faith means*. It appears she had become aware of a loss in her experience of faith; a loss she seemed to relate to an attitude or orientation of expecting more from God, an aspect of relating to God that also harbored the element of trusting in him alone. In this respect, she was articulating similar sentiments as Suzanne had expressed to me earlier regarding the issue of how to trust in God. I also heard a sound of Aaron’s call to arms and his incitement to take more risks for the sake of reviving one’s faith and relationship with God. All three of them appealed to a deeper, more intimate faith in God. Gaby’s words contained a slight criticism of the church, as the reason for why she had come to this place, yet at the same time it cut deeper, into her own heart and the longing for *plain faith*. Questioning and searching for rational explanations in an intellectual way, seemed to imply the opposite of a faith stirred by the expectation of and trusting in God, for Gaby. She described expecting from God as an element of trusting in God, or a step in the process of learning to trust in God. As I understood Gaby, expecting from God may have been facilitated, if the church had opened a space for the receiving of personal prayer within the service. Another statement in which Gaby emphasized the issue of expecting more from God, may also be read as a reference to prayer and the gifts of the spirit: *Being open to the fact that God is a sovereign God and has power to do anything*. Again, this comment evokes a reminiscence to Suzanne’s words, when she assessed the church in Green Forest to be about

what we can do, whereas Marsham Street was about what God can do. What Gaby wanted, was to encounter God as God, sovereign and powerful.

Feeling closer to God

The theme of contrasting the theological aspects of faith with faith as lived life continued in several of the interviews I had at this time. My understanding of what people were missing from their spiritual life in church grew as people expressed and formulated themselves on the matter in different ways. When I met Myra, who had come to church some years after my first fieldwork, she articulated what she wanted from church and from her faith, and at the same time clearly expressed what did not interest her. Maybe more than many of the others I spoke to, who brought up the academic and theological profile of the church as aspects adding to the experience of dryness for them, Myra put her finger more precisely on the characteristics that would make church more relevant to her:

*M: I've kind of come to know what the feeling of feeling closer to God is like, and what the feeling of feeling further away is like, so I'm always kind of striving to be closer. And I kind of know when I'm closer, and when I'm feeling closer, I make better decisions.
(...)*

In a sense, Myra cut to the chase on the issue concerning *feeling* the closeness or presence of God. She did not reason that not feeling close to God or not being able to see God's presence at a particular moment was just a matter of perception. She simply referred to and considered the sense of being close to God as a particular feeling which was important to her, and mentioned decision making as a practical consequence of feeling God's closeness. Like Gaby, Myra referred to Green Forest as a place of stagnation, which had not supported her in getting to a place where it was natural to feel close to God:

*R: Do you miss anything in church, or are you content with this church fellowship?
M: I miss being scared. The feeling of reverence is not there. It's a very charming, happy environment, it's very caring, and people do pull together when we need to. But it's almost like the feeling of reverence has been lost amongst this whole, sort of, family, cosy kind of community.*

R: *Lost? So, was it there before?*

M: *Yeah, I don't think I've ever experienced it at Green Forest, but I think I turned up when the babies started appearing, and they say they've been in crisis for six years. Well, I've been there for six years, so I think I've never seen it running at its best. (...) I don't know whether it is the worship, or different teaching, or being at a different place in life... I don't know, but there just isn't the reverence. And maybe that's just a choice of sermon material or whatever. Like, I can see why they had a whole sermon on how to read, what was it...*

R: *Revelations.*

M: *Yeah. That type of literature, but I didn't come to listen to a sermon about English literature type of thing. I want to come here, you know, to His home.*

R: *Feel that you receive something?*

M: *Jesus loves you, you are forgiven, you know, I'm proud of you. I want to hear simple things. I don't want to go delving into revelation and what does this word mean, and what does this word mean, and next have a panel discussion on a book. I don't want to do that. I can join a book club if I want to. I want...almost like the gospel every week. I want just to be reminded of why I live my life the way I do, and why I am who I am, and how big God is, kind of thing. So, I've never really got on with the sermons³⁵.*

R: *Okay.*

M: *The worship is always very... we'll sing two songs and then we'll sit down. There's never an opportunity for worship to carry on, or some other song that wasn't planned, you know. For the band just basically to let go.*

R: *To be led by the Spirit you mean?*

³⁵ In several church services during the autumn, the speeches in Green Forest had sought to look into the Book of Revelation, the last book in the Bible. One of these sermons related the message in the book of Revelation to the prediction of a particular way of life going towards its end. To get a sense of what it may entail to experience that one's known world is disappearing, the congregation was encouraged to read a novel by Douglas Coupland, called "Girlfriend in a coma". In this novel such a condition was vividly described; the ending of one way of life and the coming of another. A few weeks later, there was a panel consisting of a few of the members of church instead of an ordinary speech, where the participants discussed how reading the novel could shed light upon the reading of the Book of Revelation.

M: Yeah, I never feel that, ever. I just feel like we're going through what's on the printed sheet. And I know there's a printed sheet, because it's got minutes beside it; how many minutes is allotted to what. And in the other church I went to...so what if the service took two hours? It didn't really matter. Or so what if worship carried on and on; we'll just cut the sermon short. It didn't really matter. And that was, yeah...that was good. And maybe I'll just like the more 'hypee' (hyper; overexcited, excitable) stuff, I don't know.

R: You can come to Marsham Street with us.

M: Is that that... fire stuff?

R: Yeah. It is different, it is very spirit filled. And I don't think I could do it every...

M: Would you be exhausted?

R: Yeah. And there are things that you don't get there. Like, there's not that much scripture reading. I mean, there is scripture within it, but it's not like a teaching.

M: But then there isn't really at our church. I never take a bible because we never have to open it. Barely. If there's visiting speakers we have to, but otherwise we don't. So, I never bother. So, I miss that as well. And that's part of the reverence, I guess. If we can't be bothered to open bibles in church, that's quite sad.

R: Yeah.

M: Maybe I should just get my fix elsewhere of... I don't know. Something a bit more spirit filled, but that just sounds really sad. (...)

R: I have felt encouraged and that there is something more (at Marsham Street). And that's been nice. It's been good to have that reminder, I think. There is something there about receiving something that makes you think "This is different, this is not of me".

M: Yeah, and that's what I don't feel at Green Forest. At Green Forest it could be a group of very, very clever people, bringing a community together, and discussing stuff. Because there are lots of clever people running Green Forest: It's almost like we're relying on clever people more than we rely on God to run the services. But then I can't really complain, because I don't have five minutes to help out, and, you know, not gonna make it any better. It's easy for you to complain, isn't it?

R: Yeah, sometimes, but at the same time it's... you have to be able to point your finger at something, without it necessarily just being complaining. I mean, it is important stuff that we talk about. And if you don't feel you're fed, then that's how it is.

M: Well, I feel like I'll have to get it elsewhere. I get my community stuff in church, and I'll give to church. I give my energy, and my time, but... I don't really get a lot back. The

Sunday after Rachel died, when Clive stood up and said the stuff that he'd learned; you know, that God is always faithful, and even if you think you can't handle something, he'll get you through, kind of thing. That kind of stuff where he spoke from the heart; that's what you remember, and that's what you take away. I'll remember that, but this kind of academic, kind of, sermons, I'm just not interested. Yeah, revelation is a bit interesting, yeah it does have a, sort of, an angle on my life, but it needs to be relevant to me. Recently there was a meeting on how you can be extraordinary in your community.

R: Wasn't that Viv Thomas from St. Paul?

M: Yeah, it was. About just being extraordinary in your ordinary everyday life. And those are the kind of things that do speak to me because that is relevant to my life³⁶.

R: Yeah.

M: So, I quite like sermons like that. But they're very few and far between, and they're always visiting speakers (laughs). My husband and I just say for now, you know, church is our community, and we'll stick by it.

R: So, you both agree that there's something...there's a part...

M: Lacking. But yeah, I don't know how long you stick by something at the expense of your own growth.

R: Because that's what you feel; that you are not growing?

M: Yeah, I think, I feel like I've, kind of, stagnated. I've got to Green Forest and, sort of, stagnated. But maybe that's because I've backed off a bit, and maybe I didn't try, you know, fit more in properly, I don't know. But things just haven't really been resonant with me. I don't know.

R: When I came to Green Forest ten years ago, I thought it was great. We were a group of people who liked to talk about things and, you know, there was prayer and there were prophecies, and all of these things.

M: None of that now.

³⁶ In one of the services focusing on the theme of spiritual formation, a pastor from a different church, Viv Thomas from St. Paul's Hammersmith, was invited to speak. Based upon experiences on spiritual formation groups from his church, he linked faith formation to living an extraordinary life. His message was that one did not have to be extraordinary or to do something extraordinary to live an extraordinary life: All one needed was to involve God in the life that one lived. By living closer to God, life would naturally become extraordinary. His message resembled Clive's speak earlier, described in chapter 3 about Jesus being extraordinary, yet not seeking to be.

R: But had you experienced that before, I mean, in your previous church?

M: Yeah: Normal everyday life. That is what being Christian and being committed to a Christian church in the community is, that's kind of like what you expect, you know. Somebody stands up and speaks in tongues, somebody acts as interpreter, somebody else will pray for you in tongues. Just...it's almost like gifts of the spirit are kind of taboo. It's almost like...keep it to yourself, kind of thing.

R: So, you are familiar with gifts of the Spirit from previously?

M: I've just grown up around, you know, it's just...part of church, isn't it? And it's almost like that part of church just doesn't exist here.

R: So, do you feel that you know what your gift is? And that you can't really use that here then?

M: I think if I have a gift it's probably hospitality, which you can use anywhere. And conveniently in our church, you know, it's easy to be hospitable. But any other gifts, I guess, had I been in a different church I might have found out, but in this church, not at all given the opportunity, and encouraged to find out, I don't think. Maybe it's just I go to the wrong things, I don't know.

Yeah. I don't think anybody... I don't think there's a place where people can use them, and I don't think there's a... You know, can you imagine a Sunday morning somebody standing up saying "I've got a prophesy", it just wouldn't work. And I don't know whether that's because we don't have an evening service. Often evening services, we haven't got the kids, it's a lot better place, and to be more peaceful, and just to be...it's not as rushed, I'm not rushing off for lunch, that kind of thing. I think that does give a whole different kind of side of church, having that kind of atmosphere. I don't know why we can't have that; one Sunday evening service a week, a month.

Maybe there's the anonymity of going to, say, Queen's Road, or wherever, would be nice. Because then you're not chatting to people about how their week was, you don't have to worry about asking so and so about, you know, how their mother is, and, you know, all these people that you meet and keep on top of. You can just go and be, and maybe that is a big thing.

R: Just focus on God.

M: Me.

R: Yeah, you and God. Yeah, it sounds a bit strange that it should be this way. I guess in my mind I've always related Green Forest to that prophetic place, you know, where you could learn things about yourself that would help you.

M: I think it must have been amazing. But I just missed all of it.

R: Surely it can change.

M: I think people are just too busy. There are very, very, very few people who can just give, you know, a whole afternoon, or whatever needs to be given. And there must have been a lot of people giving in those early days, a lot of time, a lot of fair time. People now just wanna be wiping bottoms and chasing children. And even the grandparents at church are grandparents, and they're running around chasing children. They're running around looking after the kids at weekends and in the week. There aren't a lot of people who have time at all. And now that it's been filled up with these different missions, there's no time left.

R: What do you think about that, the mission groups? There must be some kind of recognition within the leadership as well then, that something is missing, do you think, or...?

M: I think they've put these missions in place to get the church going forward somewhere, make church bigger, to get the people in. But it's almost like they...they've forgotten that we kind of need to be fired up to do it. There's no sort of fuel or energy in the engine. And if that's the whole reverence kind of spirit filled thing, and if people aren't just...they haven't got the desire to go out and share Jesus with people, or, you know, be on a mission or contribute to the community, then the missions aren't gonna happen, because the burning desire inside people isn't there. And they haven't really done anything to fuel that.

R: Yeah, the fuel's not there?

M: Yeah. For me it's almost like, yeah missions are all great, but people are doing things, you know, everyone does things in their own little way and contributes to our community, it's just not public.

A wounded church

Myra missed a sense of reverence in church; a sense of awe, a sense of being scared. The fact that church was a cosy and charming place, did not weigh up for this reality. Even Aaron might

have been pointing to the ‘cosiness’ element of church when he described church as having become comfortable: “*We are now as radical as Mothercare!*” Myra’s regret related to the fact that the *cosy kind of community* seemed to have replaced a more explicit and direct sense of church as being a place for communing with the Spirit of God; *I want to come here, you know, to His home*. She wanted to hear simple things, not an interpretation of books in the Bible, but the gospel expressed every week; *Jesus loves you; you are forgiven, you know*. Myra’s request for the simple message of love from the gospels reminds me of something Judith said, in the interview in chapter 6, when describing a book that she had felt fed by; *there’s sort of basic statements of faith about God the Father and Jesus rising from the dead, and it talks about the Holy Spirit and just the sort of basic statements of faith*. I feel that statements such as these reveal a longing for relating to God, as Gaby expressed it, through *plain faith*, not through the mediation of one’s own interpretations, but through a sense of God himself speaking. I think the essential elements in Myra’s interview were about *direction*: her articulations of her desire to be oriented towards God, and the role of church in assisting her in doing this. However, what she expressed more profoundly, was her yearning to be directed by God. When she suggested that she perhaps needed to get what she termed as *Something a bit more spirit filled* elsewhere, she was drawing attention to the orientation of being led by the Spirit, indicating at the same time her perception that the church in Green Forest was not being led by the Spirit: *Because there are lots of clever people running Green Forest: It’s almost like we’re relying on clever people more than we rely on God to run the services*.

Via a reference to her own experience of growing up within a charismatic church, Myra drew a link between the lack of spiritual gifts being expressed in the church services in Green Forest, and the spiritual life of the church. In this respect, she was expressing concerns and assessments voiced by Suzanne, Estelle, Lizzie, and Gaby earlier, in relation to their sense that the influence and direction of the Spirit was missing in church. Myra missed elements like prophesying, speaking in tongues and the interpretation of tongues, all different gifts of the Spirit, which had the quality of offering guidance, and creating a sense of connecting with God, with the gospel, and with the fear and reverence that she felt should accompany faith in God. Within her perspective on life in the Spirit, Myra also expressed her perception on the transformation that the church attempted to facilitate: *They’ve forgotten that we need to be fired up to do it*, she said about the setting up of the mission groups. Her remedy for reviving faith within church differed from Aaron’s call to arms through taking risks. Myra specifically referred to an openness to the work of the Spirit, and church as a space for communing with

and growing in the Spirit, as that which she deemed was needed for a true transformation; a form of gospel reality felt on the body. In relation to her reflections upon relying on God, and as an opposition to a reliance on *clever people*, she pointed to Clive's speak in church after Rachel's death, where he spoke from the heart about God's faithfulness in a difficult circumstance, perhaps revealing one of his own spiritual gifts, namely that of faith. Clive's speak was something Myra would remember, and the type of message she was interested in getting from church; a knowledge of God arising from within, through the experience of real life, by the guidance of the Spirit. To live by grace. Was this perhaps the risk the church should take, to live by the Spirit? Then the rest would follow? I just ask.

What the material in this chapter has revealed to me, is the desire and need for direction, expressed not only by different individuals, but also by the church itself, as represented by the leadership team. Had the church, with all its members, lost its direction, as various testimonies may have seemed to indicate? Was my metaphor of the church as a bleeding bird, lying on the ground, wounded, that I suggested in the introduction to the chapter, an apt portrayal? If so, where was the healing for this body, the healing of the Body of Christ?

A celebration of difference

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.

John 14:1-2

Throughout my work, I have explored seeking God as an orientation of faith related to inner experience, as a phenomenon of embodied knowledge, and not solely as an intellectual idea or dogma. With a particular eye for the dynamic between intellectual- and experiential embodied knowledge, I have explored the concept and experience of a 'living faith', which was what I originally wanted to understand and write about. In chapter 2, I suggested, through my own story, how seeking a personal and intimate God also carries within its expression a basic, universal human need for acceptance and belonging. As I came to realize and described in chapter 1, within my desire to explore the presence of God lay hidden my own need for love and acceptance. My enquiries of the Christian faith on a personal level led me to the concept and experience of love, which in the Bible is fundamentally expressed through God's grace. My pursuit of grace as embodied knowledge can thus be said to have constituted an important context for my seeking. My exploration of intellectual versus embodied knowledge has likewise been based upon the perspective that although grace may be intellectually known by Christians, as in my case, grace as a phenomenon and lived experience may not always be a part of people's embodied knowledge. Through learning to relate to God in a more personal and intimate way, some of the first instances of which I referred to in chapter 1, God's grace has throughout my work come forth to me as the essence of his love and character, through which the experience of relating to God as a person and not just as a concept to believe in, has gradually, and through/in certain contexts, emerged. The perceptions upon grace and faith that I share in my thesis, have grown not only from my own story and experience of faith, but from the many interactions, interviews, and conversations I have had with people in the field and the church

fellowship. The statements of faith that I have presented above, must be considered as expressions of the transitive dimension of knowledge, which as I wrote about in chapter 2, relates to subjective reflections and theories about the world. It is such subjective reflections and experiences that I have tried to explore, aided by my own spiritual journey, and which, as I will show in this last chapter, led me back to the concept and experience of love, through the stories and discourses of others from within the Christian fellowship of Green Forest. Based on my focus on experiential faith, trying to grasp elements of faith as embodied knowledge, expressed in the stories of the people that I met, follows the perspective that faith is not only a spiritual matter, pointing towards a supernatural dimension: Faith is a bodily, existential, and multisensory lived experience, in a world, which is here and now. A person's faith and the body seeking not only connects the believer to a spiritual God, but also to humanity and an actual, human world. As part of the experience of being, religious faith thus deeply attaches the believer to the world through the concrete and multisensory aspects of being a subject and a body.

In this last chapter, I come back to the motto within church to celebrate difference, which I mentioned in chapter two. This motto was manifest in the willingness of the church to be accepting of the existence of different theological standpoints among its members. However, as I have shown and tried to explore, the existing differences in spiritual orientation among people, sometimes seemed problematic rather than celebrated. Through exploring the subject of people's longing for and missing of the prophetic dimension within the church in Green Forest, I have suggested that the longing for the prophetic expressed a deeper need for connecting with the Holy Spirit and engage with the gifts of the Spirit. I believe that the issue that I was being presented with by those who struggled with the aspects of difference within church, was one in which some people were becoming aware of a deep-seated need or urge within them, to develop their spiritual gifts, and to be in a church which was able and willing to support them in their functioning in these gifts. The different negotiations regarding the practical living out of the Christian life within church, articulated through the previous chapters, I sum up as related to different perceptions, experiences and orientations of faith and spirituality, the resolution to which seemed dependent upon a dialogic way of relating to one another within church. Acknowledging and making room for different expressions of seeking God and his presence may thus become a unifying framework for relating to both God and oneself, the fellowship, and the world around. My explorations of the need and desire for the spiritual gifts have been oriented toward the inner life of the person and his or her personal relationship with God, whereas the descriptions of the actualization and outward extension of

the gifts, has stirred a gaze on the individual's place in the fellowship and one's sense of mission in the world. I start the chapter by bringing up the issue of love as a vital force for faith, as it emerged in a church service in Green Forest where people's need for love was articulated. Thereafter I share two interviews whose focus was on extraordinary experiences of God's love. Finally, I try to merge my concern with the faith and spirituality of the individual, as well as of church, with reflections upon the Christian fellowship in Green Forest and their intention to celebrate difference. I settle my explorations of the spiritual seeking and yearning for the presence of God, through reflecting upon the calling narrative as a framework encapsulating both individual and church.

Looking to the past and looking to the future

In the beginning of December, there was a church service in Green Forest, which focused on the past and the future of the church, and I present certain parts of this service here:

Aaron introduced this service as one in which we would look back, to the beginning of the church, and remember those days. We would also look forward, towards the hope related to the future. He linked the themes of past, hope and future to the series on the book of Revelation that the church had been going through over the past months. He said that Revelation involved a looking back at the seven churches mentioned in this book and portrayed as heavily flawed and dysfunctional. The churches referred to in Revelation were also the ones Steve Holmes had talked about earlier, which I described in chapter 8. These churches had received a letter from the apostle John, writing from the island of Patmos. Then Aaron said that the church in Green Forest had also received a letter from two of its former members, and that was Tom and his wife Anna, who had moved to a rough area in another city recently to plant a church. Tom was one of the persons involved in starting the church in Green Forest, so he had been around since the beginning, and Aaron related a little bit of history back to this period³⁷. He stated that the practice of asking former members for letters, was a form of connecting with the theme from Revelation, in respect of the letters sent to the churches there. Then he read out the letter, in which the couple expressed how grateful and humble they felt about having been a part of Green Forest Community Church. What stood out the most to them when remembering

³⁷ I have referred to this history in chapter 2.

*Green Forest, they referred to as the sense of becoming a part of the lives of people in the community. They were facing many challenges where they were now, but the main message was still the same: People needed to feel loved. What it meant to be loved and how the couple expressed love to other people the letter said nothing about, but I noticed the articulation that people needed to feel loved. It was as if this articulation 'to **feel** loved' stood out to me, making me aware that love was being referred to as a **feeling** that was needed, in church.*

After Aaron had finished reading the letter, he talked about the old days as often seen through a rose-tinted glass, a place to which we would like to go back. However, we could not go back to those days. It would be like thinking that in a marriage that had lasted for years, one could go back to the times when one had butterflies in one's tummy, merely by hearing the other's voice. Maybe some people could experience this, but the majority would not, Aaron said. It was a little bit like the temple building in the Old Testament, he continued: The Israelites built a few temples, and the third one Herod built at the same place where the old temples had stood. When Herod's temple was finished, the Israelites started worshipping in it, but God was not there anymore. God had moved on. As a church it would not be possible to go back to the heady old days, because that would not be where God was now; God had moved on. We should remember what had been with gratitude but look to the future. Aaron said that like the rest of society, the church ran the risk of becoming consumerist, being more inclined to want to receive than to take responsibility itself. By these words, he encouraged the congregation to be active in terms of their own desires for church, and not expect just to consume.

Suzanne and I talked about Aaron's last words later. Suzanne did not think it was an appropriate message to give to church. There was a difference between receiving and consuming, she held, and to focus on people who expressed a need or a desire for something as then being consumerist was not helpful and would make it difficult for people to speak up about their needs. In Aaron's talk, the past and the future were used to encourage a certain way of being in the present, which was characterized by being active, moving forward, taking responsibility for changing the world and one's life for the better oneself. His perspectives were concerned with the church's calling to be involved in missionary activity. As Aaron expressed through the story of the temple building, from which God had moved on, the past was a time that was gone, and to desire something from the past was the same as desiring its return, which was impossible and futile.

Suzanne was also pointing to the past in her perspectives, as she had shared them earlier concerning intercessory prayer and the prophetic as more present within church before. She was a voice for those who felt that what had been lost in the past needed to be regained if the church were to become a transformative power in the world, as it was meant to be. For her, as for several other people, encouraging the acceptance of the past as solely something gone forever, meant neglecting what the sentiments related to the past had to say about the present situation, and that which was perceived to be lost. In this perspective, what the recollections of the past stir in one is also a part of one's present here and now, raising awareness of the significance of specific qualities in life. Come to think of Aaron's written article, referred to in chapter 8, he himself referred to the heroes of the past as a way of inspiring attitudes that he was endeavouring to bring to the forefront again. It was just that his heroes of the past were of a different character than the heroes of the past that Suzanne and other people were inspired by. What different people were really trying to reawaken might not have been only the heroes of the past, but lost elements within their own lives, personalities, and spiritual orientations, that one with age had become aware of having left behind, and with time and experience had realized the unfortunate consequences of. Did not church need both types of 'heroes'?

It strikes me how differently Aaron and Suzanne related to the issues of receiving and consuming, and how their different messages also reflected their faith and orientation. Whereas Suzanne in a sense was encouraging the enhanced ability to receive guidance from God rather than needing always to be in charge oneself, Aaron was encouraging people not to expect only to receive but act oneself. Both spoke from the perspective of their own background and personality, their own spiritual journey, and experiences, which coloured the intention behind their messages differently. Suzanne was expressing her orientation in faith, which was one of endeavouring to submit to God. As we recall from chapter 5, this aspect of receiving was one that Suzanne said she always struggled with; how much to do herself, and how much to expect God to do. The dilemma of debating whether to wait on God or take matters into her own hands, signifies the problem that she pointed to in terms of the approach of the church in Green Forest as well. Perhaps it was due to her own struggles of relying on God versus relying on herself, that she became aware of the church struggling in this same area. As she proclaimed in chapter 8; church in Green Forest was about what we can do, whereas the meetings at Marsham Street were about what God could do, which also represents the opposition that Suzanne pointed to. In Suzanne's hopes for the church, lay the perspective and desire to learn to rely on God, more than oneself. In her perception, this aspect was part of what was missing in church. Aaron, on

the other side, seemed to encourage the exact opposite, when he urged people to act upon their desires for the church, rather than expect to receive from either others or from church, to achieve their hopes. For Aaron it seemed to me that the idea of receiving represented a passive act, a form of consumerism of spiritual favour, whereas for Suzanne receiving represented submitting to God, and thus allowing God to be God; almighty, omnipotent, and omnipresent. It was from submitting to this God that the inspiration to act would be born, as she demonstrated through the way she lived her life, always seeking the will of God. I do not think, however, that Aaron did not intend relying on God as essential for the perspective of being active that he stood for. For him, as Caroline had also said about herself, in my interview with her in chapter 7, the spiritual inspiration came from starting to act in the first place, indicating their sense of calling to an active lifestyle, rather than a contemplative one.

I am sure that both Aaron and Suzanne would be able to see the matter from the other's perspective, and this point is the message I am conveying here. The story above serves in my view, as an example of the need within the fellowship, to see an issue from the other's perspective and try to find the middle way. Both Aaron's and Suzanne's perspectives were reasonable, but the contrast between their perspectives shows how differently people related to the same subject, or what appeared to be the same subject, and how potentially, those listening might find the messages confusing. Different perspectives upon church and individuals, and their unification would, however, be possible through dialogue. The church service shared above, encouraging thankfulness towards the past and pro-action towards the future, demonstrates one of the church leadership's attempts at moving the church to a new place, a new future of being a church living up to its calling. Relating this calling to the letter from Tom and his wife and their statement that people needed to feel loved, Suzanne's concern with the condition that people needed to be heard, being acknowledged in terms of one's personal needs, perspectives, and experiences, illustrates a way for people to feel loved, and for church to love them. This perspective also reawakens Buber's exposition to me, of the primary word I-Thou, which he describes as the sphere establishing the world of the relation (Buber 1992). Myra pointed to a similar condition in chapter 8, when she said that people needed to be 'fired up' to become a part of the church's new vision. Her conception of being 'fired up' was in the context related to becoming awakened by the Holy Spirit, the feeling of being seen, and through this sense, feeling recognized. The stories I have shared, of different people's seeking of God, may thus also be considered testimonies of their attempts at getting to this place of 'fire'. In this perspective, the journeying to Marsham Street is a clear symbol of such a search, perhaps also

inspired by the meetings' apt title; 'Fire on Marsham Street'. For those visiting Marsham Street from Green Forest, I do not think their desire was to receive a supernatural experience of God to savour for themselves. I believe they expressed a desire to recognize God's supernatural power and be imparted with his Spirit, to receive from God the most precious of his gifts, namely his grace. Through the sense of being recognized may one not be enabled to act within the world oneself, fuelled by love to reach out to others? This perspective is certainly one that I see contained in the approaches of Suzanne and Myra.

In the end, the different understandings presented here through Aaron and Suzanne, may stand as symbolic references to the discussions about what felt lost within church, where rather than Suzanne representing the inferior stance of the 'suffering group', she represents the pursuit to come together in a dialogic fashion. This perspective would emphasize the view on relating presented by Michael Jackson in his work *Minima Ethnographica*, where he shows how debate and conflict constitute important aspects of intersubjectivity. He states that intersubjectivity must not be misconstrued as a synonym for shared experience, empathic understanding, or fellow feeling, but seen as embracing both constructive and destructive extremes without prejudice. In his view, "Compassion and conflict are thus complementary poles of intersubjectivity, the first affirming identity, the second confirming difference" (Jackson 1998: 4). Intersubjective relating does not always mean harmony; sometimes intersubjectivity is witnessed in conflict and tension. The question for those feeling the tension, must then be how to rise above the difference, if at all possible, to affirm not only one's own identity, but also that of the other.

To feel loved

The core message or the purpose for reaching out to people, to the world, for both Suzanne, Aaron, and the church, I believe was contained in the word *love*, captured in the sermons on Revelations, as well as in the letter to the church from Tom and his wife, referred to earlier. In their letter they had stated that although they had moved to another city, the main message was still the same: *People needed to feel loved*. The focus in this sentence seemed to me to be on those receiving love, needing to feel it, rather than on those giving or expressing the love, through various acts of charity. To the Salvation Army as an established Christian community there was perhaps an underlying assumption that everybody knew that love was the core message, which one was to preach to those who had not yet come to a faith in God, a message

often preached and lived through social action, in accordance with the old motto of the Salvation Army, which was ‘Soup, Soap, and Salvation’. Although there were currently other needs than soup and soap to try to provide for, within the Salvation Army one was taught to focus on people’s practical needs first. As far as the Gospel went, we all knew that God sacrificed his son because of his love for us, and we all knew that Jesus died on the cross on behalf of his love for humankind. But did we understand the scope of this love? Of course not. To be honest, when I had heard this message in church, it did not make a huge impression on me. I guess the rehearsed message about God’s love, due to its wrapping in a language too general to convey any sense of the depth and essence of this love, risked offering more of an intellectual knowledge, the repetition of which became like stating a cliché. However, what would happen to the understanding of God’s personal love for an individual if it emerged as a felt quality in the body, as an element of appropriation (Kierkegaard 1994), as an instance of a prophetic truth? This was the direction of my reflections that the letter from Tom and his wife pointed me towards. The importance of the question of how people would come to feel this love was thus pressed upon me again, as was the recognition of the essence of experiencing the presence of God. In interviews, people often talked about a felt sense of God’s love for them through certain spiritual experiences. Some people gave testimony of a new understanding and knowledge of God’s love based upon personal experiences of God’s intervention, of God’s presence in their lives at precarious times, like for instance Clive in relation to losing his wife, and Gaby in relation to her tummy ache being healed. The experiences they had referred to as revealing God’s love to them had seen and set God in a context which related to their concrete life situations and not only a linguistic context of stating a belief in the possibility of such events. They were stories about *what God can do*, as Suzanne might have put it, carrying within them a testimony of God’s intervention.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, it seemed as though I returned to my initial interest in faith as embodied knowledge, as more and more people that I interviewed focused on specific, spiritual experiences that they’d had. In retrospect, I remember feeling at this period of my fieldwork, as though I was led back to the starting point of my project, where I had exercised the simple desire to learn and know more about the experience of the presence of God. Spiritual experiences had at that final stage of my stay become part of an issue that I was not sure how to interpret and deal with anymore, as I wrote about in chapter 7. Perhaps at some point, I had even tried to diminish the importance of spiritual experience for the knowledge of faith, since I did not see clearly where to put them in my text. I never managed to leave the

subject entirely behind though, and whenever somebody told me about an experience of spiritual value which had been of importance for their understanding and relationship with God, and which stirred a sense of something precious to them, I felt moved and often found myself in a state of awe. One reason for this more pronounced focus on spiritual experience towards the end of my stay, might also be that I interviewed people whom I did not see on a regular basis, and hence did not know as well as many of the others. Conversations about church and what one might potentially miss in church, may not be the first issue to broach with someone whom one barely knows. When I introduced the subject of my work as related to the experiential aspects of faith, many of those whom I interviewed related this theme to spiritual experiences which were decisive moments in their lives. Miriam was one of the women who shared such a story with me, whose interview I will share below:

M: Well, first of all, I could give my testimony, briefly, which came as an experience, a sense of God's presence that I hadn't known before. So, I could start out with that:

As a young woman of 32, I had to have an operation on my back. I had been going to church, but I wasn't yet a believer. All I can say is I was in hospital, I was due to have an operation, I was really fearful about having this operation, so I read long into the night. And the next day I was anaesthetized and went onto the operating table. I don't remember any of that, but I actually had what I now know was a revelation or an experience of God. I'd never heard of anybody having anything like this before, but you know, actually, during that time of being anaesthetized I started to look at my life and I started to think 'What's my life all about? I've got a good husband, I've got children, I've got a lovely home' – all the things that I thought would make me happy. (...) I had all these things that I thought would make me happy, but actually, I just had this real sense that there was something missing from my life, and there was a lot of questioning going on. And those questions were happening during that time of my operation. And I started to feel the insignificance of my life and what was the purpose of my life if I died even then, you know. It really wouldn't be any great loss: I was just as insignificant as a grain of sand on the beach. That's how I was feeling. And it was at that point that I now know I had an experience of God. And what I actually felt at that time was, as I was feeling so low, and really feeling completely unloved, but actually felt this incredible love sweep over me: I just felt like I had two huge arms wrapped around me. And it was like liquid love just being poured out on me, so much so that I

had to say, 'That's enough, I can't...I can't cope with this love'. And the incredible thing was that I knew it was God, and I don't know how I knew that it was God, because I had never heard anybody talking about having experiences like this before. I knew it was God, I knew he loved me – and at that point, I knew that this great God had come to me, and that he loved me so much.

And I started to wake up from the operation; they were still operating on me, so that the pain was severe. I couldn't move, because I was paralyzed, you know, I couldn't move or indicate that I was actually waking up. And I knew that this God who had come to me and loved me so much would be able to deal with it, and I completely put my trust in Him there and then. And the pain went, I don't know what happened, I don't know whether they realized that I was awake, the anesthetist, (...), but I know that I know that I know, that if I had died, I would have gone to be with Jesus. I hadn't prayed the sinner's prayer, but I'd actually put my trust in this God who came to me and showed his love in that incredible way. And I did try to tell people about it afterwards, but they thought I was crackers. They didn't understand – well, I didn't understand, because I'd never heard anybody speaking in that way before.

When I was with Miriam, I felt as though I felt the presence of God myself. This feeling became an important clue to understand Miriam's experience and conceptualization of the presence of God. She portrayed her sense of being loved by God as an experience rather than as an idea to have faith in. She described how she had been touched by God physically, emotionally, and spiritually. It was a story about her physical healing, combined with the emergence of the spiritual knowledge of God's presence, as she emotionally rested in a sense of trust and peace that God would take away her pain at the operating table. She referred to the experience as part of her process towards becoming a believer many years ago, a life-transforming encounter with God, through which she had gained her conviction not only about the reality of God, but also about his character of love, and his love for her: *I knew it was God*, she said, adding that she did not know how she knew it was God, since she had never had any experiences of God before. Her knowledge of God and the sense of his presence were accompanied by a strong sense of being loved, like when she referred to God's presence as *liquid love*. Again, as with the letter from Tom, it was rare for me to hear *love* mentioned by people or within church as a vital aspect of an experience of God. More often, as in relation to Marsham Street, the focus was upon the power of God, upon *what God can do*, but perhaps not

so much upon *why* God would do it. Miriam's story was about an extraordinary experience of God's intervention, of the kind I had heard from the stage at Marsham Street, but when she referred to her story of becoming a Christian, it was God she focused on, and her own inner need and *longing* to know him as a person, and not as a performer of power:

There was a longing in my heart to know more of God. There was a longing to know about what made life...you know, what life was all about, and I think, you know, God knows that in your heart, doesn't he, he knows what's going on. Nobody else knew, because I didn't talk about it, to anybody. I was very challenged when Jehovah's witnesses from next door spoke to me, although you know, I knew that there was something not right about them... I still listened, because there was a real desire, you know, to know and to understand more of God. I'd gone to Sunday school as a child, and it was the only place that I felt secure. In Sunday school and in churches, I felt a real peace.

How do I know God is real to me now, and have experiences? I experience God's presence in worship. I feel him now. I feel he's with us now, because...just a sense of his presence. The atmosphere is different when he's here, I find it easier to talk about him, I find it easier to pray, easier to worship, easier to prophesy when his presence is there. When he's in the house...when God is in the house you can prophesy. And also, there are times when I feel a real sense of his presence, like I just feel as though he has his hand on my chest when I'm...you know when I'm just really...just reading the word, just praying, and when...just being real, not just praying. When there's...when you're just talking to him about things, or it's a heart-to-heart thing, that you'll never be able to discuss with anybody else, I just feel...you know, I feel as though I have a hand on my chest just there (pointing to her chest).

R: Yeah, it's a particular sense, isn't it, that you only get...it can only be the presence of God in a sense...because nothing else will bring that feeling. It's not really a feeling either, is it?

M: Not a feeling! It's an actual touch.

Miriam was describing the personal, intimate God. Her longing had led her to God and faith in him, in perhaps the truest sense of the word *faith*, as trust and confidence in him personally, like when she was waking up before the operation was over: *I knew that this God*

who had come to me and loved me so much would be able to deal with it, and I completely put my trust in him there and then. In Miriam's story she was very specific about context, and the event of the operation was clearly the most decisive moment for her faith and life. She also pointed to certain other contexts where she would often feel God's presence more strongly, like when she was worshipping, reading the Bible, and praying. I found particularly interesting how she related God's presence to instances where she described herself as being real – *when you're just talking to him about things, or it's a heart-to-heart thing.* In this comment she corroborated my own and many others' belief and perspective that one can only meet God through the real life that one is living, and that God is here and now, present in the everyday. She seemed to experience that the presence of God was at hand in her present moment, especially when she was engaged in specific tasks or states which involved her being real and relating honestly to the actual situation in which she found herself. She even demonstrated her belief, experience, and conviction of God's presence here and now by sharing with me that she could feel God's presence at the time and place of our interview, in our moment of talking. In addition to the overall belief that God is always with us, she thus pointed to specific contexts where she would feel God's presence, and she referred to particular senses in her body, which instilled in her the knowledge that God was there, with her in the present. Going further than anyone else, she emphasized the essence of feeling by stating that the feeling we both claimed to have at the time, were actual touches of God, thus in a sense merging the emotional with the physical, as manifestations of the presence of God. The most essential context for experiencing the presence of God that Miriam pointed to, however, was her relating to God as a person who was actually there. If the feeling of God's presence was an actual touch, then it followed that God was also actually there, touching.

I remember feeling a little tinge of confusion after the interview with Miriam, having to acknowledge that I did not fully know how to relate her interview with the rest of my data material, since her interview seemed at the time to 'only' be about spiritual experience. This 'only', however, was massive, because it felt like the essence of everything related to faith and the presence of God: This was what it was all about! What more was there to say? Nevertheless, I was writing a thesis and what I needed was exactly what to say! At such moments it was the void and emptiness of my words that struck me, allowing me a sense of a much greater *beyond* than my words could ever touch upon. As my tutor might have said it – and indeed has, although regarding the very different topic of pain; "What happened (...) remains too overwhelming to find representation in language (Knudsen 2005: 170). Ironically, or perhaps humorously, the

interior message I am feeling as I am writing these lines, must be that my seeking has now come full circle; it all started with the presence of God, and it all ends with the presence of God. And although I will keep talking, I will know that there is really nothing more than this.

Embraced by God

My last month in the field, where the interviews seemed colourful descriptions of experiences of encounters with God, evoked the sense of excitement in me that I had felt before, when I had heard wonderful stories about what God had done in someone's life, like the evening of sharing stories with Suzanne and Vivien, from chapter 2. By then, as mentioned earlier, the issue of how people related to church and how church related to people had become the focus. Through my encounters with different people, contexts, and perspectives, I seemed to have taken a detour from my initial ambitions, having instead started to question my first plans and interests. I experienced what people shared with me as something that was precious, even though I might not have seen entirely how these stories fit in with where I was at with my work at that period. When I met Shaun for an interview, it was again as if I was experiencing a spiritual moment myself, by simply hearing him talk about his own spiritual experience. Like Miriam, Shaun's interview concerned the sense of being physically touched by God, and again the core message seemed to be that the experience was solely related to an expression of God's love:

S: People were dying around me in a period from I was 16 till 20; my uncle, my grandmother...of cancer. My brother's best mate accidentally shot himself. A youth leader died. So, people whom I was close to died. The young guys were two of the strongest Christians – and they died. That was a strong experience. But it did not make me question God. I just knew and believed absolutely that there was a God in heaven. Bad things happen to Christians too. Death happens and death is a part of life. So that was all fine. I just had a real deep faith that there was hope, that in really bad things God is really there. A knowing that God is there and still works in things. So that was quite deep.

And also, I had one of my few big spiritual experiences, supernatural experiences of God, when my gran died in the middle of all this. And I was very, very close to her, and loved her to bits. And she used to look after us a lot; we used to go on holidays with her, used to go shopping with her. She lived half a mile away, we used to

see her most days of the week, sort of thing. And I was very, very close to her. She was a church lady who even right near to the end of her life, I was dropping her off at church. She had a brain tumor that just went bang. And even when it was going bang, she was speaking to these old ladies. She got lost walking out of the house, but she could still preach, because it was so embedded in her, in some part of her memory.

But when she died, I just remember, being by myself in a room at university, being on my bed in this horrible room with big brown flowers in the wallpaper, the horrible brown curtains in the scummy student house, where the back part of the house was dilapidated and actually had been knocked down, for damp. But I was in this front room, and my grandmother had died, and I had absolute peace about her dying, because...it was her time, absolutely fine, and there was nothing at all unsaid. Or no cuddles not...we had so many cuddles with her, and so...all that sort of stuff. But I just think; God, I just miss her, and she's never gonna cuddle me again. And I remember this time, I must be 19 years old, in my room, I'd feel this, this wave just come over me as I sat in this bed, as if...yeah, it's amazing, as if God was cuddling me. Yeah, that was really profound, actually. You could explain it in so many different ways...but the only way I could explain it is, I just prayed to God: 'I'm just gonna miss her, I'm never gonna cuddle her again', so I just said: 'can I have a last cuddle with my gran?' So, that was great!

R: Oh, that was moving!

S: (Laughs a little) Yeah, I was really so...and I just...yeah! I remember just sort of crying after...during this and afterwards, but sort of happy crying as well, thinking wow! Yeah, so I'm just thinking: Wow God! As sort of, I've known you for...all my life...and I just had that thought: Thank you! That sort of, sort of – what a treat!

Yeah (moved speech, tears in his eyes.) So, yeah, that's one of the things that I cherish, and there's... I just don't think I could get that with the other people (laughs a little – I presume he means his childhood's church). I've never had that...I've had a bit more supernatural, sort of more that physical thing...once or twice since. But that thought, why God, really thank you. 'Cause it's sort of...I really had a physical relationship with my gran, sort of just...she missed her husband, but always cuddled me, like, always gripped me to death (both laugh). I was the one person that she could sort of abandon herself in hugs with, and so it seems sort of really...

R: You had a special relationship.

S: Yeah. So, it seems lovely that God sort of seemed to be saying – well, that's how I interpret it as being: 'Here you go!'

It was a very moving story Shaun told me about what he called one of his few big spiritual experiences. Right before telling this story, he had testified to having *a real deep faith that there was hope, that in really bad things God is really there. A knowing that God is there and still works in things.* The story he then told me seemed to verify his faith in God's presence in all things. The combination of the presence of God and a sense of love was emphasized by Shaun, perhaps even more literally than in Miriam's case, since what Shaun had asked God for was an expression, not first and foremost of God's love, but of Shaun's gran's love for him. It was as if Shaun received God's love in the form of his gran's embrace. Shaun's spiritual encounter was imbued with a sense of the reality of God, not as an abstract figure, but as the most personal and intimate God. It was a moment where God became real through showing his love for Shaun in a similar way that Shaun was accustomed to receiving love from his gran. In a context of experiencing sadness over the loss of his gran, God became present as the giver of hugs, as the manifestation of a form of love that Shaun already knew and had felt on his body.

The experience of being cuddled by God did not constitute a conversion point for Shaun; it was not this experience that convinced him about the reality of God. He had been a believer all his life and despite not having had what he called a physical manifestation of God during his childhood and youth, his faith seemed to have been founded upon a deep sense of conviction. Shaun said that within his childhood church, spiritual experience was frowned upon, i.e., people would 'lift their eyebrows' in dismissal of such experiences, according to him. The focus was on the preaching of the word and he grew up learning not to depend on extraordinary supernatural experience. He now questioned his old church's failure to recognize spiritual experience:

S: I never had at that age physical manifestation. Supernatural experience was almost frowned upon – it was 'preach the word, get baptized!' Never much teaching about what you do after you have become a Christian. If the kingdom of God was here and changed us, why didn't we talk more about it? I always knew there was a God, but church never focused on encounters with God.

Although Shaun's story showed that his faith was not dependent on great, spiritual experiences, what his story also expressed was that a spiritual encounter with God could bring about inner change, through God becoming a present figure, rather than a distanced and abstract one. For Shaun, this change may not have concerned the direction of his life in terms of taking up new actions, but a change in terms of his understanding of God: A strengthening of his personal faith through an experience of love.

An afterthought follows my portrayal of spiritual experiences related to a sense of love: I am becoming aware of an aspect of my own spiritual moments related to purpose. I may sometimes have felt that there was a purpose to an experience of God speaking to me, and perhaps I was also seeking a purpose. I am now contemplating whether this aspect of a spiritual encounter, the sense that there was no specific purpose to it other than the experience of God's presence and love, may have been the reason for why I, at the end of my fieldwork, did not know what to do with these experiences. I had grown accustomed to thinking that there should be a purpose to such experiences, and that their justification lay in their later application for good, for the church, community or for oneself, in terms of being of help in sorting out some issue, or for my own part, often in terms of bringing 'revelatory' knowledge and insight. Perhaps there was, also within the environment of the church in Green Forest, as Shaun had described in his old church, a tendency to focus on the pragmatic aspects of having faith, those that would lead to actions of transformative effect in the world? Did faith, and the relationship with God and the language aimed at describing it, in this sense run the risk of becoming instrumental, the mystery of it all becoming lost? Of being a means to an end, in which case, love itself as the true purpose of everything, faded into the background? In his book *Man's search for meaning*, Victor E. Frankl shared a moment of illumination that he experienced during his confinement in the concentration camp of Auschwitz during the Second World War, arising in his mind in the midst of a long and hard walk with his fellow prisoners to a work site. Stumbling on in the darkness, with sore feet and silenced from conversation by the icy cold wind, an image of his wife set before his inner eye. In the book he wrote: "A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life, I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth – that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love.* (...) For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory." (Frankl 2008 (1946)).

Chosen to be healed

During the period that I am mainly describing in this chapter, I went to my last meeting at Marsham Street. I did not know that it was going to be the last meeting for me, because there was one final meeting after this one that I was hoping to go to as well. As I reread my fieldnotes for the writing of this section of my text, I saw that the meeting that became my last one strangely constituted a form of conclusion to one part of my story: The part that relates to healing. Although I do not want to say that the healing of my oesophagus illness was the focus for my spiritual orientation during my fieldwork, the condition had still become a part of my awareness since the first meeting I went to at Marsham Street. The awareness of my illness had followed me through several meetings and requests for prayer, through outbursts of the pain itself and through my own prayers during these outbursts, some of which I felt helped, others not. I had felt that my condition had improved, but I was not healed. To be honest, I do not think I fully expected to be healed. I acknowledged that the question of healing vs. non-healing was not one that came with a simple answer and left it at that. From my fieldnotes:

I spent the last meeting at Marsham Street together with Suzanne and Estelle, my two most regular companions to these meetings. Jonathan Conrathe was speaking again, and it was in fact the fourth meeting he had held during the autumn. I had heard him speak twice before and although I liked him, I did not feel any great expectations concerning what I was going to hear or see. This sense was soon to change, however. When Conrathe came to the front to start his talk, he said that there would not be a focus on healing today, but that there were some people that he needed to pray for, and he was going to do that first. By these words I felt the first tingling of expectation, the swift flutter of my thought to the possibility that I was among these 'some people', a thought that I just as quickly laid aside due to what I considered its unlikelihood. Conrathe continued and said that there was someone with a cataract in their eye and as a result, their eyesight had become a lot worse. He went on, with his eyes closed and with an expression of concentration on his face, to mention illnesses that different people were suffering from. As he talked, his hands would move to that part of his own body that he was addressing on somebody else's. He mentioned asthma, and his hand lingered just above his chest. My sense of expectation and excitement flared up again and with Conrathe's hand still placed in the centre of his chest area, he started to talk about someone who had an issue related to acid in their stomach, and reflux. The breath rose in me. He went on to explain that it had to

do with the muscle to the oesophagus, on top of the stomach, which did not work properly. I looked at Suzanne and she whispered, "Is it you?" I nodded. My legs were shaking, and my eyes filled up with tears, then started to run.

When Jonathan Conrathe was finished mentioning the various illnesses, he said that he wanted to ask those whom he had mentioned, to come forward and be prayed for. "Jesus wants to heal you", he finished. Those words felt powerful and moving. It felt different to be told that 'Jesus wants to heal me', than to just feel stirred up by an inward emotion to go forward for general prayer. The sentence spoken on behalf of Jesus made it feel more personal, more real, more directed at me: This time it was for me! I felt. I walked down the two steps to the front and got in line with all the other people who had gone down. I felt a sense of awe, feeling very moved, and my tears were running as I was standing in line, in between a man and a woman. Jonathan Conrathe went on to the stage and said that he did not have his team with him today, but there would be people coming around to pray with us. He then prayed a general prayer from the stage. Conrathe started praying from the middle of the line of people that had formed, running parallel to the stage, and then moved in the opposite direction to where I was standing. The man soon to take over as pastor at the Emmanuel Church was praying from our side and I realized he was the one who would be praying for me, not Conrathe. This fact did not bother me³⁸. I just felt that if Jesus had said that he was going to heal me, then he was going to do it whomever was praying for me.

For the rest of the meeting, I felt a deep sense of peace and joy because I felt that I had been healed. I felt that I had been chosen to be healed, that I had been among the chosen few. I felt as though I knew that I had been healed, although I had no way of knowing for sure whether I had. But there was something in the sense of peace that I felt in my body, which contained a knowing, almost as if the sense of wellbeing drove any enquiring or doubtful thoughts away. I rested with delight in the words 'Jesus wants to heal you' and I knew with confidence that he would do so. It was a sense of knowing that only my faith could have provided, because there was no scientific or medical evidence to support this sense of knowing. When I felt that I was healed, I felt comforted to such an extent that I did not worry about who prayed for me. The sense of being among those 'some people' chosen for healing, filled me with a sense of being special, of having received special favour for no apparent reason; I felt respect,

³⁸ This comment, or thought, is a reference to one of the meetings with Christen Forster, where I specifically wanted to be prayed for by him, not anyone else from his team, which I described in chapter 4.

and I felt dignified. Perhaps the unifying word that best captures these feelings is the word acceptance, a sense of being accepted and welcomed.

It occurs to me that my story of healing, as well as the stories of Miriam and Shaun that I have presented in this chapter, may all be related to experiences of God's love, for no purpose other than that. The experiences of hearing from God seemed simultaneously accompanied by the experience of being seen, recognized, and loved by God. As I look at the incident of my healing today, I feel that more important than the healing of my condition, was the steps it induced towards the healing of my faith, the reliance on Christ, through the sheer sense of Jesus' desire to heal me for no other reason than his love for me.

An undefinable sense of knowing

I would like to go back to Miriam's story and an element involved in her experience of encountering God's love; the element of knowing something that you do not really 'know'. Miriam knew that it was God acting, although she did not have faith in God at the time or was aware that God could intervene in her life. My sense of knowing that I was going to be healed was not based in any form of reality that I knew from experience. Yet I felt like I knew. What was this sense of knowing? I cannot define it outside of the parameters of faith, but phenomenologically I would describe it as a sense of knowing that held many dimensions; a sense of knowing that God could sort out what was wrong or painful; a sense of knowing that one was favoured by God, and maybe most importantly; a sense of knowing that everything would be okay, because you were in good hands. It was a sense of knowing paving the way of trust, confidence, and faith. The words Clive said he had felt in his heart when he was a boy, which I wrote about in chapter 5, seem another example of this sense of knowing: 'All is well, and all will be well', through which a sense of assurance came forth. As we remember, assurance was defined as faith in Hebrews 11: 1, referred to in chapter 1: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen". The words that Clive had felt in his body were immediately meaningful to him at the time, in terms of the sense of peace they brought him. The words and the bodily sense that the words yielded then, seemed to have become an aspect of Clive's life here and now. As he recalled the words, during my interview with him, I had the impression that these words had come back, or been reawakened, to speak into his presence and give him nurture; they had proven true in a new sense, in a new context, the

context of him losing his wife. The words induced afresh the knowledge and conviction that everything was fine; Clive was going to be fine. In this perspective, the words had the character of being prophetic words, representing a truth, that had been given to Clive at an early age, but not just representing a knowledge of what was, or what was to become, but more importantly, representing the love that moved God to share these words in the first place, and later would move Clive in his turn. The experience of God's deep love would be a truth just as much when Clive was a boy, as when he was a grown man. The sense of God's love through the sense of truth in these words, together with the expressions of love from members of the congregation, was according to Clive what saved him from going under, when he lost his wife. As I discussed in chapter 1 in relation to my own experience of being moved by psalm 63, the prophetic does not only relate to what is in the future; it also relates to the present, as God's disclosure of what is true here and now and will remain true, both in the present, the past, and the future. From my experience of having a sense of knowing at the last healing meeting, that I cannot explain, I find myself thinking that this sense of knowing has similarities to the sense of knowing that people who had prophesies for other people, referred to. In those cases, a sense of knowledge concerning a particular situation seemed to have arisen within a person, bringing with it a sense of urgency to share the object of this sense of knowledge, with those whom it concerned.

As I have suggested before, a significant aspect of the practice of the prophetic lies in its quality of providing the reality of God's presence here and now, opening a space of awareness and a possibility of relating to reality as it is with God in it. In this respect, Edith Stein offers significant insights into the prophetic as a conduit to God, through her work on different knowledges of God, which she expounds upon in the work *Ways of knowing God* (Stein 2000 (1946)). Stein, who was born and raised a Jew, became a philosopher and phenomenologist under Husserl, then converted from atheism to Catholicism and became a nun in the Dutch Carmelite convent at Echt. She was later arrested and sent to the gas chambers of the Auschwitz concentration camp, where she died in August 1942. The work I am referring to here was published after her death. In this work she draws upon the writings of Dionysius, also called the 'Areopagite', a religious writer whom she claims dominated Western thought from the ninth to the sixteenth century. From the vantage point of Dionysius' symbolic theology, Stein refers to the prophetic as an image-language with the purpose of unveiling God and what is holy. Because God is veiled in an 'unapproachable light' and too 'dazzling brilliance', creatures on earth can only draw near him or his mysterious truth through images that serve as riddles or puzzles, hidden under the veil of sensible forms and relevant images, transferring

their names to the divine, and making the invisible accessible through the visible. In this sense, gaining the light of divine knowledge tallies or accords with our human nature, Stein says. Examples of this image-language taken from Scripture, is when God is referred to as a *fire* or divine Wisdom referred to as a *mixing bowl*, from which God's providence is shared. Not only objects, but states and processes of the body and soul (sleeping and waking, being angry), social acts (oaths and curses) and events (the wedding feast and others mentioned in the Biblical parables by Jesus) count within the different types of images within this language. Stein suggests that symbolic theology leads us through the familiar images from the world of our experience to the Kingdom of God.

Bearing in mind the various examples provided from my participants' narratives of mental images and words through which God was experienced as speaking, we see how they exemplify the image-language that Stein describes. In this light, we also see how Shaun's story of feeling his gran's embrace, that he had experienced so many times before, becomes an image of his relation to both his gran and to God. There is often, as is witnessed in Shaun's experience, an objective presupposition for the creation of this image relation, according to Stein; to be able to form a thing into an image of something else, to see the one in the other, the latter, i.e., God, must be known. A person's images of God must be formed based on his/her awareness of God, even if this awareness only erupts in a moment, as in Miriam's story. In her case, it seemed the knowledge of God that arose in her during the operation was an essential antecedent to her later choice of a conscious, personal relationship with him. This perspective brings us to Stein's explorations of the different sources for knowing God, i.e., different knowledges of God.

Ways of knowing God

The first source of the knowledge of God that Stein mentions, is natural knowledge, based on our knowledge of the created world, from which we infer arguments for the existence of God, and which proceeds by conceptual thinking. This world is our 'external world'. The second source of the knowledge of God is faith, which Stein terms the 'ordinary' way of supernatural knowledge of God. This way involves accepting and retaining the supernatural revelation of God and his truth communicated through the *Word* (Scripture). Faith by itself, apart from any extraordinary illuminations, can thus be a source for the image-language of symbolic theology. The third source of the knowledge of God comes from supernatural experience, which is the 'extraordinary' way of supernatural knowledge of God. Herein belong revelation and

inspiration. If God speaks through his Word, written down by those speaking for him, his emissaries, then *his Word* must stand out from ordinary human words. God's Word can thus be conceived of as revealed by God to an emissary who is inspired or moved by God, in what to write and often how to write it. Stein uses the example of the prophet Isaiah here, who experienced a great vision of the Lord sitting on his throne, surrounded by seraphs, speaking his Word for Isaiah to pass on to the Israelites (Isaiah 6). This encounter should be taken in the literal sense, she holds, as something that happened for real, and not in a purely intellectual way. Nevertheless, Stein asks the question of how a prophet can be certain that he is standing before God? Seeing with the eyes or in the imagination does not necessarily have anything to do with this certainty, she says. When both are absent there may still be an inner certainty that it is God speaking. This certainty can rest on the 'feeling' that God is present; one feels touched in one's innermost being by God. Stein calls this the *experience* of God in the most proper sense, and the core of all mystical living experience: the person-to-person encounter with God, which induces the knowledge of God, but not from deductions and rational considerations. Whenever God unveils himself or a hidden truth, he does so through his Spirit; and whenever a human being is chosen to convey such a truth to others he must be guided by the Spirit, she says. The definition of faith from Hebrews that I have referred to so many times before: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen", sheds new meaning upon the message of Edith Stein, revealing certain clarifications upon my own insights as well. Accepting the fullness of faith as assurance and conviction stemming from the reading of Scripture, Stein has gone further and stressed the type of knowledge stemming from *experiential* faith, the conviction of things *seen* through personal experience, and related this to knowing God personally. She compares these ways of knowing God to the difference between having heard about a person and meeting the person for real. Pointing to the extraordinary supernatural knowledge of God which is at the core of mystical experience, where the guidance and presence of God as the holy Spirit is central, she points to the way of knowing God that I have tried to explore and describe in my text. Emphasizing *feeling* that God is present as essential to this certainty of God, she also indicates the process which may lead a person into a prophetic role and mission.

From the stage at Marsham Street I had heard encouragements to seek a sense of God's presence. In the church in Green Forest the message would lean more towards the idea of, and faith in, God as being present in all situations. Sometime after I had come back from the field, I discussed with a good Christian friend the distinction between presence and present, and its

significance in terms of relating to God. My friend made the comment that God is in the present and we can therefore only find him in the present. This sentence clicked into my understanding and highlighted the perception of present as a much broader term than the experience of presence. The present is what we are always living in, whether we experience a sense of presence in a strong way or not, be that the presence of God or of something other. Seeking the present opens us up to a journey of acknowledging what is in the present, no matter what this present is, whereas seeking presence may lean more towards seeking a particular experience of presence, often infused with good qualities, like peace, love, and harmony; qualities that we often relate to God. If seeing God as already here and now in your life, with or without a sense of his presence, the intentionality behind relating to God for the believer may rest upon a sense of openness, expectation, and confidence in that whatever happens, it happens *with* God present, as Shaun expressed in the face of losing his two Christian friends and his gran. Faith in God as present may thus become an embodied orientation and conviction; a faith, which merges the spirit and the body, grounding both the body and the spirit in the world, the circumstance, the situation, the moment, the history, and the purpose that applies here and now, in a new way. Seeking God in this way relates to seeking to live in the reality in which you find yourself. However, an experience of a moment induced by the sense of God's presence, a sense, view, or a glimpse of God, stirred from within a particular situation may be what *brings* the conviction of the reality of God in the first case, as in Miriam's story of experiencing God on the operating table. Such an experience may also be something that, again as in Shaun's case, grants new knowledge of who God is to a person, through the *mediation* of for instance a hug (as Jeremy might have put it, from chapter 7). Such glimpses of God, of Christ, may be understood as what Stein referred to as the coming of the kingdom of God/Heaven into the world³⁹, from where it may continue to grow. From the perspective of life in God, these experiences bring knowledge of God in different ways, which Stein has tried to describe.

³⁹ Then Jesus asked, "What is the kingdom of God like? What shall I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his garden. It grew and became a tree, and the birds of the air perched in its branches." Again he asked, "What shall I compare the kingdom of God to? It is like a yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour until it worked all through the dough." Luke 13: 18-21.

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is', or 'There it is', because the kingdom of God is within you." Luke 17: 20-22.

The Body of Christ

Supernatural experiences as the extraordinary way of the knowledge of God may also be described and explored from a perspective of their meaning within a given society. As I have expressed through my work, my ambition has not only been to understand personal experiences of knowing God, but how faith in God and the spiritual life of the individual may come together within a fellowship. Moving from the subjective experience of individuals to the intersubjectivity involved in being a church, I will in the following consider a perspective of church as a focal point or ‘crucible’ for different experiences of the presence of God. Experiences of spiritual content described from the perspective of the inner life of the individual, also have an ‘external’ countenance, focusing on the consequences or ‘fruits’ of such experience for the individual within a community. This is the gaze that I am applying when I now look at the church. From this vantage point, I will apply the perspectives of the atheist philosopher Alain Badiou to shed light on the church’s position of being ‘for all’, since this position can be related to the discussions of difference and unity within church.

In his work *Saint Paul*, Badiou explores the New Testament story of Paul on the road to Damascus as an example of an event causing a rupture within society and to the individual, at the same time stressing the event’s universalising properties and its making of the individual into a ‘subject’. According to Acts 9, Paul was blinded by a strong light and heard a mysterious voice revealing himself as the resurrected Christ, telling Paul to stop persecuting the Christians and join them instead, to become the apostle he later is known as. In Badiou’s terminology the sphere of human action consists of an ‘ordinary’ realm and of an ‘exceptional’ realm. The ordinary realm, where Paul found himself before his encounter with Christ, is the realm of knowledge or approved *knowledges*, the realm of established interests and differences; a set order essentially static and ‘objective’, exemplified by social norms and common attitudes on various issues; societal tendencies that control our thoughts and behaviour in a larger political perspective. Paul’s contemporary situation was thus dictated both of the Jewish community, Roman law and Greek ideology. The exceptional realm consists of singular innovations or truths⁴⁰, which Badiou refers to as truth-procedures. A truth-procedure can only begin with some sort of break with the ordinary situation in which it takes place, causing a rupture to

⁴⁰ Bear in mind that Badiou’s concept of truth differs from my own usage of the concept of truth, as it was used within the Christian community.

everyday life. This break Badiou calls an *event*; a happening which leads to an innovation or a truth (Badiou 2007: ix). Badiou considers what happened to Paul as an event. This ‘thunderbolt-experience’ led to Paul’s conversion to Christ, bringing him into an exceptional realm and instituting him as a Christian subject. Badiou says about the event of Paul’s conversion that it mimics the founding event; “it is the subjective sign of the event proper that is the Resurrection of Christ.” (Badiou 2003: 17). Similarly, he calls Paul’s event a (re)surgence (resurrection) of him as a subject in Christ, the ‘I am’ in Paul.

Every truth in Badiou’s view erupts in this way, as singular, i.e., related to a particular situation, and its singularity is immediately universalizable; applicable to all, which Badiou in the case of Paul’s event emphasizes by referring to Gal. 3: 28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female”. The truth that defines a Christian subject, is believing in and declaring the gospel of Christ resurrected, and remaining faithful to this declaration. The truth is universal because it is addressed to everyone, without limiting the offer by setting as its condition the belonging to any specific categories or groups. We see how this condition is present within the conceptualization of the church’s mission, in terms of the vision of sharing the gospel with everyone. Through this perspective on universalism, we may understand the logic behind the motto of a celebration of difference that the church in Green Forest held; it is the same principle of relating to difference by way of superseding it, or traversing it, which figures as the fundamental condition for Badiou’s universalism. Belonging to a particular church is not that which creates unity; it is the sharing in the experience of the event proper, through which one becomes instituted as subjects in Christ, and this position is not dependent on external traits and categorizations. Making a quick leap from Badiou’s philosophizing to Edith Stein’s, her descriptions of different ways of knowing God may be seen through Badiou’s perspective as different portrayals of the event, truth, and truth procedure, her exposition of the experiential faith through extraordinary experience coming closest to the example of Paul. No matter the formidability of the event, the subject may arise to a new knowledge. We may also recall here Berit Borgen’s work, which I described in chapter 5, of the coming into a new and life transforming perspective through the conversion to Christ, testified to by the substance abusers that she wrote about (Borgen 1994).

As I said above, Badiou’s perspectives point from singular experiences to the intersubjective domain. In terms of discussions about the church, the journeys of different members can be brought together or merged in the concept of intersubjectivity. I have not highlighted subjective events in isolation for the purpose of subjective experience; if the

singular events I have described all relate to or emerge from the founding event, the event proper, the Resurrection of Christ, then singular experiences should not be perceived as solely about or for the individual having the experience, but about and for the entire body of the church, as a collective consisting of individuals wanting to follow Christ, receiving in various ways and at various times revelations and inspiration from God, with the potential of ‘a rupture’ with the ordinary realm. Without the unifying event which the body of Christ constitutes, singular experiences would merely represent different subjectivities and point to the individual, whereas within the perspective of the resurrection of Christ as the founding event, they all point to him. Badiou describes the resurgence of the ‘I am’ in Paul, or the event that institutes him as a subject in Christ, as “the exemplary matrix of the link between existence and doctrine, for Paul draws from the condition of his ‘conversion’ the consequence that one can only begin from faith, from the declaration of faith” (Badiou 2003: 17). In relation to the church in Green Forest, I believe I witnessed this link between people’s experience and their convictions. Sometimes the convictions surging from an event, lead to perspectives and approaches regarding how the church should be run and what it should stand for. The perspectives of the people within the leadership team regarding church, were based as much upon their own experiences and ensuing convictions, as did the perspectives of those feeling a sense of lack within church. However, if the declaration of faith as Badiou describes it, relates to the founding event of Christ’s resurrection, then for the church to present a message relating to perspectives on lifestyle or ‘church style’ matters, would be to move away from the truth and the exceptional realm, and force the truth into the ordinary realm, in which it becomes static and objective.

According to the apostolic letters in the New Testament, the church is the body of Christ in the world: A body that moves as one entity, one whole, but consisting of interdependent and equal parts. *Being* the body of Christ i.e., the church, is a biblical metaphor, which relates to the idea that every Christian or Christian church is a limb on the body of Christ. The different limbs have different purposes, but all are important for the functioning of the body as one. This perspective necessitates inclusion of all parts, lest the body be functioning poorly; it thus merges difference with oneness and unity. In Badiou’s words: “(...) whatever people’s opinions and customs, once gripped by a truth’s postevental work, their thought becomes capable of traversing and transcending those opinions and customs without having to give up the differences that allow them to recognize themselves in the world” (Ibid: 99). Differences are indifferent, and the universality of the true collapses them, says Badiou. I believe that this was the place that the church in Green Forest and their members wanted to get to. Both the church

and its members desired the sense of remaining gripped by the truth's postevental work, to help others come to faith and experience the event proper of the resurrection of Christ, to traverse their differences to find their place in the exceptional realm.

A celebration of difference

As I mentioned in chapter 2, the motto of celebrating difference was one of the ideals for the church in Green Forest, reflecting the desire to encourage an environment of openness towards differences of opinion and belief among the members, concerning for instance theology. This desire was also an expression of the vision to work together and function as one body, where everyone belonged and played their part. As I came to learn about the disagreements that existed among people concerning various aspects of the church, such as its spiritual profile, its approach to mission and the content of the services etc., I pondered upon how a church can live by an ideal to celebrate difference. What is a celebration of difference going to look like practically, within a church, when certain differences turn out to be problematic rather than celebrated, lest the motto becomes only an intellectually acclaimed slogan? It seemed to me that during the period that I refer to in my thesis, different spiritual orientations did not attain equal significance within church, causing a sense of loss and the lack of recognition in those whom this concerned and affected. The spiritual approach directed towards engaging with the prophetic and other gifts of the Spirit, was struggling more to be heard and recognized within the church in Green Forest. As many of the people whom I interviewed had pointed out, academic and mission-based approaches to church and the Christian life seemed the most promoted. For those who felt that their voices were not heard, like Gaby, who felt that the loudest voices in church were the 'thinkers', and who felt that her own needs were not met, the idealized difference was harder to celebrate, and may have precluded a sense of unity in terms of the spiritual aspect, with church. What seemed to be missing for this group, was a sense of being a part of the church in such a way that one's spiritual identity felt expressed through the church body. Academic analysis, or incitements for action, would never fulfil the need for depth, and the care, comfort, and direction from the Spirit, which nurtured the faith and being for these. Rather than wanting to consume, what they wanted was a space within which to act upon their spirituality and orientation.

The challenges involved in realizing practically the motto of celebrating difference is also part of the story of belonging to the church, of seeking to belong, and not merely a story

of estrangement. The approach of Gupta and Ferguson concerning the intervention of anthropological knowledge may suggest the way forward, also for the church incorporating different types of spiritually informed knowledges: *“Rather than viewing anthropologists as possessing unique knowledge and insights that they can then share with or put to work for various “ordinary people”, our approach insists that anthropological knowledge coexists with other forms of knowledge. We see the political task not as “sharing” knowledge with those who lack it, but as forging links between different knowledges that are possible from different locations and tracing lines of possible alliance and common purpose between them. In this sense, we view a research area less as a “field” for the collection of data than as a site for strategic intervention*” (Gupta and Ferguson 1997: 39). Applying this ambition for the church in Green Forest, relating to the domain of church as a site for strategic intervention, would in this perspective involve an endeavour for coexisting with different forms of knowledge. The sense of belonging to church depends upon the integration of different ways of knowing God, whether this knowledge comes from seeking God through a sense of his presence, through the gifts of his Spirit expressed through intercessory prayer and the prophetic, through intellectual understanding, or through risk filled action for the sake of being a visible witness of the Gospel. Perhaps one of the dilemmas for the Salvation Army regarding the sense of difference within church relates to the fact that its task is not only to be a ‘progressive missionary movement’ saving souls but also to reflect ‘The kingdom of God’ at home and as home, the place to find rest for their weary souls: *“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest”* (Jesus in Matt. 11: 28). William Booth pointed to the principle of adaptation in relation to doing mission: *“Go to the Indian as a brother, which indeed you are, and eat and drink and dress by his side. Speak his language, share his sorrows, and make him feel that you have come down, if it is a coming down, to act after the fashion of Christ”* (Roots 1994: 27). The content of these words, which stems from a letter to one of Booth’s officers in India, one also finds in Paul’s letters in the New Testament: *“To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some.”* (1 Cor 9: 20-23) Becoming all things to all men may not only apply to those whom mission is directed at, but also to those whom mission goes out from. This perspective was captured in one of Myra’s comments from chapter

8: *They have forgotten that we need to be fired up to do it (mission)*, in which she pointed to the sense of belonging to church as essential for the inspiration needed for going out into the world.

My intervention as an anthropologist into the discussion of difference has been the writing of this text. In portraying a group that felt that their longing for a more Spirit filled personal spirituality and church approach were not being met, I have suggested a wider gaze for the church beyond its own agenda, for the church to be looking to include the views and experiences of these members of the church. To be inclusive of and open towards not only the existence of different theological perspectives, but also to *engage with* other spiritual orientations, would for the church involve allowing these a space of interaction for the expression of themselves and their knowledge of God, as legitimate parts of the Body of Christ. Likewise, I also suggest an engagement in dialogue with the church for those sensing and experiencing a loss of vital qualities for their personal faith and spiritual life, to let their voices be heard. I choose to believe that the seeking to unite different experiences and orientations in a space of mutual interactions was present as a desire within the church, if not fully achieved, a strength existing as a possibility.

Being and doing: A calling narrative

In various ways, the journey of my thesis has entered in and out of ‘the body’, both my own and others’: The particular and situated individual human body seeking God – of which mine is one, and a wider human body constituted by the fellowship of believers as the body of Christ. Upon this material I have created a narrative that has tried to capture the life and embodiment of faith through concrete situations and lived life, granting not only the experience of what it is to be in the world as a human body, but also in theory the experience of what it is to be in the world as *one* body, through the perception of the church as the body of Christ. My text has on one level been about transcendence; about how people through experiences formative of their faith, were lifted above the ordinary, singular, and specific conditions of life, and into a dimension where the essence of being related to a sense of union or re-union with God, through an awareness of his presence. On the other hand, my text has been grounded in the world, through its focus upon what it means to be a body in the world. Through my narrative, I have tried to merge the perspectives and experiences of being in the world and at the same time stretching for, *seeking*, to live in the Kingdom of God. My text has been a narrative of the individual seeking God, and of the individual seeking to understand herself in relation to God.

It has also been about seeking to understand each other and the fellowship. At last, it has been about seeking to understand how to write about these relations as an anthropologist, through the feeble means of a narrative. What remains to be said, will have to revolve around narrative.

The creation of narrative is said to be a natural part of life and being, it is how we make sense of experience, even when experience is impossible to make sense of. The quest for meaning within culture is presented as the proper cause of human action, as much a part of our 'culture' as of our 'nature' (Bruner 1990: 20). As anthropologists, we try to sketch out a temporary still image or portrait of specific episodes, experiences, or events, which capture certain aspects of the lives of those about whom we are writing. We make narratives not only for the sake of the cultural portraits that we are trying to create, we are at the same time also engaged in the making of our own personal narrative. Albeit accepting that we can never present ethnographically the full truth or the final picture, of neither others nor ourselves, a tentative image of a bigger story also starts to form, in tune with our growing experience and knowledge. This process is part of the craft of text-production which anthropology involves, but it is also part of the general production of meaning which life itself invites us to engage in. The unfolding of different personal stories that we as anthropologists witness and try to connect for the sake of cultural analysis, ultimately is part of a greater narrative than we are able of telling, i.e., life itself. This sowing together of 'multiple narratives', of often unshareable experience, into an overall narrative, can of course be the cause of a fair amount of confusion, encapsulated in the anthropological approach of participant observation in the interface of both distancing oneself from the field and becoming a part of the field.

Whilst in the field, being in the middle of experiencing may create the sense that one only has the middle part of the narrative, falling short of both its beginning and end, which are necessary integral parts of the plot (Bruner 1986a). The overwhelming experience of the nitty gritty details of life in the field may bring more nuances than one feels able to handle narratively, sometimes disrupting a clear vision of the beginning and the end of the writing project. Such an experience becomes more obvious when one is in a process of seeking and writing about seeking. One aspect of seeking is for instance the sense that one is looking for something that one cannot quite define, with the possible consequence of feeling constantly trapped in movement and caught in a never-ending story. Although ethnographic texts need a beginning and an end as narrative tools, when it comes to the lived life that we are trying to capture, what we relate to in the field for the main part is the present, our own and that of others. There are two matters of importance here; how to deal with the present of the actual *lived* life,

and how to extract from this life and into the narrative one is trying to write. Deleuze and Guattari's take on 'beginnings and ends' in their work *A Thousand Plateaus*, where they decline the supremacy of chronology, became an important first approach to my own attention to the present once I was back in Norway to start the writing.

Deleuze and Guattari suggest an alternative way of relating to the world than through the lens of 'beginnings and ends'. Using the image of the rhizome a new perspective emerges where the 'beginning' is defined by choice, not linear time: The rhizome is a root with no detectable beginning or end, and it is therefore always caught somewhere in the middle. Connected with a myriad of other root stems, it is a root they associated with the status of being between things, symbolically emphasizing inter-being, rather than a beginning or an end. The focus is upon proceeding from the middle, through the middle, highlighting coming and going rather than starting and finishing (Deleuze & Guattari 2004: 27-28). For me, the image of the rhizome highlighted the fact that the living of anyone's life finds itself at a yet indeterminable place between a beginning and an end, and a written text reflecting this life can be conceived of as being a glimpse into 'the middle of life', and into that place representing this 'middle'. Although this perspective is liberating at one point because it frees me to live in and relate to the present to a greater degree, it does however, not take away the fact that one still needs a beginning and an end, even if these may be chosen according to one's own will. This freedom to live in the present, which resides in 'the middle part, the in between', cannot be actualized until one knows that one is indeed in this inter-being referred to by Deleuze and Guattari. One needs a place from where one started this journey, this surrendering to inter-being, to the present, and one needs to have a certain idea of direction. The construction of a beginning and the perspective of an end are important in terms of how one relates to and captures the present both as lived life and as text and will impact and form the story one recounts of the middle-part that one is living. The beginning and the end constitute important frameworks for this story, both as it is lived and as it is told, but they are choices that the storyteller makes, a part of the storyteller's construction and authority.

This framework of beginning and end is where the Christian story reveals a particular relation to the present and the significance of an overall framework, incorporating both the seeking of one's true self, and the seeking of one's calling. The Christian story represents both expressions of *being* – the search to discover who I am, and expressions of *doing* – the search to discover my tasks or purpose in the world. Both expressions of calling are captured in the seeking of God. I believe that the choice of a beginning, and the placing of oneself within an

ongoing story surrendered to God as the main narrator, is the essence of the life lived as a believer in and follower of Christ that I witnessed in the field, both for the individual believer and for the church. Through exploring individual stories, which sometimes comprised explicit stories of calling, of some of the members of the church in Green Forest, my material has shown the dynamics and challenges involved in a process of enquiring into how one's personal story may align with the bigger story of the church and its vision. It is in this perspective that my text has provided space for those voices expressing a sense of lack and of seeking, sometimes accompanied by a sense of not entirely belonging, or of not quite having found one's place and path, existentially and spiritually, within the bigger, united whole that the church is. The seeking of God and one's calling become part of the direction or narrative holding together the life of the individual believer in different ways, some of which I have tried to grasp in my text. In this respect, the calling narrative may become personally and individually empowering, as a force of life, placing the believer in the interface between lived life and story, between perceptions of heaven and earth, where the small individual stories also have a place within the big story.

The big story is not only represented by the belonging to a church, but by the belonging to the image and story of those identifying as the people of God, the followers of Christ, the Christian subjects (re)surrected by the 'I am'. This big story stretches from the Old Testament's story of God's calling of the Israelites, culminating with the continuation of this story through the New Testament as a calling and thus a new story, reaching till the ends of the earth, encompassing all who want to be followers of the new way, the new manifestation of grace, which is Christ. What I have tried to say, and believe that my material has shown, is the proclamation that the calling narrative, which is such a massive component within the Christian church and identity, is more than an incitement for action and doing, urging one to engage in mission or a vocation. The calling narrative is equally a calling to oneself; to stand up in the new identity that one is granted in Christ, through the instituting of oneself as a subject; it is a calling to receive the love and grace of God. And then, finally it is a calling to receive and realize the tasks that have been bestowed upon one in the world, through the event of the rupture and transformation that coming to Christ and gaining faith, is.

The latent power of the calling narrative is thus, that it both puts the individual into a specific context and a bigger story, where one not only feels as though one has been 'summoned' by God himself, but feels provided with an individual path, purpose, and story. The individual story can thus be seen as unique and constantly fed by the bigger one, which is perceived as being narrated by God, through the Word and through his Spirit, through different

ways of knowing God. Life as this bigger story may often feel out of reach, and at the same time within touch. What I have presented in my text is a few of the moments in the smaller as well as greater story of life, which we can sometimes only surrender ourselves to and live, now and then catching glimpses of others and ourselves, God and the world, in moments of awareness and moments of revelation. Within this story, perhaps hidden in a longing for a future, which may or may not resemble a better past, is a seeking to *be*, and to feel that one *is*, in the present, in the presence of God; grounded in the world and at the same time grounded in God, through being the Body of Christ.

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Graphic design: Communication Division, UIB / Print: Skjipes Kommunikasjon AS



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ISBN: 9788230849514 (print)
9788230847664 (PDF)