

**CO-AUTHORING SPIRITUAL WAYS OF BEING:
A NARRATIVE GROUP APPROACH TO
CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

by

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NOVEMBER 2000

DECLARATION

I, Trevor Allan Hudson, declare that **CO-AUTHORING SPIRITUAL WAYS OF BEING: A NARRATIVE GROUP APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY** is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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ABSTRACT

This qualitatively oriented Practical Theology research project was based on a narrative enquiry into the spiritualities of five Christ-followers. These conversations occurred within a small group context, and were aimed at enabling the participants to co-author preferred spiritual ways of being. Because of my commitment to reflexive research practice, other voices and perspectives were invited into the research process. Besides sharing in numerous reflexive conversations with my supervisors, I brought into the group three 'outside voices'. By sharing their stories, these 'outside voices' challenged privatised expressions of spirituality, introducing a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' into the research process and enabling the research participants to wrestle with the challenges of a compassionate and ethical spirituality. In this conversational journey I was able to engage the central research question of whether a group narrative approach can facilitate the intention of Practical Theology to transform human life.

Key terms: Christian spirituality, narrative approach, Practical Theology, contextual approach, hermeneutic approach, 'hermeneutic of suspicion', social constructionism, ethical, reflexivity, local congregation.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCING THE RESEARCH STORY

... the sound of story is the dominant sound of our lives.
(Reynolds Price quoted by Taylor 1996:5)

1.1 INTRODUCTION: THE SEARCH FOR A MORE MEANINGFUL SPIRITUALITY WITHIN A POST-MODERN CONTEXT AND ITS CHALLENGE FOR PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

1.1.1 The renewed interest in spirituality

We are currently witnessing a widespread resurgence of interest in spirituality and spiritual formation (Houston 1990; Leech 1992; Foster 1998; Rolheiser 1999). Within the South African context, the 'New Land Journey' of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa confirms this trend. After sifting through the written responses of some fifteen thousand members, and listening to the expressed needs of about seven hundred grass-roots delegates at a three-day residential conference, the Methodist Church identified the call for a deeper spirituality as its top priority (Olivier 1996). Mairs (1993:12) articulates some of the critical questions that lie at the heart of this spiritual searching:

What does it mean to live a life in God's presence?
Present to God? What responsibilities do I bear in creating
such a life? What choices must I make in order to sustain
it?

1.1.2 The challenge from inside and beyond the church

Voices both within and outside the Christian church are challenging it to take the need for spiritual transformation seriously. One reason for the present day criticism of Christianity is the result of its failure to take human transformation

seriously as a real, practical and everyday concern (Willard 1988:ix). If Christianity is to have any message for Africa, it has 'to be a call to be transformed in the name of Christ' (Dandala 1997:1). In one of his last presidential speeches, Nelson Mandela challenged the religious leaders in South Africa by calling for 'an RDP of the soul' (Mandela 1999:1). Indeed, Kretzschmar (1996:63-75) has argued that a holistic spirituality represents a key pre-requisite for reconstruction in our country. These calls for a spirituality of human transformation coincide, as the following section points out, with some of the central concerns of Practical Theology.

1.1.3 The challenge facing Practical Theology

We need to understand better how our choices and actions enable us to experience God in more transforming ways (Mairs 1993:12). This need describes one important challenge facing Practical Theology today. The most urgent task Practical Theology must tackle is exploring and researching how one goes about deepening our spiritual lives as Christ-followers (Willard 1988:14-18). Gerkin (1986:61) suggests the following tentative definition of Practical Theology:

Practical theology ... is a critical and constructive reflection on the life and work of Christians in all the varied contexts in which that life takes place with the intention of facilitating transformation in all its dimensions in accordance with the Christian gospel.

1.1.4 The contemporary post-modern context

Pastoral practice does not take place in a cultural vacuum. Today we live in an era widely recognised as 'post-modern'. This cultural shift from modernism to post-modernism has numerous implications for those involved in the ministry of spirituality (Endean 1996:175-178). While the scope of this research project does not permit a critical examination of these implications in the light of the Christian faith, for the purposes of this study, I assume that post-modernism is 'something

to acknowledge as the inescapable context in which we live and interpret' (Brueggemann 1993b:ix). Hence I wanted to co-construct with other spiritual seekers a way of going about Christian spirituality which would be appropriate to the post-modern culture in which we live (Webber 1999:138). For the reasons set out below I have chosen a narrative approach to do this.

1.2 GENERAL BACKGROUND: THE NARRATIVE SHAPE OF HUMAN EXPERIENCE, STORY-TELLING AND THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

1.2.1 The narrative dimensions of human experience

Our lives have a narrative shape (Peterson 1997b:3). Indeed, we are the stories that we tell about ourselves. We are also the product of all the socio-cultural stories that we have ever heard (Taylor 1996:1). These stories which we tell about ourselves are not merely ways to describe our lives; stories give form and meaning to our lives (Müller 1998:8). We make sense of our lived experiences by arranging them in sequence across time, linking past, present and future (Epston 1998:11). In this way, we seek to arrive at a coherent account of ourselves and our world. This account can be referred to as a story or self-narrative (White & Epston 1990:10). As Sterk (quoted by Bridger & Atkinson 1998:277) points out:

Human beings call upon the narrative form when they need to present a meaningful account of experience to themselves and others.

1.2.2 The performance of personal stories

Our stories also need to be told. This story-telling requires an audience. The performance of our stories before a relevant audience leads to their re-shaping with real effects on our lives and relationships. Not only does experience structure expression; expression structures experience (Epston 1998:11). In other

words, by telling our stories, we reorganise and re-author our lives (Müller 1999:9). Hence, with regard to the real effects that this public performance of our stories has on our lives, Epston (1998:12) points out:

The expression of our experience through these stories shapes or makes up our lives and our relationships; our lives are shaped or constituted through the very process of the interpretation within the context of the stories that we enter into and that we are entered into by others.

Moreover, the re-authoring of our lives also takes place as we enter the stories of others. When we listen to another person's story through the ears of our own, there is a movement in our own story (Kotzé 1999:21). White (2000:75-77) refers to this 'movement' when, in his reflections on outsider-witness groups /reflecting teams, he revisits the notion of 'katharsis'. He suggests that when we are moved, or transported, by listening to another's story, and so become other than who we are on account of this, we experience 'katharsis' in its classical sense. He writes (White 2000:77):

My preference is to relate to the idea of katharsis in its classical sense - people being moved in the sense of being transported to another place, where they could not have otherwise been, as a result of witnessing a performance of life that is 'gripping' of them.

1.2.3 Story-telling and the local congregation

Capps (1998) emphasises the importance of story-telling for the general life of the local congregation. Writing with specific reference to pastoral counselling from a narrative perspective, his main premise is that it 'exemplifies story-telling within a constructive context' (Capps 1998:173). Unlike the destructive gossip that often pervades a local congregation, which is a kind of 'story-telling that does not occur in a constructive framework' (Capps 1998:173), pastoral counselling in a narrative mode is 'a higher form of gossip' (Capps 1998:192). In its

conversations, pastoral counselling affirms the importance of the seemingly trivial (Capps 1998:188), helps individuals to gain an imaginative freedom from the dominant culture (Capps 1998:193), and provides conversational space amongst congregants that they do not experience in the other language systems of their lives (Capps 1998:194). His conclusion is relevant to the concerns of this research project:

In congregations where the personal stories of parishioners are treated respectfully, are listened to responsibly, and responded to in a helpful manner...the fact that this is how the pastor works becomes known and it becomes a positive example for how parishioners may hear one another (Capps 1998:213-214).

If story-telling has an important value within the congregational context, and is also central to the human experience, how can congregations go about providing spaces where people can gather to share their stories (Taylor 1992:151)? Is a life of faith essentially a collaborative and mutual activity in which we listen to each others' stories and help craft new ones (Peterson 1980:80)? Can we enter our own spiritual worlds and those of others by listening to the personal stories of one another (Kotzé 1999:22)? My musings about these preliminary questions underpinned this practice-based research study into a narrative group approach to Christian spirituality.

1.3 PERSONAL REASONS FOR CHOOSING A NARRATIVE EXPLORATION INTO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

1.3.1 My personal spiritual journey

I am currently seeking a spiritual way of being that affirms and enriches the particulars and details of my daily life. Often my experience of the Christian faith has been the very opposite of this. Instead of helping me to interpret my actual lived experience and to re-author my life as a Christ-follower, dogma has instead

imposed on me an extra or superior mode of existence. Much contemporary Christian teaching encourages us 'to remove the essence of faith from the particulars of daily human life and relocate it in special times, places, states of mind' (Willard 1988:28). A narrative approach, on the other hand, provides 'a context for attending to the small and ordinary, for listening at the level of the word to the possibilities for a story to pivot at any point' (Weingarten 1998:3).

1.3.2 My work as a pastor in the local congregation

As a pastor I wanted to learn how to enable others to envisage more meaningful ways of living spiritually. I believed that this could happen if people recognised how the small and ordinary material and moments of their everyday lives fitted into the plot of God's story (Peterson 1980:76). This would involve, at the very least, learning how to let others tell the stories of their lives. Reflecting on this narrative dimension of pastoral work, Peterson (1980:75) writes:

The pastor begins this work then, not so much as a story-teller, but as one who believes that there is a story to be told, the curiosity to be attentive to the life of another, and the determination to listen through the apparently rambling digressions until a plot begins to emerge.

1.3.3 My style of pastoral conversation

I wanted to learn a way of conversing about our faith and lives that would deepen and enrich our experience of God. Language functions at many different levels and has many different purposes (Peterson 1989a:36). As a pastor I have been trained in speech forms mainly suitable for preaching and teaching the Christian faith. Learning to ask questions and listen to people's stories, and to interpret them in the light of our faith, requires another style of pastoral conversation. I believe that a narrative approach with its emphasis both on the meaning-giving power of language and stories and the importance of asking questions from a

'not-knowing' position has much to offer (Müller 1999:17-20).

1.3.4 My personal journey in narrative therapy

I wrote this research thesis while I was enrolled at the Institute for Therapeutic Development, where I was introduced to Narrative Therapy. Certain aspects of this hermeneutic approach to therapy stood out for me. These included developing externalising conversations through a process of relative influence questioning, fostering a not-knowing posture towards others, mining for the seeds of an alternate and hopeful story in the midst of the dominant and oppressive one, becoming aware of those cultural discourses of power and knowledge in which our lives are situated, the co-creation of new meanings leading to the re-authoring of lives and relationships according to preferred self-narratives, and the use of reflecting teams/compassionate witnesses in the therapy conversation (Andersen 1987; White & Epston 1990; Anderson & Goolishian 1992; Monk et al 1996; Weingarten 2000). As a pastor I was keen to learn how to use this approach with pastoral and theological integrity. In other words, I was eager to explore what was distinctive about the use of narrative within a Christian context, especially with regard to a deepening of our spirituality. I believed that by reflecting upon my research experience, I would be able to pursue what I had learnt.

1.3.5 My personal writing in the area of Christian spirituality

Since the early eighties I have been involved in the work of Christian spirituality in three major ways. First of all, I developed a model for doing Christian discipleship within contexts of human suffering called the Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope (Hudson 1999). Secondly, I have been involved in spiritual retreats for members of various church denominations (Hudson 2000 in press). Thirdly, I have written three books exploring the nature of the Christ-following life (Hudson 1995, 1998; Hudson & Kelsey 2000). While much of this work had narrative

overtones, I hoped that this research project would enable me to go about my future ministry in the above areas with an even greater narrative focus.

1.4. RESEARCH QUESTION

In formulating my central inquiry I sought to bring together my twin concerns of discovering how a narrative approach can enrich our spirituality and making a contribution to the discipline of Practical Theology. The research question reads as follows:

In what ways can a narrative group approach to Christian spirituality facilitate the intention of Practical Theology to transform human life?

1.5 RESEARCH AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The above research question was then expanded into the following research aims and objectives:

- **to explore how Christian spirituality could be more meaningfully facilitated within a post-modern culture;**
- **to co-construct with five other spiritual seekers preferred self-narratives as Christ-followers within the context of a small group;**
- **to explore what is distinctive about a narrative group approach to Christian spirituality; and**
- **to put forward some ideas for doing Christian spirituality from a narrative perspective within the local congregation.**

1.6 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.6.1. Christian spirituality

1.6.1.1 Introduction

Spirituality is a relatively new word in the English language. Rolheiser (1999:5) points out that 'it is only within the last thirty years that this word has become part of our common vocabulary'. Benner (1998), in his discussion of the term, summarises some of the various meanings that the word has come to have in its English usage. Spirituality has been regarded 'as the human quest for and experience of meaning' (Benner 1998:87), 'an expression of a yearning for connections' (Benner 1998:87), 'a person's experience of and response to the Divine' (Benner 1998:88), and 'an expression of a yearning for surrender' (Benner 1998:88). Given these meanings, Benner argues that spirituality 'is foundational to humanity' (Benner 1998:88). Hence, Rolheiser (1999:6) writes:

Everyone has to have a spirituality and everyone does have one,
either a life-giving one or a destructive one.

Christian spirituality, similarly, 'demonstrates a great variety of understandings and experience' (Benner 1998:91). So, although I had written about the subject (Hudson 1995, 1998, 1999; Hudson & Kelsey 2000), and had read extensively in the literature, I was concerned that my understandings and experience of Christian spirituality would not predominate in and determine the direction of the research journey. As already explained, one research concern was to learn how a group narrative approach could enable the research participants to co-construct preferred self-narratives as Christ-followers (see 1.5). A group of five research participants was constituted to explore this research problem (see 2.4.2.2). It was for this reason that, in the group's first meeting together, I introduced the idea of Christian spirituality as a socially constructed experience, asked the research participants to describe *their* personal meanings around the notion of spirituality

and invited them to identify areas of their spiritual lives which they wanted to explore in conversation. However, I also highlighted two convictions about Christian spirituality which I brought to the research journey (see 2.4.2.4). I would like to conceptualise these briefly.

1.6.1.2 *Experiencing God in the everyday and ordinary*

As I describe later in my conceptualisation of a narrative approach, I brought to the research journey my belief that God's presence and activity permeates all human activities with the intention of bringing about God's purposes for these people (see 1.6.2.3). This personal conviction has its roots in an incarnational approach to spirituality which insists that the divine and human must not be kept apart (Leech 1985:239), and in Ignatian spirituality with its strong emphasis on 'finding God in all things' (Hebblethwaite 1994:222-232). This conviction also coincides with my present search for a way of spiritual being that enriches the particulars and details of my daily life. In the light of my above faith-conviction regarding God's presence and activity permeating all human activities with transformative intention, I was strongly drawn in the research journey to explore what Malouf (quoted in White 2000:145) calls the 'little sacraments of daily existence'. Against the backdrop of his narrative approach to therapy, White reveals this sacramental notion in a way that guided me. He writes (White 2000:145):

The word *sacrament* invokes mystery. And it evokes a sense of the sacred significance of the little events of people's lives; those little events that lie in the shadows of the dominant plots of people's lives, those little events that are so often neglected, but that might come to be regarded with reverence, and at times with awe. These little sacraments are those events that have everything to do with the maintenance of a life, with the continuity of a life, often in the face of circumstances that would otherwise deny this [White's italics].

Significantly, when Peterson (1989b) reflects on the work of the pastor in doing spirituality, he explores 'small talk' as a pastoral art. Encouraging pastors to move away from conversations about 'grand themes' and 'big issues', and to attend to the everyday and ordinary in people's lives, he urges them to 'cultivate conversational humility' (Peterson 1989b:122). This means 'staying close to the ground (humus), to people, to everyday life, to what is happening with all its down-to-earthness' (Peterson 1989b:122). Adopting this conversational mode enables the pastor, to use a phrase drawn from narrative therapy, to 'exoticise the domestic' (White 1991:27). Given the strong tendency to locate spirituality in 'an extra or "superior" mode of existence' (Willard 1988:31), exoticising the domestic in peoples' lives enables possibilities for a spirituality of experiencing God in all things. It could be for this reason that Kotzé (1999:122) suggests:

Near experience language opens up possibilities for spirituality
whilst academic discourse suffocates spirituality.

1.6.1.3 *An ethical spirituality*

Christian spirituality often risks becoming solely an inward and individual experience (Leech 1992:14-17). As such, it becomes 'confused with a privatised form of the Christian faith which limits the impact of the Gospel to the private concerns of the individual' (Kretzschmar 1998:155). Responding to this ever-present possibility, I have written elsewhere that compassionate caring lies at the heart of an ethical spirituality and way of life lived after the manner of Jesus (Hudson 1995, 1999). Indeed, I have gone so far as to suggest that spirituality 'that does not make us more caring cannot be called a gospel-spirituality' (Hudson 1999:85). Leech (1992:17) argues in a similar vein:

If we are to rescue Christian spirituality from its captivity to individualism and the culture of false inwardness, we will need to recover the sense of its social character, indeed the sense of the social character of the gospel itself.

Besides influencing my conversations with the research participants, this particular ethical conviction also shaped the way I went about doing Practical Theology. The limited scope of the dissertation allows for only one example at this stage. During the research journey, I brought in three 'outside voices' into the group's conversations (see 2.4.2.6). I deliberately chose people whose life stories would challenge a privatised form of Christian spirituality, and who would facilitate a human 'hermeneutic of suspicion' into the ways we interpreted both our own faith-stories and God's story as described in the Scriptures (see 2.3.6). This idea of bringing in 'outside voices', with the purpose of facilitating a more caring spirituality amongst the research participants, was rooted in my past pastoral experience. During the 1980s and early 1990s I had developed a model for doing Christian spirituality called the Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope (Hudson 1999), in which congregants were exposed to situations of suffering and oppression. The transformative effects of this experience in the lives of those who participated encouraged me to facilitate a similar experience of exposure for the research participants in a small group setting. (I describe this 'pilgrimage' model more fully in the final chapter).

1.6.2 A narrative approach

1.6.2.1 *Introduction*

Narrative and story are terms that were used interchangeably throughout this research project. Indeed, as Marguerat and Bourquin (1999:40) point out, for 'there to be a narrative there has to be a story'. They explain that central to the structure of any narrative/story, and serving as its unifying principle, is its plot. Taylor (1996:58) points out that one criterion for a meaningful life 'is that we find a plot in our lives'. In order to find this plot, we need to organise our experience, frame it, or give some pattern to it (Epston 1998:11). For reasons set out below (see 1.6.2.2), I propose that 'story' or 'narrative' provides 'the dominant frame for

lived experience and for the organisation and patterning of human experience'. Following this proposal I want to define a story or a narrative 'as a unit of meaning that provides a frame for lived experience' (Epston 1998:11). Given the cultural shift from modern to post-modern ways of thinking and knowing, together with its implications for the inter-subjective construction of knowledge (see 2.4.1.3), narrative or storytelling has become a prominent theme in post-modern thought. Indeed it has been hailed as *the* primary category in post-modern analysis (Bridger & Atkinson 1998:277). I chose narrative as the conceptual framework for my research because of the considerations set out below.

1.6.2.2 *The narrative quality of human experience*

Our stories are our dwelling places. Human experience has an inherent narrative quality. It is 'moulded, root and branch, by narrative forms, ... its narrative quality is altogether primitive' (Crites 1989:84). This narrative structuring of human experience sheds light on the way we understand various aspects of our being in the world.

Firstly, it links with and contributes to our understanding of our temporality. Human beings are multi-tensed, which means that we have a past tense, a present tense, and a future tense (Lester 1995:22). The past is made available in the present through memory, while expectation or anticipation brings the future into the present (Lester 1995:12). However, it is through the narrative structuring of our experience that these separate modalities of time are joined together, so providing that continuity of experience through time on which our sense of personal identity depends (Crites 1989:77-78). Thus, time and narrative are joined together inseparably. As Ricoeur (1984:3) writes:

... time becomes human time to the extent that it is organized after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the feature of temporal experience.

Secondly, the narrative structuring of human experience demonstrates 'how the language that we use *constitutes* our world and our beliefs' (Freedman & Combs 1996:28). Indeed, since the stories in which we dwell are dependent upon language, it can be said that we exist in language (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:4-7). By changing the way we speak, therefore, we can also change the way we understand and organise our worlds (Drewery & Winslade 1996:34). In other words, as Burr (1995:43) points out, if 'language is indeed the place where identities are built, maintained and challenged, then this also means that language is the crucible of change'. Freedman and Combs (1996:29) stress the therapeutic implications of this connection between language and change when they write that 'change, whether it be a change of belief, relationship, feeling, or self-concept, involves a change in language'. From a theological perspective, it follows why the faith that facilitates a new way of living involves, at the very least, learning and practising a new language (Clapp 1996:102-105; Dawn & Peterson 2000:31). In his reflections on the Christian faith as a particular way of life, or culture, Clapp (1996:103) writes:

So it is that different cultures teach us different languages and grammars, which in turn cause us to see the world differently. Accordingly, the church as culture teaches a language and grammar that causes Christians to see the world in a peculiar - namely a Christian - way.

Thirdly, the narrative structuring of human experience opens a way for understanding people as 'living human documents' whose life-stories could be viewed as texts which call for understanding and interpretation rather than categorisation and stereotyping (Gerkin 1984:38). Besides opening up possibilities for a hermeneutic approach to Practical Theology and Pastoral Care (Capps 1984; Gerkin 1984, 1986), this connection between storying our lives and viewing them as texts 'advances the idea that the stories or narratives that persons live through determine their interaction and organization, and that the evolution of lives and relationships occurs through the performance of such

stories or narratives' (White & Epston 1990:12; see also 1.2.2). White (White & Epston 1990:13) argues:

Stories are full of gaps which persons must fill in order for the story to be performed. These gaps recount the lived experience and imagination of persons. With every performance, persons are reauthoring their lives. The evolution of lives is akin to the process of reauthoring, the process of persons entering into stories, taking them over and making them their own.

1.6.2.3 *The narrative quality of God's self-revelation*

In choosing narrative as my conceptual frame of reference for understanding God's self-revelation, I am aware that narrative theology 'has come to mean a number of related but different things' (Gerkin 1986:43). While it is beyond the scope of this study to explore all the issues concerned, I would like to position myself clearly with regard to my understanding of the narrative mode of God's self-revelation.

First of all, I would regard stories as the primary way in which the revelation of God is given to us (Peterson 1997b:3). Brueggemann (1993a:63) asserts that we 'cannot know Yahweh apart from Yahweh's story'. We come to know this 'story of God' through the stories of those who have a relationship with God (Hauerwas quoted in Lester 1995:41). These stories are found primarily in the Scriptures (Gerkin 1986:48). However, this biblical story of God is an open-ended one. Gerkin (1986:48) clarifies:

It does not stop with the end of the collection of biblical texts. Rather it concerns the activity of God in all of history, a story that continues in the present and is to be fulfilled in the future. The biblical story of God is thus the story of an active, purposing, covenanting, promising and redeeming God who has always had and continues to have a stake in whatever takes place in God's world.

Secondly, I believe that the language describing this narrative mode of God's revelation is always metaphorical. McFague (quoted in Gerkin 1986:45) points out that the only 'legitimate way of speaking of the incursion of the divine into history...is metaphorically'. Metaphor 'is a way of talking about the events of history and of present experiences that acknowledges that what one says about events and their meaning both is and is not true to the reality about which one is attempting to speak' (Gerkin 1986:45). Peterson explains (Dawn & Peterson 2000:70):

The use of metaphor is not a precise use of language; in fact, it is quite the opposite. A metaphor, instead of pinning down meaning, lets it loose. The metaphor does not so much label or define as it does expand, forcing the mind into participating action.... Metaphor keeps us from being spectators of language by forcing us to be participants in it.

This metaphorical interpretation of God's presence in human experience suggests two consequences which I sought to bear in mind during my research. On the one hand, it underlined the necessity for Practical Theologians to continually re-interpret the meanings of the Judeo-Christian narrative and its metaphors, especially as other ways of seeing the world emerge (Gerkin 1986:52). On the other hand, since metaphor draws from common sensory experience, 'the same sentences on which scholars write learned books are also read and understood by truck drivers and waitresses in conversation over coffee' (Dawn & Peterson 2000:71). This 'accessibility' feature of metaphor makes it possible for all Christ-followers to be Practical Theologians, even children!

Thirdly, in introducing my research project, I must openly declare that, with regard to the central plot of God's story and its relation to human experience, I made one central assumption. Put simply, it was the belief that God's presence and activity permeates all human activities with the intention of bringing about God's

purposes for them. In return, our faith responsibility involves placing all our activities within a structure of response to the activity of God. As Gerkin (1986:71) affirms:

This theological notion that our actions are permeated and given redemptive coherence and direction by the activity of God is a central theme of the Christian story. In a sense it grounds all other themes of that story; it is what it means to be the people of God. In narrative language, it is the central plot.

1.6.2.4 *The narrative dimensions of pastoral practice*

Story-telling and story-participating are an integral part of everyday pastoral practice. Writing about and to pastoral counsellors, Gerkin makes the point that they relate to narratives in three ways on a regular basis. First, they are listeners to stories; secondly, they are interpreters of stories; and thirdly, they are the bearers of stories (Gerkin 1984:25-27). Reflecting on what facilitates meaningful pastoral counselling and visitation in the local congregation, Peterson (1980:76) suggests:

...all that is needed, is an arrangement in which everyday conversation can be treated confidentially and purposefully, so that a sense of collaboration can be established, so much as to say, 'We are going to talk together, and we are going to make a story out of our conversation. We are going to find where we, together, fit in the plot of God's story'.

1.6.2.5 *Evaluation of a narrative approach*

While a thorough critique of a narrative approach is beyond the scope of this research project, I want to identify two possible limitations of the approach and explain my position in response to these limitations.

Gerkin indicates one possible limit when, in the light of Ricoeur's reflections on the writings of Freud, he refers to the tension between the language of force and the language of meaning (Gerkin 1986:130). The language of force relates to the presupposition that all human behaviour is determined by a confluence of forces, while the language of meaning relates to the ways in which we interpret our lives (Gerkin 1984:50). The question is then whether the narrative-hermeneutic approach takes these forces which act to bring things about seriously enough if these forces are both internal to the person and the community and external to them. I would like to make two points:

First of all, as Gerkin himself points out, these forces only become visible in the narratives people tell about their lives. Thus, while the stories which we tell about ourselves always function within the limits of what is not shaped by a story, we do need a story to indicate the presence of these forces in our lives (Gerkin 1984:192; 1986:131). Secondly, while I do not want to avoid addressing the question of the relationship between the force/meaning dynamics of human life, I believe that the narrative emphasis invites us into greater responsibility. Taylor (1996:143) states the idea clearly:

Ceaseless blaming gives away too much of our power. It takes the keys of our destiny out of our own hands and places them in the hands of forces that are either hostile or indifferent to us... Rather than responsible characters acting to shape our lives, we are static victims, waiting for someone else to determine our future. But if we are not responsible we are not free, and if we are not free we cannot be characters in meaningful stories.

A second possible limitation relates to the question of ethics and whether a narrative approach can provide a moral context for my research. In other words, does a narrative, hermeneutic mode of enquiry enable one to locate oneself with regard to the norms, boundaries and visions of the good life (Gerkin 1991:11-22)? Can story-telling and story-participating within local congregations lead to

what Van der Ven (2000:1) calls 'the formation of moral communities'? Are all human stories equally true and valuable (Taylor 1996:143)? Does a narrative approach enable people to reflect upon the morality of their actions (Goodliff 1998:221)? Given the confusion and fragmentation of norms and boundaries in contemporary society, and more particularly the repeated calls for a new moral order in South Africa, these questions are important. Again, all that is possible within the limited scope of the study is a brief positioning of myself as researcher with regard to this critical concern.

First of all, both my qualitative research approach and Practical Theological method insist that I be explicit in relation to my biases and faith-commitments (see 2.2.6 and 2.3.2). I did my research as a member of the Christian community whose normative way of being in the world is shaped by the images and metaphors of biblical narrative accounts of God's presence and activity in the world (Gerkin 1986:48-49). Hence, I operate knowing the constant challenge for all Christ-followers to interact with this biblical narrative and to seek ways of being faithful to it. However, and this I consider to be one of the contributions that a narrative approach makes to the arena of ethics, this does not mean imposing 'spiritual principles', 'moral guidelines', 'theological truths' on others in order to force a godly shape on their lives (Peterson 1997b:4). Instead, it involves nesting their personal stories 'within the biblically grounded narrative of the God who is both transcendent of the human story (God's "otherness") and active within that ongoing story (God's suffering, gracious, redemptive "presence")' (Gerkin 1986:54), and living out of this biblical narrative in our own time and place.

Wright (1992:140-143) offers a helpful analogy, drawn from the world of drama, that illustrates how we can live out of the biblical texts in our own time and place: imagine, he says, that a formerly unknown play by Shakespeare is found. However, it is incomplete, since it has only four of the original five acts. Because no one can write like Shakespeare, it would be foolish for someone to write a fifth act. Rather, suggests Wright (1992:140), 'give the key parts to highly trained,

sensitive and experienced Shakespearian actors, who would immerse themselves in the first four acts, and in the language and culture of Shakespeare and his time, *and who then would be told to work out a fifth act for themselves*' [Wright's italics].

Wright (1992:42) sees the Bible as having four acts - Creation, the Fall, Israel and Jesus - while the writings of the New Testament form the first scene of Act Five, giving hints of how the play should end. Those who follow Christ 'would then live under the "authority" of the extant story, being required to offer an improvisatory performance of the final act as it leads up to and anticipates the intended conclusion'. In this way, as Clapp (1996:138) points out, 'the church does not so much apply Scripture as perform Scripture'. This improvisation of the biblical text in our lives, I want to suggest, indicates one way for us of interacting with the Scriptures and being faithful to them.

Secondly, a narrative approach expresses its ethical concern by providing space for critical reflection on the effects of our choices and actions on the lives of those around us. Responding to the concern that narrative therapy in particular may encourage an 'anything goes' attitude, Freedman and Combs (1996:35) argue that, on the contrary, it motivates us 'to examine our constructions and stories - how they come to be and what their effects are on ourselves and others'. They add (Freedman & Combs 1996:35-36):

The issues of deciding, of choosing, and of examining the effects of our choices are central to the kind of therapy that we practice. Not only do we carefully examine the beliefs and values that we choose, but we invite the people who come to see us to examine their beliefs and values as well.

By inviting reflection on one's personal choices and actions, as described above, a narrative approach creates openings for ethical discernment and facilitates movement towards an ethical or good life. In this respect, it is worth recalling

Ricoeur's (1992:180) definition of an ethical perspective, 'aiming at the good life with and for others, in just institutions'. Given my prior personal conviction that compassionate caring lies at the heart of Christian spirituality and living (Hudson 1995, 1999), I suggest that compassionate caring also constitutes the primary characteristic of this good and ethical life. Thus, throughout the research journey, I was eager for the participants to reflect on the effects of their actions and choices on the lives of others, especially on those who suffer most. I was further encouraged in this direction by Van der Ven (2000:9) when, in his discussion on the practical formation of moral communities, he writes that now 'is not the time to strive for knowing about our own salvation and redemption, but only for helping the needy, supporting the poor, caring for the sick'. Goodliff (1998:70) describes the relevance of such a compassionate spirituality when he writes:

If the post-modern world will not take heed of the gospel message, it just might take note of the quality and sheer vitality and authenticity of the care with which the Christian community embraces a hurting and disintegrating world in the name of Christ.

Thirdly, the narrative approach demonstrates its ethical commitment by taking seriously 'the broader sociopolitical context of the person's experience' (White & Epston 1990:18). Drawing on Foucault's notions surrounding the power and knowledge discourses in society, White (White & Epston 1990:22) argues that since 'we are all caught up in a net or web of power/knowledge, it is not possible to act apart from this domain, and we are simultaneously undergoing the effects of power and exercising this power in relation to others'. Hence the ethical challenge of accountability for those of us who work narratively is 'to establish conditions that encourage us to critique our practices...identify the context of ideas in which our practices are situated and explore the history of these ideas' (White & Epston 1990:29). In my own research, I sought to be accountable through my commitment to be reflexive throughout the research experience (see 2.2.4 and 2.4.2.6).

1.7 OUTLINE OF THE REST OF THIS RESEARCH STORY

In Chapter Two, I describe my qualitative research approach, my practical theological methodology, my research procedures and the way I went about writing up this research report.

In Chapters Three and Four, I provide an analysis and interpretation of my conversations with the research participants and the 'outside voices', paying special attention to the ways in which they described their experiences of God and spiritual lives. On the basis of this reflection I articulate and explore six questions relevant to the aims and purposes of this research project (see 1.5).

In Chapter Five, I summarise my reflections and experiences in exploring a narrative approach to spirituality, and outline some emerging ideas for going about the formation of a transforming Christian spirituality from a narrative perspective within a local congregation. In addition, I also outline what I learnt about Practical Theology and the doing of research following a qualitative approach.

In this research report, real names are used with the permission of all the research participants.

CHAPTER TWO

DESCRIBING THE RESEARCH APPROACH

Somehow we have lost the human and passionate element of research. Becoming immersed in a study requires passion: passion for people, passion for communication, and passion for understanding people. This is the contribution of qualitative research ...

(Janesick 1994:217)

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes my qualitative research approach, my practical theological methodology, my research procedures and the way I went about writing up the research report. My choices in these four areas were largely motivated by two central concerns. First of all, I wanted an overall research approach and practical theological method which allowed me to take seriously the conceptual framework for my research (namely narrative). Secondly, I wanted my research enterprise to be an ethical and accountable endeavour. Denzin and Lincoln (1994:12) point out that 'the age of value-free inquiry for the human disciplines is over', and that researchers must now 'struggle to develop situational and transsituational ethics that apply to any given research act'. In this chapter I show how the different components of the overall research approach took these two concerns seriously, as well as how they related to each other.

2.2 A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH

2.2.1 Introduction

Maykut and Morehouse (1994:2) point out that researchers following a qualitative approach need to articulate reasons for doing so, if they want to

defend their projects as rigorous and valued pieces of scholarship. Let me, therefore, describe three reasons underlying my choice of a qualitative approach.

First of all, a qualitative approach fitted in well with this research project's overall conceptual framework (namely narrative). On the one hand, unlike quantitative research, which is based on observations that are converted into discrete units which are then compared to other units by using statistical analysis, qualitative research 'generally examines people's words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more clearly representing the situation as experienced by the participants' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:2). On the other hand, since qualitative research is committed to 'the interpretative understanding of human experience' (Nelson quoted in Denzin & Lincoln 1994:4), it fits in with a hermeneutic/narrative approach to Practical Theology. This means, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994:2) point out, 'that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them'.

Secondly, a qualitative approach enabled me to explore and pursue a social constructionist epistemology for my research (see 2.4.1.3). Like social constructionists, qualitative researchers 'stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is researched, and the situational constraints that shape enquiry' (Denzin & Lincoln 1994:4). Sears (1992:148), in his reflections on the relationship between qualitative research and social constructionism, points out that a qualitative approach allows those who work from a social constructionist position 'to step into the worlds of others, to portray these worlds through the authenticity of their voices, and to understand these worlds through methodological integrity reflected in emerging hypotheses and the development of grounded theory'.

Thirdly, a qualitative approach offered me room to honour some of the

predominant ethical concerns that I brought to the research process. These ethical concerns included making visible my own biases/assumptions/values, taking seriously the interdependence between researcher and what was researched, allowing the voices of the research participants themselves to be clearly heard, remaining accountable throughout the research process to my conversational partners, ensuring that the research journey was a respectful one, and above all, making the research participants themselves the primary beneficiaries of my research (Janesick 1994, Maykut & Moorhouse 1994, Sears 1992, Steier 1991).

These three reasons become clearer in the light of the emphases associated with a qualitative research method set out below.

2.2.2 Human-as-instrument

Qualitative research looks to the '*human-as-instrument* for the collection and analysis of data' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:26). This means that 'it is the person with all of her or his skills, experience, background and knowledge as well as biases which is the primary, if not the exclusive source of all data collection and analysis' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:26). Thus, qualitative research is characterised by 'a close examination of people's words, actions and documents in order to discern patterns of meaning which come out of this data' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:16). The power of qualitative data, therefore, 'lies not in the number of people interviewed but in the researcher's ability to know well a few people in their cultural context' (Sears 1992:66).

2.2.3 Patterns of meaning

Qualitative research is characterised by attempts 'to capture the lived experience of participants in order to understand their meaning perspectives' (Janesick 1994:218). This implies deeply shared encounters where we listen to those

stories in which people have sought to give meaning to their lived experiences (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:25-39). As social construction discourse points out, these meanings are co-created by people in language, as they collectively generate descriptions and explanations (Gergen & Gergen 1991:78). It follows, therefore, that with regard to this particular study, the emphasis was not solely on my own understanding of how spirituality could be fostered by a narrative approach, but on the patterns of meaning generated by all the research participants in response to the concerns of this research project. Sears (1992:152) describes this emphasis well when he writes:

Fundamentally, qualitative enquiry is a state of being: a willingness to engage and to be engaged, the ability to momentarily stop internal dialogue and to engage reflectively in a search for the meanings constructed by others and ourselves.

2.2.4 Reflexivity

Qualitative research strongly affirms that researcher and researched are interdependent in the research process (Steier 1991:163-185, Denzin & Lincoln 1994:1-19). This inevitably means that researchers are 'constitutive of the data they collect and of the way in which it is interpreted and analysed' (Hall 1996:28). Reflexive research practice takes seriously these notions of 'interdependence' and 'researcher's constitutiveness' by aiming to render more visible the researcher's 'human influence in the process of selecting, interpreting, analysing and reporting data' (Hall 1996:28).

In my own research, this meant declaring my own knowledge and experience base which I brought to bear on the research process, constantly trying to recognise and reflect on my own role in the research process, becoming more aware of my own presuppositions in conversations with my two supervisors, 'owning up' to my own biases and to what I knew of my own constitutiveness in the knowledge construction and research process and constantly seeking to

expand the languages of understanding. It is in the light of the desire to clarify my subjectivity (my biases, assumptions and values) that I decided to write the report on the study using the first person pronoun 'I', instead of an impersonal style.

It also implied that the research participants become actively involved in the research and knowledge construction process itself (see 2.4.2.3, 2.4.2.4). In addition, they also read Chapters Three and Four of the study before they were submitted in their final form to ensure that their conversations and reflections upon them had been faithfully described. Gergen and Gergen (1991:79) point out with regard to one of the purposes of reflexivity:

The aim is to realise more fully the linguistic implications of preferred positions, and to invite the expression of alternative voices or perspectives into one's activities.

2.2.5 Research posture

Qualitative research invites a posture by the researcher which has been variously described as 'indwelling' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:25), 'reflective' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:25), 'a participatory mode of consciousness' (Heshusius 1994:15; 1995:121) and 'empathetic' (Sears 1992:149). These descriptions imply an immersion of the researcher in the stories of others in which the researcher's aim is 'to gain an understanding of a person's situation that is meaningful for those involved in the inquiry' (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:26).

Furthermore, in the light of a conversation with my supervisor, I believe that the 'not-knowing' posture associated with narrative therapy applies also to doing research. Writing with specific regard to the therapy situation, Anderson and Goolishian (1992:29-31) indicate that taking up this position entails 'a general attitude or stance in which the therapist's actions communicate an abundant,

genuine curiosity'; such a position situates the therapist 'in such a way as always to be in a state of "being informed" by the client' and enables the therapist to join 'with the client in a mutual exploration of the client's understanding and experience'. The obvious implications of this 'not-knowing' posture for my research into the spirituality of the research participants were highlighted by Peterson's (1992) reflections on the pastoral work of spiritual direction. Peterson (1992:186) points out that while it is important for the pastor to know the biblical story thoroughly, 'none of us knows in detail what God is doing in another. What we don't know far exceeds what we do know'. These reflections by Anderson and Goolishian (1992), and by Peterson (1992) encouraged me to adopt a research posture also characterised by a 'not-knowing' curiosity and openness.

2.2.6 Personal involvement

Qualitative research makes the personal involvement of the researcher in the research study more explicit. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994:11) point out, behind all the research activities of a qualitative researcher there 'stands the personal biography of the gendered researcher, who speaks from a particular class, racial, cultural and ethnic community perspective'. It follows that there can be no purely objective, value free or bias free research design. Each researcher has the responsibility to identify his or her own biases and must clearly articulate the conceptual framework of the study (Janesick 1994:212). While it is fairly simple to meet the second requirement (see Section 1:6), it is extremely difficult to recognise one's own biases. In doing this research project, it meant for me that I had to sustain a commitment to multiple-reflexive conversations (see 2.2.4), making explicit my faith commitments and convictions (see 2.3.2), honouring the inter-subjective processes involved in the social construction of knowledge (see 2.4.1.3) and ensuring that the research participants were satisfied with how I had written up our conversations and constructed meanings in Chapters Three and Four (see 2.2.4). However, it must also be recognised that this 'personal involvement is more than dangerous bias - it is the condition under which people

come to know each other and to admit others into their lives' (Oakley 1986:58). It could be for this reason that Wolcott (1992:54) writes: 'Bias is *essential* to the conduct of research'.

2.3 A CONTEXTUAL/HERMENEUTIC METHOD OF DOING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

2.3.1 Introduction

In his summary of different ways of doing Practical Theology, Heitink (1999:172-177) described five trends: the normative-deductive, the hermeneutic-mediative, the empirical-analytical, the political-critical and the pastoral-theological. Writing from a South African perspective, Van Wyk (1995:93) points out that the approach most widely adopted in Practical Theology at the University of South Africa can best be described as a 'communicative theological operational science'. In terms of my own understanding of Heitink's (1999) five trends, it would seem that the empirical approach developed around 'the subject matter of communicative actions in service of the gospel' (Pieterse 1994) can best be described as empirical-mediative. In my own research, I mainly followed a contextual approach (Cochrane, De Gruchy & Petersen 1991), and supplemented and balanced this approach with some key elements drawn from a hermeneutic approach to Practical Theology (Gerkin 1984, 1986, 1991, 1997). It can be shown that these two approaches have several emphases in common. These similarities include the importance of beginning in the lived experience of people and communities, taking seriously the wider social-ecclesial context, reflecting theologically on lived experience, having a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' and facilitating the transformation of life. In addition, the hermeneutic approach brings two other important emphases to my doing of Practical Theology. Besides honouring the narrative quality of God's self-revelation (see 1.6.2.3), it also affirms the narrative structuring of human experience with its emphases on meaning-making and the constitutive power of language (see 1.6.2.2). Thus, relating these two approaches gave me a practical theological method that

connected with the narrative conceptual framework of the research project, the qualitative method of doing research, social construction epistemology, and the central research question. These connections should become more explicit as I describe more fully my practical theological methodology, using the seven step contextual model for doing practical theology proposed by Cochrane and others (1991) as my basic structure.

2.3.2 Faith-commitments

For a theologian, the contextual method 'assumes, in the first place, that the theologian, or the community doing theology, acknowledges and confesses Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ' (Cochrane et al 1991:15). This acknowledgment opens up the practical theologian's prior commitments for inspection both by him/herself and by others, thus aiding the need for reflexivity in research. It also corresponds with the requirement in qualitative research that researchers identify their own biases and deepen their awareness of them.

2.3.3 Beginning in context

The contextual method 'locates our pastoral responses in the lived experience of individuals and communities' (Cochrane et al 1991:17). This is vitally important, since relevant theological reflection, wherever and whenever it occurs, needs to be meaningful within an immediate social context (Moltmann 1974:8-18). As Gerkin (1986:37) states:

We begin with the questions and intimations that come to us out of our involvement in our own time and place. Theological reflection cannot begin, hard as we may try, from some ahistorical point of departure or even from some historical point remote from our own.

This method begins with our lived context, and this honours the research

participants as living human documents, affirms the human-as-instrument and takes seriously the life-stories of people as the primary data for research. It also infers that it is not God, 'but the human experience of God' which now 'takes central stage as the object of enquiry' (Heitink 1999:110).

2.3.4 Social-ecclesial analysis

The contextual method situates the lived experience of Christians within the wider context of church and society and seeks to analyse these relationships critically (Cochrane et al 1991:26-54). In this analysis, it also takes seriously the perspectives of those who are marginalised and oppressed. Furthermore, the model stresses that those engaged in this step understand their own faith orientation (as explained in 2.3.2), as well as their own social-ecclesial location and interests. As the proponents of this contextual approach explain, 'this assumes that practical theologians undertake a disciplined process of self-criticism' (Cochrane et al 1991:19).

This step relates well to the narrative/social construction conviction that our lives are the products of all the socio-cultural stories/ discourses in which we live (see 1.2.1, 2.4.1.3). During my research journey, I constantly tried to help the research participants reflect on the relationships between these stories/ discourses and their lives. My reflexive conversations with my supervisor enabled me to do the same regarding the stories/discourses in which my own life is situated.

2.3.5 Theological reflection

The contextual method seeks to reflect upon lived experience in the light of living faith, the Scriptures and tradition (Cochrane et al 1991:55-74). This step stresses the priority of the Bible and the retrieval of the tradition in an

ecumenical way. One sees similarities here with Gerkin's undertaking of Practical Theology as 'a process of the interpretive fusion of meaning embodied in the Christian narrative with other horizons that form and shape perceptions in the various arenas of activity in which Christians participate' (Gerkin 1986:61). When I followed this step in my research, I departed from the themes suggested by the proponents of the contextual method. Instead of using the liberation themes associated with the 'kingdom of God' motif, I brought to the reflection process my theological conviction of God's presence and activity present in all human situations and experiences (see 1.6.1.2, 1.6.2.3). Together with this central theological conviction, I also sought to use the Scriptures narratively in the processes of reflection. In this regard I was helped particularly by Brueggemann's (1993b:20-21) suggestion that we 'fund' the development of an alternative world-view when we provide bits and pieces of Biblical material 'out of which a new world can be imagined'. He further supports this suggestion when he argues that 'people in fact change by the offer of new models, images, and pictures that characteristically have the particularity of narrative to carry them' (Brueggemann 1993b:24).

2.3.6 Hermeneutics of suspicion

The contextual method accepts that theological reflection requires the help of the social sciences, and in particular the critical insights of a sociology of knowledge, in order to uncover its hidden biases and interests (Cochrane et al 1991:22). The retrieval process of the Christian tradition must, therefore, be a critical process, 'passed through the sieve of suspicion - before it is reworked and restated within our context' (Cochrane et al 1991:23). Gerkin (1986:64) supports this need for a healthy 'hermeneutic of suspicion' in practical theological thinking, both with regard to the present human activity and to our use of the Christian story with its narrative images and themes:

The fusion of horizons notion also implies a certain 'hermeneutic of suspicion' concerning all horizons of understanding, including

our own appropriation of the Christian horizon.

This insistence on a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' opened the way for me to use the insights of social constructionism (see 2.4.1.3) in my practical theological methodology. While I was doing my research, these insights enabled me to be aware both of the socially constructed nature of our knowledge and the constitutive/shaping effect of discourse in our lives. Consequently, I was constantly seeking reflexive ways in which the research participants (including myself) could reflect critically on their faith experience within their lived context (see also 2.2.4). One way in which I expressed this reflexive commitment was by inviting 'outside voices' to the research project (see 2.4.2.6). As Chapters Three and Four will show, these conversations introduced a very powerful 'hermeneutic of suspicion' into the research journey.

2.3.7 Spirituality

The contextual method seeks to develop an empowering, life-affirming and hopeful spirituality that is responsive to human suffering (Cochrane et al 1991:75-83). Significantly, from the perspective of this research project, the contextual model regards the aim of spiritual formation as central to the pastoral task (Cochrane et al 1991:23). This emphasis corresponded closely with my central concern as researcher to re-envisage spiritual ways of being within a contemporary context. Because I am aware that spirituality can easily be privatised (De Gruchy 1986:43), I appreciated the emphasis in the contextual method on the formation of a caring and compassionate spirituality. In my earlier writing, I have suggested that compassionate caring lies at the heart of Christian spirituality (Hudson 1995, 1999) and the formation of an ethical and moral community (see 1.6.2.5).

2.3.8 Pastoral practice and planning

The final element in the contextual method aims to plan further transforming activity based on what has gone before. Gerkin (1986:64) points out that the purpose of practical theological thinking 'always relates to the facilitation of the transformation of life'. This final step in the pastoral-hermeneutic circle means that those involved in contextual theological reflection decide 'on what they now discern to be God's will for them, what it is they are called to be as the People of God, and what action this requires in the world' (Cochrane et al 1991:24). Gerkin (1986:74) stresses the importance of this discernment for our future lives as God's people:

The purpose of Christian praxis is to enable us to move ahead in our individual and corporate lives under the guidance of the Christian story of who we are, who we are called to be, and what the God of that story is bringing about.

This step in the contextual method corresponded with my hope of putting forward some new ideas for forging a transforming and compassionate spirituality.

2.4 RESEARCH PROCEDURES

2.4.1 A theoretical basis

In the early stages of the research project I read widely in three particular areas: post-modernism, narrative and social constructionism. Insights from and references to these three theoretical bases are woven into the thesis throughout, but it may be helpful to the reader for me to summarise central insights that form the basis of the study in one coherent section, to clarify the theoretical basis of the research. If these insights are presented only in a diffused form, there is a risk that assumptions are not made fully explicit to the reader. Since I had already read extensively in the literature of Christian spirituality before

embarking on this research journey, I did not do any further reading in that area as part of this project. Below I outline briefly the literature survey together with its main effects on my thinking and research.

2.4.1.1 *Post-modernism*

Given that this research project sought to explore how Christian spirituality could be meaningfully facilitated within a post-modern context, I sought to 'map the culture' that constitutes post-modernism (Goodliff 1998:1). Its main epistemological and philosophical contours included its reaction against the certainties of the modernist project and modernism's accompanying confidence in objective truth. Post-modernism also rejects universal or totalising perspectives and opposes the idea of an autonomous, knowing observer separated from what is observed (Snyder 1995:213-230; Goodliff 1998:26-27). Instead, post-modernism prefers to refer 'to a different, discontinuous theoretical direction: knowledge is socially constructed and generative, and knowledge and the knower are interdependent - presupposing the interrelationship of context, culture, language, experience and understanding (Anderson 1997:27). This reading motivated and affirmed my choices of narrative as my conceptual framework for research and social construction as my epistemology.

2.4.1.2 *Narrative*

A narrative approach has been widely used in Christian thinking and reflection in areas such as congregational analysis (Hopewell 1987), Biblical hermeneutics (Brueggemann 1993b), practical theological thinking (Gerkin 1984, 1986, 1991, 1997), pastoral practice (Peterson 1980), preaching (Bausch 1993), and pastoral counselling (Lester 1995; Capps 1998). During my participation in the Institute for Therapeutic Development, I was introduced to the pioneering work of Michael White and David Epston in the field of narrative therapy (White & Epston 1990; Epston 1998; White 1997, 2000). By reflecting on the relevant literature in all the

above areas I was better able to develop a narrative approach as my conceptual framework. Since my conversations with the research participants were mainly guided by what I had learnt in narrative therapy, I read particularly widely in this area. In 1.3.4, I list those aspects of narrative therapy which stood out for me and which I used in my research.

2.4.1.3 *Social constructionism*

Social constructionism, which has strong connections with both post-modernism and narrative (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997), places 'knowledge within the process of social interchange' (Gergen 1985:266). Its main premise is that 'the beliefs, values, institutions, labels, laws, divisions of labour, and the like that make up our social realities are constructed by the members of a culture as they interact with one another from generation to generation and day to day' (Freedman & Combs 1996:16). Knowledge is something that people construct between them through the social processes and interactions in which they are constantly engaged (Burr 1995:4). Implied in this understanding of social constructionism is the constitutive or shaping effect that the various discourses in society have on the personal lives of people (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997). It follows that social constructionism takes 'a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge', and sees the ways in which people commonly understand the world as 'historically and culturally specific' (Burr 1995:3). Besides enabling me to use social construction discourse as the epistemology for my research, reading the relevant literature also helped me, on a personal level, to engage with the question of whether it is possible to affirm the 'givenness' of reality and take its inter-subjective construction seriously.

2.4.2 Narrative conversations

2.4.2.1 *Introduction*

For reasons I have already explained (see 2.2.1, 2.3.1, 2.4.1.3), in my research, I used a qualitative approach as my research methodology, a contextual model of doing Practical Theology (supplemented and adjusted by the hermeneutic method) and social constructionism as my epistemology. In choosing my research procedure, I decided upon a narrative enquiry into the spiritual lives of the research participants within a small group context. Besides allowing me to integrate the above three elements into my research project, this conversational research procedure suited my overall conceptual framework (namely narrative); it gave me an opportunity to explore a narrative approach to pastoral conversations experientially based upon what I had learnt in narrative therapy; and it took seriously my ethical concern that the research participants themselves should be the primary beneficiaries of my research (see 2.2.1). I followed the steps set out below in my research procedure.

2.4.2.2 *Choice of research participants/conversational partners*

Five Christians were invited to participate in this research study. They were given an information sheet (Appendix 1) explaining the ethics and objectives of the research study, and a separate letter of consent regarding their participation in the project (Appendix 2). Since I wanted the research participants to be able to make use of the research experiences, one factor in their selection was their current involvement in the ministry of a local congregation. The five participants were:

- Sue, the director of a local congregation's pastoral care ministry;
- Dot, the superintendent of a local congregation's children's church;
- Paul, a youth pastor in a local congregation;
- Darren, a candidate for the ordained ministry of the Methodist Church of

Southern Africa; and

- Andrew, a university student in a local congregation.

In the information sheet (Appendix 1) given to the research participants right at the outset, I assured them that strict 'confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained with respect to each participant's personal identity in the report'. Accordingly, when I wrote up the transcripts of the first two meetings I used the pseudonyms CP1, CP2, CP3, CP4, CP5 (CP meaning 'conversational partner'). After the second meeting I expressed unease to my supervisor about this 'non-personal' form of address. In conversation with him I decided that, at the next meeting of the group, I would share my unease and offer the research participants a threefold choice. Would they prefer that I write up the transcripts using the acronym CP, or using a personal pseudonym that each of them could choose, or using their own personal names? Unanimously they agreed that I use their personal names. I verbally assured them again that strict confidentiality would be maintained in respect of their surnames and the transcripts.

2.4.2.3 *Group meetings*

Ten group meetings took place over a period of ten weeks. Each session was audio-taped and transcribed later. These transcripts of the group's conversations were afterwards made available to each of the research participants for verification and/or adjustment. A group approach was chosen for five reasons. First of all, it demonstrated the conviction that there 'is in fact very little in the New Testament letters about personal spiritual formation as such...its spirituality is social' (Leech 1986:9). Secondly, it facilitated the performance of personal stories (see 1.2.2). Thirdly, it allowed the members in the group to be compassionate witnesses/a reflecting team to the stories being shared (Weingarten 2000; White 2000:59-85; see also 2.4.2.5). Fourthly, it expressed my ethical commitment to be reflexive and accountable in the research process (see 2.2.4). Fifthly, it enabled me to pursue a social constructionist epistemology

for my research (see 2.4.1.3).

2.4.2.4 *Initial meeting*

At our initial meeting, I explained to the research participants what the theme of my research was. After asking them to share their personal meanings around the word 'spirituality', I explored with them the idea of our Christian spirituality as a socially constructed experience. I also explained my intention to use a narrative framework for our journey together, especially with regard to my conversations with each of them. The concept that the group could become a compassionate witness group/reflecting team was then introduced and discussed (Andersen 1987; Weingarten 2000; White 2000: 59-85; see also 2.4.2.5). Following on from the above discussions, I then identified, with the research participants, areas of their faith-story upon which they wanted to reflect in the light of Christian faith. I also shared with them areas of particular interest to myself. As pointed out earlier (see 1.6.1.2, 1.6.1.3), these areas related to our experience of God in everyday life and its implications for our relationships with others, especially with those who suffer.

2.4.2.5 *Structure of meetings/use of questions*

During the following five meetings, I engaged each research participant in conversations with what Combs and Freedman (1993:67) call 'narrative intentions'. Questions formed an important part of these narrative conversations. In her discussion of the use of questions in the therapeutic process, Anderson (1997:37) stresses the helpfulness of questions 'that help the therapist to learn and to understand the "said" and "the not yet said" '. Such questions, she points out, facilitate 'conversational space'. Freedman and Combs (1996:57) draw attention to a particular kind of questioning which they call 'deconstructive questioning'. This kind of questioning 'invites people to see their stories from different perspectives, to notice how they are constructed (or that they are

constructed), to note their limits and to discuss that there are other possible narratives'. Many of my questions fell into this category.

Furthermore, since I was mindful of the key emphases of my practical theological methodology (see 2.3), I also tried to ask questions that would enable both social-ecclesial analysis and theological reflection (see 2.3.4, 2.3.5). Between the group sessions, the research participants were invited to consider some biblical texts, along with their accompanying metaphors and images, that would further enable them to situate their lives within the plot of God's story, and so facilitate the ongoing re-authoring of their lives as Christ-followers (Brueggemann 1993b:20; Gerkin 1986:71-72). These texts were either selected by the research participants themselves after our conversation together, or suggested by one of the group after they had listened to the conversation between the research participant and myself, or I offered suggestions myself. To summarise: my purpose in asking questions was to pursue narrative enquiries with each person so that the participants' faith-stories could be evoked in ways that would open up the possibilities of their re-interpretation and ongoing deepening (Gerkin 1984:135).

Each group meeting had a three-tier structure. First of all, I would pursue a narrative conversation with a research participant while the others listened without interrupting. Secondly, when this conversation came to an end, the members of the group were then invited to respond. Their responses were mainly structured around what had 'moved' them (see 1.2.2). In this way, the group became 'compassionate witnesses'/'a reflecting team' to the stories being shared (see 2.4.2.3). Thirdly, I would return to the research participant with whom I had had the initial conversation. He/she was then asked whether there was anything from the group's response which he/she wanted to pursue in further conversation. Each meeting would take about one and a half hours.

After my conversation with my first research participant, I became aware that

issues had surfaced which needed to be followed up. I shared this realisation with my supervisor, who suggested that I add to the summary report of each session some further questions for the research participant which we could then reflect upon at the next meeting. This I did with three of the research participants. Hence, the conversations with three of the research participants flowed over briefly into the subsequent session.

2.4.2.6 *Other voices*

In order for the research to be reflexive (see 2.2.4), other voices and perspectives were invited into the research process. During the research journey, I benefited from reflexive conversations with my supervisor and co-supervisor. Furthermore, in our group's seventh, eighth and ninth meetings, I pursued narrative conversations with three people from outside the group. Each of them was willing for his/her personal name to be used in the research report. These 'outside voices' were

- Christine, who had suffered greatly from polio during her childhood;
- Stephen, whose spirituality had led him and his family to live amongst the poor in Winterveld, where he works as a community doctor;
- Rob, who had left the Methodist Church of Southern Africa in order to continue his spiritual journey with the Religious Society of Friends (the 'Quakers').

These three people were all known to me personally. I asked them to participate in the research process because each of them had either suffered deeply and/or immersed his/her life in the sufferings of others and/or pursued spiritual journeys in church backgrounds different from those of the research participants.

Besides expressing my commitment to be reflexive, these conversations also introduced a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' into our reflections (see 2.3.6), and

enabled the research participants to wrestle more deeply with the challenges of co-constructing for themselves a more compassionate spirituality (see 2.3.7).

2.4.2.7 *Concluding meeting*

At our tenth and final meeting I reflected with the research participants on our conversational journey together. We spoke about the effects of our conversations together on our lives, identified the key meanings of spirituality that had emerged for us, reflected upon them in the light of God's presence and activity present in all human experience and shared our intentions concerning our future spiritual journeys. We also reflected upon the research process itself, paying special attention to how those participants who had been part of other research projects had experienced this particular process. This final conversation together further enabled me to be faithful to a qualitative research approach with its emphases on reflexivity and co-creation of new meanings (see 2.2.3, 2.2.4), my practical theological method (2.3) and my social constructionist epistemology (2.4.1.3).

2.4.3 **Written research report**

2.4.3.1 *Solid description data*

Qualitative research necessitates the presentation of solid description data so that the researcher can lead the reader to an understanding of the meaning of the experience being studied (Janesick 1994:215). This means that the lived experience of the research participants must be described as fully as possible, using their own words as much as possible. It is through the research participants' words that we come to understand how they interpret and construct their worlds (Maykut & Morehouse 1994:18).

When writing up Chapters Three and Four, I used my weekly transcripts as my

primary source (see 2.4.2.3). This also enabled me to begin with the lived experience of the research participants themselves, thus allowing me to be thoroughly contextual in my practical theological method (see 2.3.3).

2.4.3.2 *Data analysis and interpretation*

Data analysis and interpretation are critical processes in qualitative enquiry (Wolcott 1992:51). Given the notion of 'the researcher's constitutiveness' in the way data is analysed and interpreted, my commitment to reflexive research practice means that I must try to make as visible as possible my process of analysing and interpreting. Hence, in the process of writing up my research in Chapters Three and Four, I took the steps set out below.

First of all, after I had completed my writing up of the transcripts describing my narrative conversations with the research participants and the 'outside voices', I read through the transcripts several times in an unhurried, relaxed and leisurely manner. Janesick (1994:216) points out that, after immersing him/herself in the research setting, 'the researcher requires time for analysis and contemplation of the data'.

Secondly, following this reading and contemplation of the data, I began to organise the data on paper around certain themes and in particular categories. In the light of my commitment to a social construction epistemology, the categories, themes and patterns used in the organisation of data emerged from the interaction between my narrative conversations with the research participants, reflexive conversations with my supervisor, the literature that I had read (see 2.4.1), and the particular interests that I had brought to the research process (see 1.6.1.2, 1.6.1.3). They were not imposed prior to data-collection (Janesick 1994:215). In fact, the particular areas of interest that I brought to the research process were revised and adjusted by the interaction described above. This can be seen by comparing my prior areas of interest (as outlined in 1.6.1.2,

1.6.1.3) with the six questions regarding spirituality that I articulated in Chapters Three and Four (see 3.2, 3.3, 3.4, 4.2, 4.3, 4.4).

Thirdly, after the organising the conversation data in the above manner, I wrote it up in Chapters Three and Four under the subheading 'Listening to the research conversations' (see 3.2.1, 3.3.1, 3.4.1, 4.2.1, 4.3.1, 4.4.1). Another level of reflexivity was added by the research participants who read through these chapters before they were submitted in their final form (see 2.2.4).

Fourthly, since qualitative research is characterised by a search for patterns of meaning (see 2.2.3), data analysis needs to be combined with a process of interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln 1994:11-15). Therefore, besides analysing the data, I also sought to discern the meaning perspectives in the lived experience of the research participants (Janesick 1994:218). These I wrote up in Chapters Three and Four under the sub-heading 'Generating meaning around the conversations with regard to spirituality'. While I did this, I also tried to trace the relevant theoretical discussion (see 3.2.2, 3.3.2, 3.4.2, 4.2.2, 4.3.2, 4.4.2). Again, because of my commitment to reflexive research practice, these sections were read by and discussed with the group members before they were submitted in their final form (see 2.2.4). Throughout this process of interpreting the data, I was mindful of Denzin and Lincoln's (1994:12) warning that 'there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual':

Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observation socially situated in the worlds of the observer and the observed. Subjects or individuals are seldom able to give a full explanation of their actions or intentions; all they can offer are accounts, or stories, about what they did and why.

Fifthly, in order to be faithful to my stated practical theological method, this

reflection upon the research participants' lived experiences in their search for meaning and new perspectives also needed to be theological in nature (see 2.3.5). Hence, when I reflected on and interpreted the data, I brought to this task the theological conviction that God's presence and activity permeates all human experience (see 1.6.2.3). Again, my commitment to reflexive research practice meant that I reviewed the meanings that emerged from this theological reflection with both my research participants and my supervisor.

2.4.3.3 *Emerging ideas*

Qualitative study needs to produce findings (Janesick 1994:215). Hence, in my report, I sought to put forward some emerging and practical ideas for going about the formation of a Christian spirituality from a narrative perspective within the local congregation. In doing so, I again tried to be faithful to my data analysis and interpretation since I was mindful that 'theory is useful only in so far as it emerges from reflection on lived experience, and is helpful in taking action' (McLean, Carey & White 1996:1). Outlining these ideas also enabled me to complete the final step in the contextual practical theological method, namely the planning of further transforming activity (see 2.3.8).

2.5 **CONCLUSION**

This chapter has explored and summarised the methods used in the study, their theoretical bases and application. The next two chapters consist primarily of data-analysis and interpretation. They have both been read by the research participants to ensure that the conversations and constructed meanings were faithfully described. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge responsibility for their final shape (Janesick 1994:215).

CHAPTER THREE

LIVING WITH QUESTIONS ABOUT OUR EXPERIENCES OF GOD

Not God himself, but the human experience of God, the Christian faith, now takes central stage at the object of inquiry.

(Heitink 1999:110)

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In Chapter One I suggested that Practical Theology has the urgent task of exploring and researching how we can forge a Christian spirituality in our lives (see 1.1.3). In Chapter Two I quoted Gerkin's (1986:37) conviction that, in doing Practical Theology, we must begin with the questions and intimations that come out of our engagement with people in the local situation (see 2.3.3). Not only does this emphasis on people's questions facilitate a contextual approach to Practical Theology, it also honours the qualitative emphases of my research approach (2.2). In this chapter and the next, therefore, I articulate and explore several questions relevant to the aims and purposes of this research project (see 1.5). These questions emerged from my reflections on the transcripts of my conversations with the research participants, reflexive conversations with my supervisor and discussions with the research participants themselves before the final writing up of this chapter. Exploring these questions, generating meanings around them, and making more visible the practical theological process that took place in the group's conversations, enabled me to research the central enquiry underlying this project, namely: in what ways can a narrative approach to Christian spirituality facilitate the intention of Practical Theology to transform human life?

3.2 EXPERIENCING GOD IN ALL THINGS?

Experiencing God in all things refers to the possibility of overcoming the sharp distinctions that are often drawn between the spiritual and the material, the secular and the sacred, and thereby relating our faith to all areas of everyday

human experience (Hebblethwaite 1994:222-232).

3.2.1. Listening to the research conversations

Frequently the research participants spoke about their experiences of God's presence in their lives. Darren spoke of a time when, on his way to a church meeting in the township, he had got lost: 'And so I prayed, "Lord, I'm stuck, can you help me?" I sensed an inner nudge to stop the car and to go across to a guy standing outside a house, and ask for directions. I asked him where St Mark's church was. He laughed, and said that he was on his way there too.' Paul told of a time when he needed R500 to fix his car and did not have it: 'About three weeks before I had to preach at the Old Age Home, I rode on my bicycle there and it turned out that someone there knew my aunt and wrote to my aunt and the day before I left to buy the parts, I got a cheque for R500 from my aunt, the exact amount, you know.' Andrew related an experience at a church camp when three others prayed for him: 'I really felt God's presence, and was really touched by God...When you are away on a camp like this you can spend your whole time with God. From my own experience I always feel much closer to God when you are on a camp like this. Somehow it seems easier on camps.'

However, connecting experiences of God's presence with 'special' moments brought with it for the research participants the question of God's presence in 'ordinary' moments. This emerged particularly strongly in the conversation with Andrew. When he was asked whether it was a good thing or not for his spirituality that he seemed to experience God more deeply within a camp setting, he was uncertain. 'Well, good and bad,' he answered. 'It's always good to have a refill, but it becomes quite hard work when you are not at camp. Maintaining your spirituality, your closeness with God, is quite difficult when you are at home, but when you are at camp for a weekend, it's relatively easy. I guess you can end up choosing the easy option and relying on camps for keeping your spirituality going.' Speaking about his longing for a spirituality 'that is manifested in all I do',

Andrew said: 'There is almost always this struggle for me between an intimate relationship with God and everyday things like going to university...the struggle is to get the constant intimacy with God on an everyday basis.' When we spoke about the possibilities of experiencing God in 'ordinary' moments like going to work, enjoying a good meal, playing with the kids or going shopping, Andrew sensed his own spirituality would be richer. As he said: 'It just makes so much more sense if these things have something spiritual about them.' And when asked whether he preferred the language of 'bringing God into what I do' or 'experiencing God in all that I do', he answered: 'I think the second one definitely. I've never really made this distinction before. But from talking about it, I think there is a distinction, and that is exciting.'

3.2.2. Generating meaning around the conversations with regard to spirituality

These conversations with the research participants about their 'experiences of God' showed that three of them tended to connect their experiences with remarkable co-incidences, the unusual and an intense 'spiritual' setting. This tendency supports Willard's (1988:28) observation that in contemporary Christian spirituality we are encouraged somehow to remove the essence of faith from the particulars of daily human life and relocate it in special times, places and states of mind. One consequence of this tendency, as we have seen in the conversation with Andrew, was the longing to experience God in the ordinary, the usual and the routine. In the words of Peterson (1997b:5), Andrew's preference was to experience 'the *God* presence in the *earth/human* conditions' [Peterson's italics].

I joined with Andrew in moving towards his preferred way of experiencing God by offering another 'linguistic resource' (Epston 1998:17). Did he prefer the language of 'bringing God into what I do', I asked him, or 'experiencing God in all that I do'? In my first chapter, I noted the important place that language occupies in a narrative approach to human experience (1.6.2.2). Referring to Kotzé and

Kotzé (1997:4-7) and Freedman and Combs (1996:29), I underlined both the constitutive effects of language and its relationship to change. It follows then, that in the gospel-work of spirituality, 'the way we use language, not simply *that* we use it, is significant' (Dawn & Peterson 2000:70) [Dawn & Peterson's italics]. It also means that our language about God influences deeply our relationship with God, and the way we live out our faith (Hughes 1985:34-39). These understandings about language became clearer as the above conversation with Andrew progressed. When I suggested another way of languaging his experience of God (talking about 'experiencing God in all that I do' rather than 'bringing God into what I do'), it seemed to open up more possibilities for spiritual ways of being for him. Reflecting on our final session on the effects of our conversational journey, he alluded again to the importance of this language change: 'What I did do more specifically was to try to shift from trying to bring God into my life to being more aware that God is already present. That's been an off and on process. It's been quite encouraging for me, and it's for me a big shift.'

3.2.3 Doing Practical Theology

Listening to Andrew's description of his experience of God over the years, it seemed that his faith journey had been shaped by a particular religious discourse. Drewery and Winslade (1996:35) describe a discourse as 'a set of more or less coherent stories or statements about the way the world should be'. The discourses that surround us in society have a constitutive or shaping effect on the personal discourses and lives of people (Kotzé & Kotzé 1997:9-11). In other words, as White (White & Epston 1990:27-28) points out, when people seek to express or represent particular aspects of their lived experience, they draw significantly on the culturally available discourses around them. With regard to Andrew, his description of his God experience seemed to be located within a discourse that suggested that God exists apart from the world and needed to be 'brought into' our everyday experience (Hughes 1985:10). When I offered him another way of talking about God ('experiencing God in all that I do'), I wanted to facilitate some critique of the former discourse, thereby taking seriously the

requirement of my contextual/hermeneutic theological method for social–ecclesial analysis (see 2.3.4).

This offer of an alternative interpretation of God's relationship to human experience was rooted in my theological conviction that affirmed 'the ineffable presence of God in and through all events, processes in time, and relationships among persons and structures of reality' (Gerkin 1984:61 - see also 1.6.2.3). This conviction is shaped by a more incarnational discourse, one that believes that we 'cannot retreat from the "secular" world in the hope of finding God elsewhere [but that] the very presence of God is manifest in the smallest, most mundane of daily activities' (Foster 1998:266). At the end of our conversation, I also offered Andrew three biblical images of the presence of God/Christ in all things based on Psalm 72:19, Acts 17:24-28, and Ephesians 4:6. By doing this, I hoped to encourage the interaction between Andrew's experience with the witness of Scripture, and also to provide the biblical 'pieces, materials and resources out of which a new world can be imagined' (Brueggemann 1993b:20). Such reflection on lived experience would enable Andrew to do some further theological reflection, as the fifth step of my theological method invites (see 2.3.5).

As Andrew's pastor I would also like to continue exploring the practical effects of this alternative way of interpreting God's relationship to the world. One effect that I would like to explore further concerns an appreciation, valuing and cherishing of all things material, and especially of every human being. In this respect I could refer Andrew to one of the 'outside voices' in the group, Rob, who alluded to this way of experiencing God when he described one emphasis of Quaker spirituality: 'There's a lot of emphasis on the dignity of each person, and "that of God in each person". Our experience of God is through our experience of God in every person.' My desire to continue this exploration with Andrew is prompted by two reasons. Firstly, it would join me more strongly with Andrew in his search for a preferred spiritual way of being and so be an expression of pastoral care for him. Secondly, it would facilitate taking the last two steps of the contextual method of doing theology, especially the development of an empowering, life-affirming and

hopeful spirituality that is responsive to human suffering (see 2.3.7 and 2.3.8).

3.3 DISCERNING GOD'S WILL FOR OUR PERSONAL LIVES?

Discernment comes from the Latin word 'discernere' which means 'to separate', 'to distinguish', 'to determine', 'to sort out' (Farnham et al 1991:23). In Christian spirituality, discerning God's will for our personal lives can refer to the 'process of finding one's own way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances; a means of responding to the call of Christian love and truth in a situation where there are often conflicting interests and values and choices have to be made' (Lonsdale 1990:64).

3.3.1 Listening to the research conversations

During our conversational journey, the research participants repeatedly referred to their struggles around discerning the will of God for their personal lives. Paul underlined the centrality of this discernment theme in our discussions when, in his reflections on the common meeting points between the different stories, he described the one that had stood out for him as 'the struggle on how to move forward in one's spirituality, finding guidance, the will of God'. One example of the group's engagement with the discernment question was in the conversation with Dot. Discussing her future career choices, she said: 'I'm looking for ways for me to know what God wants.' It was evident that finding what God wanted for her life was a source of uncertainty and difficulty. She commented: 'As you can see, it's a bit confusing to me. I really want to do what is in God's will, but I'm not always sure what God's will is.' She later added: 'So as you can see, I find this very difficult.' These words about her struggle to discern God's will for her future was echoed by Andrew's experience. He commented afterwards: 'When Dot was talking about decisions she was making, and talks about some of her uncertainty, it's a relief to me. I have been there as well.'

In my letter to Dot after our conversation, I referred to the group's common

struggle with discernment and asked again: 'Is there a fixed divine blueprint for our lives which we must find, or do we in a sense create the will of God by trying to make faithful choices?' Her response the next time we met indicated her ongoing engagement with this question: 'I find that a tough question. I do know that, whatever I do and choose, God will be with me in it. But I've often wondered whether when you are born there is this blueprint for your life and whether it's just that we go off-course now and then, and then we seek God's will again and come back in line. But I suppose it's because we have free will. We cannot expect God to make our choice for us.'

3.3.2 Generating meaning around the conversations with regard to spirituality

Popular Christian discourse around this issue often suggests that discerning God's will for our lives is a straightforward affair. When the group was asked whether there was an idea abroad in the wider church that God's will is something clear and unambiguous, Paul responded: 'Most people like to say that, but I'm sure they don't experience it like that.' Closely related to this popular notion is another widespread idea that the will or plan of God is a large blueprint of what God wants to happen in our lives. Lonsdale (1990:65) points out that, according to this discourse, 'finding the will of God means something like getting in touch with that small corner of the immense celestial blueprint that concerns us, and getting to know what "God wants us to do", so that we can comply and thus "do the will of God" '. He concludes that this model 'is a powerful cause of anxiety to many good Christians who spend much time and effort trying to "find out God's will"...and who become very distressed and anxious when, not surprisingly, they do not succeed'. Dot hinted at this distress and anxiety when she remarked: 'I'm hoping that God will help me to make decisions. I think too often I make decisions too quickly and regret it afterwards. So I want to know if a decision is of God and I think I wrestle with this.'

In describing how she had sought to discern God's will in a past decision, Dot

spoke of a process that highlighted personal responsibility and reflection far more than these popular discourses did. She described a lengthy process that involved asking God for direction, receiving encouragement from a devotional booklet entitled 'Faith for Daily Living', talking with friends, developing certain inner leanings and then coming to a moment of choice-making. When asked whether it was God or herself who made the final decision, she answered: 'I think it's up to us in the final analysis. We are allowed to do things, and we have the freedom to do so.'

Responding to Dot's story, Paul shared an interesting word-picture based on his own experiences of decision-making and discernment: 'It's like somehow you are in a playground with swings and a sandpit and a horse, and God says, "I don't mind what you play with, but just stay in the playground". There are certainly some no's, but there are far more yesses. I know the Bible says the path is narrow, but perhaps there are a lot of narrow paths.' Reflecting on these conversations, could it be, then, that when it comes to discerning God's will for our personal lives, 'God's will for us is that we should learn to respond in freedom to God's love for us, and to give shape to our individual and common lives in freedom by the choices that we make' (Lonsdale 1990:65)?

Sue generated another meaning around this theme when she introduced the notion that God's will was related to our uniqueness and fulfilment as persons. Once when she was considering a new job opportunity, Darren had said to her that the job 'had Sue written all over it'. Taking on the new job had led Sue into a personal sense of much fulfilment, which led her to believe that the change she had made was 'about obedience to God'. She described her experience in these words: 'It's an experience of joy that I haven't experienced for a long time... Sometimes I walk around saying, "Yes, Lord, I love it when a plan comes together!" And also a deep sense of fulfilment. I look back over all the years, and my work has been very satisfying, but this job is fulfilling.' Sue's experience embodies the insight of O'Connor (1971:15): 'We ask to know the will of God without guessing that his will is written into our very beings.' It also seemed to

open up a possible option for Dot to explore in relation to her uncertainty about her future: 'Yes, I was listening carefully to Sue's story and how she made her decision. I heard that our Lay Seminary is offering a course called Network. It's about finding our gifts. I thought that will help me sort out my gifting and see where my future lies. Got me thinking about fulfilment, that's what I really want.'

Rob, one of the 'outside voices', speaking about the processes of discernment in the Quaker community, stressed the communal dimension of discernment which had not been strongly emphasised by the research group participants. Telling of the time he made his decision to leave the Methodist Church and join the Quakers, he referred to the help he had received from others: 'Well, one decision I had to make was whether I became a Quaker or not. There's what Quakers call "clearness committees"...it's just a few people gathering around you and going through the process of decision-making with you. The purpose is not to make a decision for you, but to help you make a decision that is right for you.' Farnham and others (1991:55) support this emphasis of the place of community in faithful decision-making:

Although God calls each of us personally, as individuals we see only partially. Individual perception, reasoning, and understanding are always limited...While circumstances sometimes require us to act without consulting others, the danger of arrogance and error in proceeding on our own can be great.

3.3.3 Doing Practical Theology

The conversation with Dot makes more visible two ideas generally associated with the doing of Practical Theology in a contextual/hermeneutic mode. On the one hand, it showed that the necessity of practical theological thinking is always prompted by practical considerations and issues (Gerkin 1986:60). In this particular instance, it was Dot's struggle to discern God's will with regard to the specific shape of her future vocation that initiated theological reflection. Does she continue teaching in a government school, or must she take up work with children

within the context of the church? This was the specific 'contextual arena', to use Gerkin's phrase, in which theological reflection needed to take place.

On the other hand, this conversation also demonstrated the introduction of a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' into the fusion of horizons between Dot's story and the Christian story (see also 2.3.6). As Dot sought to reflect on her lived experience of trying to find God's will for her future career in the light of her faith, I raised a question that I hoped would contribute towards the construction of new meaning around the issue of finding God's will, as well as provide a way for Dot to move forward in her dilemma. This question was the following: 'Is there a fixed divine blueprint for our lives or do we in a sense create the will of God by trying to make faithful choices?' The question was prompted by my reading of the literature around discernment (Lonsdale 1990; Barry 1993), the dilemma I heard voiced in her telling of her story, and also by my hermeneutic conviction that 'the dialogical conversation between horizons will reveal blind spots, open unasked questions, compare different ways of seeing, and in general call into question accustomed ways of interpreting human activity and experience' (Gerkin 1986:64).

3.4 PICTURING WHAT GOD IS LIKE?

Picturing what God is like refers to the ideas that we have about God and deeply influences the way that we relate to God (Hughes 1985:34).

3.4.1 Listening to the research conversations

Varying pictures of God, sometimes contradictory, emerged during the research group's conversational journey. Darren's picture of God was shaped by his understanding of Jesus. 'Jesus is my favourite way in which I relate to God,' he explained. 'He helps me to have ideas to know what God is like.' Later he said: 'I don't see God as someone who wants to punch us for doing wrong, but as someone who accepts me.' For Dot, God was 'more like a fatherlike figure. Perhaps because I had a good relationship with my father and I somehow know

that God is with me.' Andrew struggled at first to recognise any vulnerability in God, but later became more open to the idea of a vulnerable God: 'I cannot say that God is vulnerable to anything, but I suppose in a way God is vulnerable to being rejected by us...Vulnerability I have always perceived as being a weak thing, rather than a positive characteristic. Certainly for males.' Sue had gradually come to see God as 'accepting': 'The more I've come to know God, the more I've come to know his acceptance. It hasn't just popped up. It doesn't come directly from heaven. I think that in my case he uses other people. When others like me for who I am, I kind of think that is how God is with me as well.' She then introduced the group to two people who had been accepting of her - her mother-in-law and father. Paul's introduction to God had also come through his experience of another human being - an ex-soldier who reflected a 'real realness' and 'who didn't always live what he preached, but you could see that he was trying to'. Based on this experience, Paul had come to see God as 'someone willing to forgive, yet who also called us forward...it was a God involved in real, mundane, daily issues'.

Two of the 'outside voices' introduced rather different understandings of God. Reflecting on his history of political activism and non-violent resistance during the apartheid era, Rob believed it had 'moved me to understand what the liberation theologians call God being on the side of the poor...'. Over the years he had found formal doctrines and creeds about God 'oppressive and restrictive', and had joined the Quakers because 'I needed space to explore my understanding of God and of God's work in my life'.

Stephen's experience of working as a doctor amongst the poor, first in the townships during the 1980s and then in Winterveldt for the past ten years, had caused him to question God's personal intervention in the lives of individuals. He told of an experience one night, when just after he had picked up a psychiatrically ill patient who had fallen to her death through a hospital window, he went to attend a mission at his local congregation: 'I drove there and there was this guy from a Pentecostal church preaching and he was saying something like, "I've just

got a real sense that God is speaking to me, and that some woman here has a vaginal itch and the Lord wants to heal you"...I got up that night and walked out. I just couldn't take it. If God was so interested in this woman's vaginal itch, where was God when this ill woman was in her confused state, falling on her head?' Experiences like this had led him to his present conviction about God's lack of personal intervention in individual lives: 'The other day I read a Jewish woman's words that she doesn't think God micro-manages the world and I don't believe that either, because if that is so, why is it that God has been amazingly kind to all my friends, but to all my friends at Winterveldt he has been amazingly unkind and lousy. So I've reached a stage where I don't even know that God intervenes in a person's life.'

3.4.2 Generating meaning around the conversations with regard to spirituality

The conversations above make it clear that people carry with them different understandings/images of what God is like. In the research group, the influences leading to these differences could be related to a number of possible factors, ranging from experiences with significant others as in the case of Paul and Sue, exposure to the suffering of others as for Rob and Stephen, specific theological orientations as for Darren, to differing gender perspectives as the conversation with Andrew seemed to indicate. In the work of spirituality, one cannot assume knowledge of another person's understanding of God. Writing from a therapeutic perspective, Griffith (1995:124) points out that making assumptions in this regard closes off conversational possibilities and joins us with forces of cultural oppression that would instruct and censor what can be talked about. Griffith (1995:127) suggests that, when we are in conversations with people talking about their relationship with a personal God, we must move from 'certainty to curiosity'. She specifically notes four certainties where we need to introduce curiosity. All four could have operated during the research conversations to some degree or another. These four certainties are (Griffith 1995:127-130):

- I know what God is like for you because I know your religious denomination.
- I know what God is like for you because I know what your language about God means.
- I know what God is like for you because your image of God is a reflection of your early attachment figures.
- I know what God is like and you need to know God as I do.

Griffith (1995:137) further suggests that, when opening therapy to conversations with a personal God, the emphasis needs to be on co-creating with the client an evolving story of God's presence in his/her life where 'primacy must be given to that person's story as the person describes his or her experiences, with the words and the meanings the person teaches us, and the possibilities and surprises that are encountered'.

Moving from 'certainty to curiosity' in the ways described, and stressing the co-construction of spirituality, also underlines the importance of maintaining the 'not-knowing' posture in the pastoral context when it comes to talking with people about their spirituality, especially their understanding of what God is like (see also 2.2.5). Müller (1999:20) highlights this pastoral stance when he writes:

...the pastor is no longer the one who knows more and better. On the contrary, he/she is in a not-knowing position. This not-knowing is to be striven for. Naturally, the pastor's inputs are important and it is assumed that he/she is an expert. However, the pastor's expertise lies especially in the way that he/she has mastered the art to take on an honest not-knowing position...

Secondly, the conversations show that our 'pictures' of God influence the way we relate to God. One example of this would be to compare the prayer experiences of Paul and Stephen as they describe them. Paul who 'pictures' God as 'involved in real, mundane, daily issues' describes one time when he went on a camp: 'I was doing the finances. A couple of hundred rand went missing. When I came

home I didn't unpack for two days - then I prayed, "God, I need this money to be found." And the first pair of pants I looked through - it was there.'

On the other hand, Stephen, who does not believe in a God who 'micro-manages' our lives, had 'reached a stage where I gave up prayer'. More recently Stephen has 'been trying "centering prayer" which basically is about learning to be silent in God's presence. That has become really meaningful. And my prayer life has been resurrected. I don't have to use words'. This comparison between Paul and Stephen's 'pictures' of God and their ways of praying epitomises Hughes' (1985:34) insight that when 'we try to pray, we must have some idea of God in our minds, and this idea will influence how we pray and whether we pray'.

Thirdly, the effects of the Pentecostal preacher's spiritual talk on Stephen's faith and life raises acutely the question of ethical speech about God. In Chapter One, I noted that a narrative approach, together with its strong connections with social constructionism, highlights the importance of critically reflecting on the effects of one's beliefs and actions on the lives of others, especially those who suffer (see 1.6.2.5). The preacher's words undermined Stephen's faith and had a negative effect. Referring to this particular episode, Stephen said: 'And I think from there began my disillusionment with the church and the preached words and this constant disconnection between reality and what is said...and so I've reached a stage where sermons don't mean very much to me, and I reached a stage then when I gave up praying.' In the light of these effects, two questions can be posed. Firstly, was this spiritual talk by the preacher ethical? Secondly, how does one make the preacher aware of these effects? My research highlights the necessity of ethical considerations like these in relation to the language of spirituality and I will return to them again in my final chapter when I engage other questions which my research raised for me as a pastor (see 3.5).

3.4.3 Doing Practical Theology

The hermeneutic approach to doing Practical Theology emphasises the

appropriation of biblical metaphors, themes and images that cluster around the themes of the present human activity (Gerkin 1986:86). Could it be, however, that reflection on people's stories can also suggest metaphors/themes/images that we can use in relation to God and what God is like? This suggestion arises from Sue's description of how her father had expressed his love for her and Darren's response to her sharing. She described how he

always wore this huge big coat, several layers of coat, that went on and came off in one, not in layers. He used to cycle for miles to work and back home, and halfway he would stop and go to the café, and always buy a small little cake, you know those small Swiss tarts with a cherry in the middle, and I would know somehow that he would bring this cake home, and it would be in one of these many pockets, and I would say to him: "Have you brought me a cake?" and he would say: "No, not tonight." So it was like a little game between us, and I knew he would want me to look and get excited, and I would search the pockets. Little things like that made me know that he had thought about me, and he wanted me to get excited and search in his pockets.

Later, when Darren responded to this story, he said: 'I also loved what she said about her Dad. I feel that's what God is like with us. He brings us a little cake but wants us to look for it. It gave me a beautiful picture of what God is like for us - a caring figure who has got something special for us and wants us to look for it!' Allowing metaphors and images of what God is like to emerge from people's lived experience, as it happened for us in the group, is similar to what biblical writers did in relation to their speech about God. Reflecting on Paul the Apostle's use of language, Peterson (Dawn & Peterson 2000:73) points out the following:

He doesn't develop a special and disciplined jargon for the sake of being precise about God; he takes the language of common discourse, which is always redolent of metaphor - common things and common actions - and uses it freely, at ease with the ambiguities that are necessarily inherent in it. And in using

language this way he sets the style for language in pastoral theology.

I have already referred in this chapter to the need for a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion at work in our theological reflections (see 3.3.3). Gerkin (1986:67) writes that we always need 'to be questioning our assumed meanings, our easily arrived at connections and conclusions'. In our conversations about what God is like, Stephen introduced this 'hermeneutic of suspicion' when he spoke of his struggle to believe in a God who personally intervenes in the lives of individuals. Even though Paul did not agree with Stephen, one effect of his listening to this interpretation was becoming 'aware of the importance of questioning - questioning my own experience, questioning my own interpretation. I went home thinking: How did I arrive at my conclusion, and how did Stephen arrive at his conclusion - and could I possibly arrive at his conclusion. I still need to think that one out'. With this comment, Paul, I believe, is committing himself to a spiritual way of being that will consistently involve critical reflection on his faith experience within his context, thereby taking the final step in the pastoral-hermeneutic circle in his own theological journey (see also 2.3.8).

3.5 CONCLUSION

Since it has been pointed out that the 'point at which the researcher's power is unrivalled by those being researched is in the analysis phase' (Limerick, Burgess-Limerick & Grace 1996:457), this chapter and the next were discussed with the research participants before they were included in the final research document. Also, writing up this particular chapter and engaging in reflexive conversations with my supervisor raised further questions for me, especially as a pastor and practical theologian. Are all experiences of God, discernments of God's will, and 'pictures' of God equally valid? And if the various confessions or theologies of the various denominations constitute the spirituality of their members, what happens when members have spiritual experiences constituted by other beliefs and ideas? Related to both these questions is the concern of how

the pastor uses the Scriptures in the work of spirituality and spiritual formation. These concerns and questions were not in my mind when I posed my research question and developed its related research aims and objectives before the research began, but emerged as I did my research and wrote it up. I will respond to these questions and concerns in my final chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

LIVING WITH QUESTIONS ABOUT THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

As a response to the gratuitous outpouring of God's love, charity demands that one turn one's face toward the face of another and confront there both oneself and God.

(Mairs 1993:176)

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Right at the outset of this chapter I would like to indicate how I use the term 'spiritual life' here. Instead of providing a precise definition, I would rather refer back to a source used earlier in relation to the contemporary resurgence in spirituality (see 1.1.1). Mairs (1993:12) suggests that spiritual life is concerned with questions such as the following: What does it mean to live in God's presence? What responsibilities do I bear in creating such a life? What choices must I make to sustain it? When we engage questions like these, our responses shape the way we intend to live out our spiritual lives. In this chapter I describe, as richly as I can, the responses of the group to concerns like these. As in Chapter Three, I organise this chapter around the actual research conversations, the meanings constructed around these conversations and the practical theological processes that were evident in the conversations. Again, the headings used in this chapter take the form of questions. This stresses both the importance of Practical Theology's point of departure in the questions and intimations that come from our engagement with people in the local situation (see 2.3.3), and also the need for ongoing exploration. As Gerkin (1984, 1986) repeatedly indicates, the story of Practical Theology is an open-ended story that requires continuous revision and collaborative enquiry.

4.2 MORE THAN KNOWLEDGE?

Webber (1999:138) argues that the rationalist world view associated with the modern era initiated by the Enlightenment led to an emphasis on a 'spirituality of knowledge'. The question posed by the research journey asked whether spiritual life and spirituality involves more than acquiring the right knowledge.

4.2.1 Listening to the research conversations

When asked for their ideas around the word 'spirituality', the research participants offered various responses. Paul spoke about the link between the tangible and intangible that 'goes beyond...mental limitations'. Andrew reacted with a comment on spirituality as 'the core of my being, my insides, dealing principally with my relationship with God, and the experiences and the power that result from this relationship'. Dot answered: 'My personal relationship with God...goes beyond my physical and mental limitations without a doubt. I say this based on my experiences with Lynette, my daughter, in particular, for although she had learning disabilities, her relationship with God was mature...She was educated for eternity.'

In order for us to understand better how Dot perceived 'mature' spirituality, I invited her to tell the group about Lynette. These were her opening words: 'When Lynette was born, she was not expected to live because she had heart problems which some years later were diagnosed as Noonam's syndrome... She was a wonderful example to us and others. Often people would say that she had wonderful faith. She took each day at a time and didn't worry about tomorrow.' When specifically asked about the 'maturity' that Dot had witnessed in her daughter, she mentioned several qualities. These included 'her acceptance of everything', 'a childlike faith' and 'her thankfulness and gratitude': 'She had this incredible love for everybody...she would go to sleep with no ill feeling.'

Dot's witnessing of a mature spirituality in her daughter's life resonated with

Paul's experience of spending time amongst the mentally disabled in a local institution:

What struck me was how Dot saw mature faith. It resonated with me because I remember a moment when I went to San Michelle, a home for the handicapped, and I met a disabled person singing the song, 'Jesus loves me, this I know'. And that evening I went to a talk by a very brilliant professor, Prof. Block, and he was expressing his love for God. I think that what Dot said validates all people's experience of God, and that excites me.

4.2.2 Generating meaning around the conversations with regard to spirituality

There is a widespread tendency to equate spiritual maturity with intellectual knowledge, especially in relation to Scripture and the so-called 'propositional truths' of the Christian faith. As Sue observed: 'There's lots of head knowledge about. If you know the Bible, read the right books, then you have really made it. I think there's a big story out there that puts value to knowing things in the head...' Webber (1999:18) suggests that this notion arises from the modernist emphasis on rationality and factualism which together insist that individuals, through their use of reason, can arrive at objective truth. By introducing Lynette to the group as her example of mature spirituality, Dot challenged this particular discourse for herself and for the other research participants. When asked whether she thought there were ideas in the wider church that linked mature spirituality with intellectual knowledge, Dot answered: 'I must have thought like this myself going back years, that you couldn't reach a fulness in your relationship with God if you had learning disabilities, after all, how could someone who couldn't read the Bible reach fulness. Yet Lynette proved me wrong.' When she later reflected on the group's conversational journey, she remarked: 'It has reinforced for me that our relationship with God is not only a head trip...In the past I've wanted to read all the latest books, or get these daily notes or those daily notes, but that's not what spirituality is all about.'

The story of Dot's daughter, Lynette, opened up an understanding for the group of spirituality that went beyond knowledge. This was new for some members of the group. As Sue responded after she had listened to the story of Lynette: 'Dot opened the door, really, of something that I haven't really thought of before. Did people's different levels of intellect affect their spirituality or was spirituality in fact something not guided by these level of things...Probably I can be spiritually mature, however intelligent I may be or not be, and that's a fresh thought for me.' At the end of our conversation about Lynette, I thanked Dot on behalf of the group with these words: 'She has affected your and our spirituality deeply, especially helping us to see that spirituality is more than an intellectual thing, but something also of the heart.' Later, in our conversational journey, when we returned to the theme of an 'everyday spirituality', Dot again referred to this theme of the heart that Lynette's life had introduced to the group: 'When I grow close to God, I need to show forth the fruits of the Spirit. So, in other words, it [everyday spirituality] wouldn't be a thought, "Oh, now I must do this". You wouldn't just think it, you would be it. So it wouldn't be an intellectual thing, it would be a thing of the heart.'

In referring to the possibilities of spirituality being primarily a matter of the heart, I am aware that the notion of 'heart' can carry strong sentimental overtones. However, as Nouwen (1981:76-77) points out, 'the word heart in the Jewish-Christian tradition refers to the source of all physical, emotional, intellectual, volitional and moral energies...[it] is the seat of the will: it makes plans and comes to good decisions'. As such, it is that 'space within us where God dwells and where we are invited to dwell with God' (Nouwen 1994:8). Little wonder that Willard (2001 in press) stresses the primacy of the heart in ethical spiritual formation. He maintains that only a person 'with a well-kept heart is a person who is *prepared* and *capable* of responding to the situations of life in ways that are good and right'. In the light of her capacity to respond to her life situations with rich faith and love (see 4.2.1), it can certainly be said that Lynette was an ethical person who lived a good life with and for others (see 1.6.2.5). And clearly, given her mental disabilities, this ethical life had its roots in the hidden domain

of her heart and not in intellectual knowledge. (In 4.4.1, I attend more fully to the development and practice of an ethical spirituality.)

4.2.3 Doing Practical Theology

Interestingly, in some recent literature around the themes of spirituality and spiritual formation, there have been calls for a 'new reformation of the heart' (Foster 1998, Willard 2001 in press). Since Practical Theology has the task of exploring and researching questions about how we go about deepening our spiritual lives as Christ-followers (see 1.1.3), we need to ask how this 'reformation of the heart' can take place in our local congregations. Could it be, and this suggestion echoes our experiences in the group, that such a reformation would need some reflexive engagement with the stories of the marginalised, the poor and the weak, like those, for example, who are mentally handicapped? Cochrane and others (1991:31) hint at this when they suggest that those involved in the work of Practical Theology 'face the difficult challenge of listening in the closest way, with the greatest respect, to the experiences and thinking of others who may have less in the way of training or verbal skills or status than the listener'. While we did not listen to Lynette herself, or for that matter any other person who had less training, verbal skills or status than the members of the group, our listening to Dot's experience of her mentally-handicapped daughter strongly reminded us that if we were going to develop a heart-spirituality we would need to learn how to listen to the stories of the marginalised, the poor and the weak.

The heart effects of engagement with suffering people were also witnessed by Sue. Reflecting on her involvement in hospice with dying people, she spoke of how this work had awakened her faith and encouraged her to live more fully:

I did nursing and looking after the dying was by far the most satisfying. I don't think I had much of a relationship with God then. For many years it was like that but I think it was because of working in hospice that I came back to church again. I looked at

people coming to the end of their lives. For some it was very peaceful, for others it was very traumatic. I think I am where I am because of what they gave me...one of their gifts was about living life with as few regrets as possible. Another gift, I remember someone asking Chris, my husband, whether working at hospice had changed me and he said: 'She just somehow has become more human.'

Reflecting on the ways personal encounters with suffering people affect our lives, it would seem that when it comes to changing hearts and minds we need more than rational argument and academic theories (Ackermann 1996:43). We need, as suggested above, reflexive engagement and interaction with those who suffer and are marginalised. Ackermann (1996:48) supports this engagement and interaction when she writes:

Hearing and engaging in informed reflection with the life stories of those who have been oppressed has the potential to change and enlarge the selves of the privileged hearers. But we do not only hear others' stories. We have our own stories to tell. As these stories intersect, they change...It is only when hearing and telling stories begins as a process of openness, vulnerability and mutual engagement that alienations of class, race and gender can be challenged.

4.3 SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINE(S)?

Willard (1988:156) describes a spiritual discipline as 'an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective co-operation with Christ and his kingdom'. Foster (1978:6) points out that they 'allow us to place ourselves before God so that He can transform us'. The question posed by the research journey concerned the specific nature of the various spiritual disciplines and their place in our spiritual lives.

4.3.1 Listening to the research conversations

The question of spiritual discipline(s) often emerged in the group's conversations about the development of the spiritual life. When Darren was asked how he had been able to hold onto his spirituality in the face of those things that had tried to steal it away, he answered: 'I think I have often realised I need time out, time to calm down and slow down.' He also referred to the disciplines of Scripture reading and fellowship in his spiritual life: 'I think for me reading the Bible gives me lots of hope. It's not a fairytale with a bad ending. It's a real story with an ending of hope. What strikes me too is the wisdom of Jesus. Also sharing with others, especially in small groups and being able to say: "Hey, I'm sukkeling at the moment." And then I get support and care.' Later he affirmed again the value of fellowship: 'I have a few friends and when we get together and talk about God and the difference that God makes in our lives, in a human sense when we share like this, it is like what I share with God. Stephen, one of the 'outside voices', spoke of the importance of regular communal prayer around the Eucharist in nurturing his own spirituality: '...and so in Winterveld my main spiritual support has been the Catholic Sisters of Mercy, and I join them whenever I can for their evening prayers...the greater emphasis on the quiet, and the Eucharist, and the mystery, makes sense to me.'

Repeatedly the research participants, together with the 'outside voices', referred to the importance of the spiritual disciplines of solitude and silence. Reflecting on the conversational journey, Sue said: 'The theme of silence has been important to me. Silence and the use of silence...The more contemplative, mystical way of being feeds my spirit, more than reading or going on courses.' When asked whether there was anything from the group's conversational journey that he would take into his future journey with God, Paul answered: 'The emphasis on silence. It was interesting to hear how people had discovered the importance of silence.' In sharing her experience of her search for identity as a woman who had suffered from polio from the age of five, Christine, one of the

'outside voices', underlined this emphasis on solitude and silence: 'In my journey I have found my identity and I have to say that I'm well-satisfied with my life and who I am at this time, and this has come through silence mostly, in solitude, going on retreats, through reading, praying. I find God speaking to me in the quiet.'

Another activity which the research participants repeatedly spoke about as being helpful in their spiritual lives was that of reflection. Speaking about what had facilitated an awareness of God's presence in his life, Darren said: 'That kind of experience only comes when I reflect on a situation, when I get through it and I look back and realise that God has been with me. When I'm in it, I don't think about God, but when I look back I see that God has been helping me to get through.' Later in the conversation he added: 'I want to develop this reflective capacity further. I believe that reflection is very important in the Christian life. It's something that I have learnt from other believers. I heard how other people say it's important for them. One thing that helped me too was the "Footprints" poem.' Closely connected to reflection for Darren was the practice of keeping a journal: 'I'm already trying to keep a journal. It's most probably my most accurate form of reflection. Sometimes when I'm down, I page through my journal and see where I was a few days before and maybe trace how I got so down.'

Sue referred to how reflecting had made her aware of other people's contributions to her life. When I asked her whether her mother-in-law knew how much she had meant to her in her faith journey, she answered: 'I think she did. I don't think I ever spoke these exact words. It may be something like the "Footprints" story - that I only realise how much she meant to me as I look back.'

4.3.2 Generating meaning around the conversations with regard to spirituality

In the group's discussions around spiritual discipline(s) a number of meanings were generated. First of all, it became clear that there are a variety of spiritual

disciplines that can be useful in the growing of the spiritual life. Those mentioned in the research process ranged from solitude, silence, prayer, Bible-reading, reflection and journal-keeping to more corporate disciplines such as worship, fellowship and regular participation in the Eucharist. Certainly, as Willard (1988:157) points out, 'we need not try to come up with a complete list of disciplines'. One activity was not commonly regarded as a spiritual discipline, but it was one about which the research participants often spoke as being helpful in their spiritual lives. That was regular engagement with the stories and lives of those who suffer (see 4.2.3). In the light of these conversations I would like to add this activity to any exploration into the subject of spiritual disciplines. In my book on compassionate caring, I have written:

Traditionally, when Christian writers mention spiritual disciplines, their list has included those of solitude, prayer, Bible-reading, fasting, fellowship, worship and the like. In the light of the pilgrimage experience I want to emphasise one discipline seldom mentioned, and that is planned encounter with those who suffer in our midst.

(Hudson 1999:110)

Secondly, the different research participants found different spiritual disciplines helpful. They did not all practice the same ones, thus illustrating Willard's (1988:157) observation that we should not 'assume that *our* particular list will be right for others'. It follows also that, with regard to the use of spiritual disciplines, the growing of the spiritual life 'leaves room for and even *calls for* individual creativity and an experiential attitude in such matters' (Willard 1988:190) [Willard's italics].

Thirdly, the strong discourse about the importance of the spiritual disciplines in Christian circles can lead to problem-saturated self-narratives. Literature around the subject abounds (Foster 1978; MacDonald 1984; Day 1988; Willard 1988; Kelsey 1998), creating a dominant discourse regarding the place of spiritual discipline(s) in the spiritual life. When Darren was asked how he had come

across the importance of solitude and silence, he answered: 'I learnt a lot from the church, its preaching about Jesus and through friends.' Not surprisingly, therefore, the group's conversations around the question of spiritual discipline(s) often expressed difficulty, struggle and feelings of not being good enough. Andrew verbalised this difficulty when he said: 'I think it's the whole busyness thing. I just battle to sit down for half an hour or so, and then there are the distractions. I know that I need some kind of structure in my day when I can just sit down and do some business with God...But it's also very difficult.' Dot felt that she shared this particular struggle: 'What I could relate to with Andrew was finding the right time. I say I'll get up half an hour earlier, but it doesn't work that way. I think that was a struggle for me for years. And then just recently I read Gordon MacDonald's book "Ordering your Private World". When I picked it up I thought to myself, I'm pretty organised, but when I read it, it made me realise just how disorganised I was.' Darren also found himself in a similar situation: 'I think I can also relate to the whole discipline thing that Andrew was talking about. It's been a tremendous struggle in my life, and still is.' These struggles expressed by the research participants highlighted one of the key assumptions of narrative therapy that 'problems are the products of discursive conditions, or ways of speaking, which have placed the person in problematic positions in the story that he is telling about his life' (Drewery & Winslade 1996:41).

Reflecting on the way the dominant ideas about spiritual discipline(s) can create problem-saturated self-narratives raised for me as a pastor doing spirituality work the following question: How does a pastor introduce and explore spiritual discipline(s) in a life-affirming and liberating way? While the scope of this chapter does not permit a lengthy response, three possibilities can be offered in the light of the two previously described meanings of the term generated in this section. Firstly, a pastor can introduce many possible spiritual disciplines in an open-ended and non-imposing way. Secondly, congregants can be invited to notice those practices that they have already found life-giving in their own spiritual lives and to build on them. Thirdly, the notion of discipline and its place in human life can be opened up for critical inspection and exploration. I sought

to do this in my conversation with Darren when I asked him whether he could detect 'different sides' to the place of discipline in our lives. He answered: 'Discipline is an essential part for me of being a person. If you want to get anything done in life you have to be disciplined. But as far as structuring your whole life, that is very machine-like to me.'

4.3.3. Doing Practical Theology

The group's conversations around the discipline of reflection showed why it has such an important place in the hermeneutic/contextual way of doing Practical Theology (see 2.3.5). In our final session together, Sue said: 'I also want to say something about reflection before we end. I think this was a theme that came out strongly for many of us. Reflecting just seems to grow things. It allows me to gain understanding and growth from the things that I have experienced. I think reflection is a tool, not only for spirituality, but for all of life.' Besides indicating how helpful the group had found reflection in their own spiritual lives, this comment also showed that non-professionals are already doing Practical Theology (reflecting upon their lived experience in the light of their faith) in their everyday lives. Could the local congregation become *the* place for practical theological discourse by supporting and facilitating this reflection upon everyday experience? Newby (1995:16) believes that, were this to occur, it could greatly contribute to the effectiveness of the educational ministry of local congregations:

As it is practised in most local churches, adult religious education is not very effective. I believe it is ineffective because it fails to connect a person's *experience* with the relevancy of the faith. To reflect theologically *together* has always been an important part of congregational life. What is needed is to make such reflection more *intentional*.

The group's discussions around spiritual discipline(s) also underlined the importance of retrieving the tradition in an ecumenical manner, another key characteristic of my practical theological method (see 2.3.5). Since the

conversational journey involved 'outside voices' from faith traditions outside the Methodist tradition (from which the five research participants came), it exposed the research participants to spiritual disciplines not usually emphasised in their own tradition. Stephen, from an Anglo-Catholic tradition, brought an emphasis on 'centering prayer' and regular participation in the Eucharist, while Rob, from the Quaker tradition, brought an emphasis on silence, non-violent practices and the doing of justice. This retrieval of the tradition in an ecumenical way also took place in the group's discussions around discerning God's will for our lives when Rob, from the Quaker tradition, stressed the communal dimensions of discernment which had previously not been emphasised by the research participants in their conversations (see 3.3.2), and when he emphasised the Quaker conviction, 'that of God in each person' (see 3.2.3).

This ecumenical orientation in the doing of Practical Theology is important for at least two reasons. Firstly, it 'is inevitable that particular confessional traditions emphasise some elements of the Christian tradition at the expense of others' (Cochrane et al 1991:22). It follows, then, that doing Practical Theology ecumenically exposes those involved to ways of Christian living/witness not stressed by their own particular tradition. This can generate fresh interest and curiosity in spiritual life. As Darren remarked about the theme of non-violence after listening to Rob's (Quaker) commitment to a non-violent way of life: 'It was definitely accentuated today. Yes, I've always known it about Jesus but perhaps I saw it in a childlike naïve kind of way, whereas today I see it more realistically. That it's a real life thing. Also, I wanted to hear a little more about the Quaker way of life. I've never met a Quaker before, but I've met one today.' Similarly, after Paul had listened to Stephen (Anglo-Catholic) talk about the importance of the Eucharist, he said: 'A lot of what Steve has said has raised a lot for me...and also the whole thing about the Eucharist. Recently I've been discovering Catholic spirituality and have seriously considered the monastic life. Yeah, I'm not sure. He has raised questions for me.'

Secondly, the retrieval of the Christian tradition in an ecumenical manner

facilitates a critical 'hermeneutic of suspicion' towards one's own tradition. This had happened for Rob himself in his move from the Methodist Church to the Quakers. As he said about this move: 'It has helped me to articulate my faith in a different way.' Dot could also have been referring to the way ecumenical exposure had led her into a more critical examination of her own tradition when she described the research journey in these words: 'For me, it has been a very thought-provoking time. Looking at myself and thinking about what I really believe, and then hearing other people's stories and beliefs, and relating it to my own life. That has been very valuable.' In our last session, she added that these ecumenical exposures 'get you to question certain beliefs. This is what has happened for me here in listening to other people's experiences'.

The risks and benefits of an ecumenical approach to both Practical Theology and spirituality need to be noted. In a reflexive conversation with my supervisor, it became clearer that such an approach could lead people to leave one particular denomination to join another which they found more fitting and attractive. On the one hand, this could encourage a consumerist approach to spirituality which is already widely prevalent (Houston 1992:12). On the other hand, by facilitating a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' towards one's own tradition, an inclusive ecumenical approach in the doing of Practical Theology raises 'some very searching and pertinent questions about those traditions which have dominated Christian history to their detriment and oppression...' (Cochrane et al 1991:22). Doing this enables us to criticise better those webs of knowledge and power in which we are all caught up as practical theologians, especially those related to our own denominational belonging (see 1.6.2.5).

4.4 WAYS OF CARING?

Caring has been considered central to spiritual life in the Christian tradition (Kelsey 1981:12-14). It was also my own conviction that compassionate caring lies at the heart of an ethical spirituality (see 1.6.2.5, 2.3.7). The question raised by the research journey related to possible ways of caring in a spiritual

life.

4.4.1 Listening to the research conversations

The twin themes of being cared for and caring for others often surfaced in our conversational journey. With regard to the first theme, both Dot and Christine described times when people had sought to care for them. Dot spoke about how, at the time of her daughter Lynette's death, it 'was caring Christian friends who helped the most. What didn't help were glib remarks like "she's better off now where she is" '.

Christine, one of the 'outside voices' and also a polio sufferer, spoke of the caring she had received when she went through a divorce and when she had Myelo Encephalopathy (ME): 'People from the Church phoned me, and I didn't even know who they were. They phoned often, and offered themselves, and asked if there was anything they could do. These were faceless people, and this was very humbling. When I had ME people came to visit me and they brought me food and talked with me and did shopping for me. I didn't know them very well either. It was really amazing.' She also spoke of how she had been on the receiving end of non-caring actions:

The not so good side was when I was a child, and I'm also speaking here on behalf of someone else, and I was in hospital. Every Wednesday the churches would call on the institution and visit people. You would know exactly when the NG were coming, and the Methodists, and the Anglicans, and people would walk up to your bed and they would plonk hands on you and start praying. And they wouldn't ask what your name was, or how you were, or what was wrong, and they would get quite fervent about it. I lay in hospital for 18 months with a spinal fusion, and this was the scenario every Wednesday, and I must admit that although I was a believer, there were many times I would pretend I was asleep. I didn't want them there. It was an intrusion, but there were also people who were extremely sensitive, who asked

me my name, and built up a relationship.

In relation to the second theme of caring for others, Christine spoke about her present relationship with her mother, where she is the main care-giver:

Three years ago, my father died. Now I look after my mom. She is bed-ridden and it's been very difficult. Now it's good, but it was difficult. I remember opening my Bible once after fighting with my mom and reading: 'Love is kind, love is patient', and I said to myself, 'I just cannot do this. I cannot. I know I can be these good things when it suits me, but not with my mother.' But over these past three years God has taught me how to do it.

Later Christine also described a time when her caring efforts had not been appreciated, and her thoughts about this particular incident:

Often I'm asked to go to someone who has been recently disabled through an accident and I've only done it once, when with a friend we went to see the champion SA trampoline jumper who had been paralysed. She didn't want to see us. In fact, she said: 'Go away. You know how to cope and I don't.' We didn't know what to say, so we left. I said I would never do that again. It's a kind of smug self-righteousness.

4.4.2 Generating meaning around the conversations with regard to spirituality

Regarding the practice of caring several meanings emerged in the conversations with the research participants. First of all, not all caring efforts are experienced as such by the recipients. As described above, this happened for Christine when she was hospitalised and for Dot when her daughter Lynette died. Their experiences illustrated Peterson's (1997a:116) observation that, although more is written about caring today than ever before, 'the reports coming back day after day from the field - people telling stories of what has happened to them in the

hospital, church, with the social worker, at school - document an alarming deterioration of care on all fronts'.

Secondly, unhelpful caring practices by representatives of the church not only affect the recipient negatively, they also have negative consequences for that person's relationship with the church. This happened for Christine's friend who, as described above, had not been helped by the visits of church members. It also nearly happened for Christine herself, for she said:

This situation created such a negative force that my friend still today will not go to church, so that is one negative aspect, and there have also been cases where people have prayed for me and asked me to walk. And when I didn't they would say that I didn't have enough faith. I don't get upset about this so much any more. But I am human and I sometimes think, 'What right do you have to say this to me when you don't really understand, and is it for you, or for God, or for what is it that you are doing this?' So there are some situations that are quite insensitive and if I was a less tolerant person I think I would have said, 'No, I am not going to church any more'.

Thirdly, reflections on our own experiences of suffering can teach us about how best to care for others. When Darren expressed how moved he was by Christine's care for her mother, she answered:

I know this sounds strange, but the fact that I'm disabled gives me a practical mind into how to deal with my mom's situation. I know what it's like to lie in bed and not reach a glass of water. So when she is sitting in her chair, I make sure that all she would need is close to her, because I remember what it's like. And like giving her a bath, I don't put her in a bath, I take her outside into the sun in a wheelchair and pour water over her, I know that is easier for all of us.

Reflecting on what people had said to her at the time of Lynette's death, Dot spoke of how she was now more careful in what she said to others who had lost loved ones: 'But even now when I buy a bereavement card and write inside, I am so careful with the words.'

Fourthly, it follows from the above three meanings generated that those who seek to care for others need to reflect critically on their caring actions. This is the ethical challenge facing all caregivers (see also 1.6.2.5). Since it is not always clear how best to give care, it is again important in this context to stress the importance of the 'not-knowing' posture. Peterson (1997a:163) hints at the need for this kind of posture in caring for others:

All through the traditions of caring (this is not only in Western, but also Eastern cultures) there are frequent counsels to reticence, to detachment, to holding back, to letting go... the reason for the counsel to reticence is that the act of caring, responding to a person in need, takes place in an environment that is already surging with life, prodigal with energy, vitality, beauty. This life, creation in all of its aspects, is exceedingly complex and far past the capacity of our understanding. You realise that we are far more ignorant of the world than we are knowledgeable of it.

4.4.3 Doing Practical Theology

Both my research approach and practical theological methodology required that I make explicit the bias that I brought to the research process (see 2.3.2). Therefore I again want to acknowledge my conviction that compassionate caring lies at the heart of an ethical spirituality (see 1.6.2.5, 2.3.7). This conviction also corresponded in part with the last steps of my practical theological method (see 2.3.7, 2.3.8). When I mentioned this conviction to the group during our last meeting together, Paul remarked: 'I knew the bias, but I wasn't uncomfortable with this. You did choose outside people who were different, and I certainly leave here more aware.'

Repeatedly there were conversational indications that the spiritualities of the participants were becoming more caring and compassionate. One example of this was Andrew's experience of participating in Christine's story:

I was very aware as I was listening to you speak that I have so little interaction with disabled people, and that there's a whole range of struggles that you go through that I'm totally unaware of. I guess it was just enlightening to hear from where you were coming. It's just a very different perspective to where I would come from, and just asking myself that if I was in a shopping mall and saw someone in a wheelchair, what would my reaction be.

When I then asked Andrew whether listening to Christine's story would have any effect upon him, he replied: 'If you don't have contact with people, you can have all kinds of theories. Treat them as you treat anyone else, but if you don't actually touch base with them, you don't ever really get the gist of their experience, and just hearing your experience and the struggle you go through and the growth of your spirituality is eye-opening. In a way that is much more real than theory.'

Reflecting once again on the effects of personal engagement with the stories of those who have suffered on the research participants, two comments with regard to Practical Theology are in order. Firstly, those involved in practical theological reflection need to be themselves engaged with suffering and marginalised people. In his conversation with the research group about the deepening of spirituality, Stephen, one of the outside voices, underlined the importance of this kind of personal encounter. Telling of his life-forming experience of participating in the lives and stories of those who suffered under apartheid through his participation in a 'Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope' (Hudson 1999), he said: 'I think the one thing the church can do for their people is to put them in touch with people who can challenge them and give them positive experiences, not just lectures on how to love the poor.' When a local congregation does this, it also takes seriously the first steps of doing Practical Theology in a contextual manner

(see 2.3.3). These moments of reflexive engagement with the stories and lives of those who suffer are 'the basic point of departure for a holistic practical theology which refuses to reduce its concerns to the atomized individual or family' (Cochrane et al 1991:18).

Secondly, it also follows that the voices and stories of the marginalised and suffering themselves need to be heard and reflected when doing Practical Theology (Ackermann 1996:47-48). If they are not, Practical Theology becomes solely an academic discourse governed by intellect and rationality far removed from the everyday contexts and realities of people who are hurting. Such a theoretical orientation seldom facilitates transformation in the lives of Christians which, as has already been noted (see 1.1.3), is the central challenge faced by Practical Theology. Significantly, both Andrew and Stephen stressed the limitation of theories in making them aware and responsive in the context of suffering. Willard (1988:152), in his reflections on Practical Theology and human transformation, makes the point strongly that 'whatever is purely mental cannot transform the self'.

4.5 CONCLUSION

Writing this chapter raised for me, as a practical theologian, researcher and pastor, the theological concern of the relationship between God's activity and our activity in the development of spirituality. In closing this chapter I would like to situate myself briefly in relation to this important issue. The central theological assumption underlying my research was the belief that God's presence and activity permeates all human activities with the intention of bringing about God's purposes for them (see 1.6.2.3, 2.3.5). Against the background of this overall theological orientation, I want to suggest that all that we do in our spiritual lives 'involves our effort to respond to and appropriate in our actions the redemptive activity of God in the present as God, by the power of the Spirit, acts on our behalf to draw us and all created life toward the realisation of God's promise in the kingdom' (Gerkin 1986:72).

CHAPTER FIVE

WHAT WAS LEARNT ALONG THE WAY

In the speaking and the hearing, new things appear in the land.
(From the words of Jeremiah and Isaiah quoted by Costello 1999:i)

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter I clarify what I have learnt during the research journey. These insights relate to the central research question (see 1.4), the research aims and objectives (see 1.5), the personal musings and reasons that prompted this narrative exploration into Christian spirituality (see 1.1, 1.2, 1.3), a qualitative research approach (see 2.2) and a contextual/hermeneutic method for Practical Theology (see 2.3). Furthermore, in this chapter I also want to reflect on those questions that were not in my mind when I posed my research question, but which emerged as the research journey unfolded (see 3.5). In writing up this chapter I have been mindful of Winter's (1996:26-27) observation that research reports are written with three audiences in mind: those with whom we have collaborated in carrying out the research reported, interested colleagues in other institutions and ourselves. Regarding this last audience, he points out that 'writing up a report is an act of learning and, in this sense, we write for ourselves so that, when we read what we have written, we find out what, in the end, we have learned (Winter 1996:27). Certainly, this is what I hope will happen for me. It also means that, while I refer to the research conversations and relevant theory, in this chapter I write very much in my own voice.

5.2 EFFECTS OF THE RESEARCH JOURNEY ON THE LIVES OF THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

5.2.1 Introduction

In this section I outline what I learnt regarding the central research question and its related aims and objectives. I follow a threefold structure. First of all, while

space only permits limited references to the words of the research participants, I begin by listening to the research conversations that reveal the transformative effects that the research journey had on the lives of those who participated. Secondly, by referring again to words spoken by the research participants, I clarify three personal insights with regard to a narrative group approach to Christian spirituality. Thirdly, I outline three emerging ideas for doing spirituality in a local congregation.

5.2.2 Listening to the research conversations

Throughout our time together, the research participants commented on the transformative effects of the research journey on their lives. Already, in my reflections on the research conversations described in Chapters Three and Four, I have pointed out some of these effects. These effects included a deeper appreciation of God's presence in all things (see 3.2.1, 3.2.2), learning fresh ways of discerning God's will (see 3.3.1, 3.3.2), revising our 'pictures' of God (see 3.4.1, 3.4.2), becoming more aware of the outsider in our midst (see 4.2.1, 4.2.2), revisiting the place of spiritual discipline in our lives (see 4.3.1, 4.3.2), and a stronger commitment to a life of compassionate caring (see 4.4.1, 4.4.2). The words quoted in the next paragraph add a further level of reflection by the research participants on the transformative effects of the research journey. Given that these comments were made during the latter part of the research journey, when we introduced ourselves to the 'outside voices' and in our final session when we reflected on the overall research process, these comments are more general in nature.

When we introduced ourselves to Rob, one of the visiting 'outside voices', Paul remarked: 'I think our time together has changed my life quite strongly.' In our final session together, he alluded again to this change: 'A lot of this journey for me has been about regaining courage, rediscovering parts of my life that I had forgotten about and that I want to reclaim now.' Dot, as she introduced herself,

said it 'had been a very thought-provoking time'. Later she said that our journey together 'had definitely made me look more deeply at my own spirituality. I've asked myself, "Where do I stand?"'

In the next session, when we introduced ourselves to Stephen, Andrew remarked that the conversational journey had 'touched my life' and had 'been encouraging and uplifting'. In our final session together, Sue reflected: 'For me I have a sense that this conversational journey will change things for me. I'm not sure exactly how, but I've got a hunch that one day I'll look back on this time and say that it was significant.' For Darren, our conversational journey had challenged him to find ways of making a difference in the lives of those who suffered. Responding to the stories involving the suffering of people, he said: 'My first reaction was almost anger with God, and then I saw also that a lot of suffering is caused by human beings. But I also saw that if Stephen could make a difference to thousands of lives I could also make a difference to some as well.'

5.2.3 Clarifying personal insights regarding a narrative group approach to Christian spirituality

Together with those described in Chapters Three and Four, the above conversational references show clearly that our conversations together had exercised a transformative effect on the lives of the research participants. However, my research concerns pressed me one step further, to ask about *how* a narrative group approach had contributed to this transformation. Reflecting on this question, again in the light of the group's conversations, enabled greater clarity to emerge in responding to the central research question of how a narrative group approach to Christian spirituality could facilitate the intention of Practical Theology to transform human life.

Firstly, a narrative group approach facilitates transformation by enabling story tellers and story participants to *connect* with each other. When Dot was asked

what she thought had brought about the change in her spirituality she said she had experienced, she answered: 'I think it was just listening to the stories. As I listened, I found myself saying, "I can relate to that, I can relate to that".' Reflecting on the movement that he felt he had experienced in his spiritual life, Andrew also referred to this theme of connection: 'What stood out for me was that, even though we were listening to other people's stories, their stories were helping me to get in touch with my story.' Paul stressed this same theme of connecting when he remarked that the conversational journey 'had made me very aware that the human condition is similar, to some extent, not the same, but there always seem to be points where one person's story touches another person's story, and that has become clearer as I listened to my story and the stories of others'. Sue professed her experience of connection by describing a moment that had taken place between the research participants outside the structured group experience: 'Earlier today some of us were just standing together, and my sense was that we were closer together than usual. Somehow we knew each other at a deeper level, at a level which is quite unusual in a church setting.'

Crabb (1997) develops a thesis that, when we connect with each other, such connection will accomplish most of the healing and life-change that we now depend on mental health professionals to provide. Suggesting that the crisis of modern culture revolves around our disconnection from one another, Crabb (1997:xvi) argues that, rather 'than fixing psyches or scolding sinners, we must provide nourishment for the disconnected soul that only a community of connected people can offer'. He adds: 'Either we can live as unique members of a connected community...or we can live as terrified, demanding, self-absorbed islands, disconnected from community and desperately determined to get by with whatever resources we brought to our island with us' (Crabb 1997:38). Reflecting on the words of the research participants in the above paragraph made me aware of how much story-telling and story-participating can contribute towards the formation of a connected community.

Secondly, a narrative group approach to Christian spirituality facilitates transformation, since it allows those who are participating to co-construct new meanings of, in and for their spiritual lives. This 'co-constructing' process was mentioned by Andrew when, reflecting on his experience of telling his own story and responding to the stories of others, he remarked: 'It was interesting for me that when you asked us to respond I'd sit here and I only started clarifying things for myself as I started talking. I'd start with a brief point that I related to in the other person's story, and then as I spoke it got clearer.' He added later: 'Very seldom does one tell one's own story, and when you do, it's interesting to see what things come out. There's stuff inside you, I've discovered, that you are not even aware of, and just by telling your story it begins to come out.' Sue also stressed how the group's narrative approach had allowed for a co-constructing of new meanings for her spirituality when she commented: 'For me I think it was something about being open...hearing other people's stories and allowing myself to be open enough to consider what they were saying.' She then gave one specific example: 'Going back to Stephen's thing about God not micro-managing the world, at first I would have totally disagreed with him, and yet there was a part of me that said, "Yes, that's true too", so really listening to another person's story moved my spirituality into another place.'

These reflections by the research participants invited me to think more deeply about this process of co-constructing new meanings in Christian spirituality. Two ingredients of this process became clearer to me in the light of our research journey. On the one hand, I saw more clearly how story-telling and story-participation can enable us to move towards a more meaningful and coherent account of our own spiritual lives. Both in telling our stories, and in participating in the stories of others, we reorganise and re-author our lives, especially with regard to our preferred identity as Christ-followers (see 1.2.2). In other words, the act of story-telling is the first step in a process that leads to what Peterson (1980:76) calls 'story-making'. He points out that when people first tell their stories, they are often 'unable to comprehend their stories as connected

narratives that have meaning and make sense' (Peterson 1980:65). However, when these stories are retold, especially within a pastoral environment of listening companionship and caring collaboration, the story-tellers involved find themselves invited to create more meaningful and coherent narratives (Peterson 1980:74). Also, this 'story-making' takes place as we listen to the stories of others through the ears of our own (see 1.2.2). As I learnt, especially during the research journey, this occurs when we are 'moved' or experience 'katharsis' (White 2000:77) in listening to another person tell his/her story (see also 1.2.2). Interestingly, this second aspect of 'story-making' is not referred to by Peterson in his writing around the theme. In his description of the pastoral work of story-making, he does not mention the possibilities of the pastoral listener becoming other than who he/she is through listening to the stories of others. This omission, I suggest, opens the door to the possibility of condescension in the pastoral encounter, undermines the mutuality and collegiality of Christian spirituality and could imply that it is only the storyteller who is engaged in the process of re-authoring his/her life.

On the other hand, I also saw more clearly how deconstructing our spirituality generates possibilities for new meanings to emerge. In referring to the notion of deconstruction, I use the term to indicate 'procedures that subvert taken for granted realities and practices; those so-called "truths" that are split from the conditions and context of their production; those disembodied ways of speaking that hide their biases and prejudices; those familiar practices of self and relationship that are subjugating of persons' lives' (White 1991:27). Besides using deconstructive questioning (2.4.2.5), I learnt during the research journey that a powerful deconstructive procedure occurs when we create conversational space for alternative voices in the story-telling and story-participation journey. Such an event occurred when I brought in three people who represented different theological traditions and/or had suffered greatly, and/or had intentionally immersed their lives in the sufferings of others (see 2.4.2.6). The research conversations recorded in Chapters Three and Four, and the meanings

generated around them, describe richly the deconstructive effects that exposure to these voices had on the lives of the participants. Listening to these outside voices opened up possibilities for alternative ways of living spiritually, rendered more visible the discourses that constitute our spirituality, and brought new ethical challenges with regard to our spiritual lives within the contemporary context. Clearly, our engagement with these outside voices initiated a process of deconstruction that contributed significantly to transformation in the lives of the participants.

Thirdly, a narrative group approach facilitates transformation by opening the way for participants to enter the Scriptures in a personally meaningful and life-related manner. Reflecting on the way we had used the Scriptures in the research journey (see 2.4.2.5), Paul reflected: 'I think the way we linked Scripture stories with people's stories did something for me to the Scripture stories. In some sense it brought them alive with new meaning and relevance. They also became more human when linked to our stories, like, hey, this was the Apostle Paul writing this, the voice of someone who like me was hurting, growing, discovering.' After listening to Stephen's story of the events and circumstances that had led to his acceptance to Wits Medical School, Darren described how it had caused him to remember a particular piece of Scripture that emphasised God's personal love: 'Some people say it's a fluke, others say that God was involved. A verse that comes to my mind is God's word to Jeremiah. It goes something like "when you were in your mother's womb I knew you".' Later he shared how listening to Sue's story about reflecting in the stillness had caused him to think of Psalm 23 in a new way: 'There it says, "He leads me beside still waters" - suddenly it struck me that when the waters are running you can't see your reflection clearly, but when you are still, and the waters are quiet, you can see your reflection.'

Clearly, by engaging the Scriptures again after they had first engaged in story-telling and story-participating, these two research participants were able to construct new meanings with regard to the relationship between Scripture and

their own lives. Reflecting on how this occurred helped me to understand better that narrative conversations have the potential to prepare the ground for a richer personal engagement with the Scriptures. In telling our stories, and participating in those of others, we enter more deeply into the meanings of our own experiences. This in turn enables us to enter into the meanings of the life-experiences described in the Bible in a richer way. As a fourth century monk, Cassian, in his conversation with another monk, Isaac, put it (Newell 1998:7-8):

Our experience not only brings us to know them [the Scriptures], but actually anticipates what they convey. The meaning of the words comes through to us not just by way of commentaries but by what we ourselves have gone through...We enter into their meaning not because of what we read but because of what we have experienced earlier.

5.2.4 Emerging ideas for doing Christian spirituality in a local congregation

The transformative effects of the research journey in the lives of the research participants raised the question for me of how a local congregation could go about exploring a more narrative approach to Christian spirituality. The following three modest ideas emerged from my own reflections on the personal insights described above, as well as on other comments made by the research participants (recorded below).

First of all, in the work of doing Christian spirituality, a local congregation can use narrative ideas in those pastoral contexts where members tell their stories and listen to the stories of others. (By 'narrative ideas' I mean those insights gleaned from my training in narrative therapy which were used in the research journey.) Earlier in the research report I pointed out that stories are always being shared within a congregational context (see 1.2.3). However, there seemed to be a significant difference in the experience of story-telling and story-

participating for the research participants when they compared their research experience to their usual congregational experience. Reflecting on his story-telling experience within the research group, Darren remarked: 'I haven't had this kind of experience before at this depth. I've had lots of occasions for superficial sharing in the church, but this has been different. This experience has been very meaningful to me and I'm just sad that I haven't had this kind of sharing before.' Both Andrew and Sue shared Darren's sense of difference when they compared their research experience of story-telling to their congregational experience. Andrew remarked: 'Telling my story was a very unusual experience.' For Sue, 'it had been quite a rare thing'. By contrast, the difference for Paul was that 'the sharing had been a structured thing. There had been something deliberate about the process'. Judging by these comments, it would seem that the use of narrative ideas had facilitated story-telling and story-participation in a different and preferred way for the research participants. For this reason, I submit that the work of Christian spirituality can be enhanced by the intentional implementation of narrative ideas in pastoral story-telling and participating contexts.

There are a number of pastoral contexts where a local congregation can begin to implement the above ideas. These range from pastoral contexts like home visitation and counselling to larger contexts like confirmation classes, adult education courses and fellowship groups. I will briefly describe how a local congregation can begin to use narrative ideas in its existing home group life. I chose this particular pastoral context because of Darren's comment in our final session: 'I'd like to implement some of this in our cell. Often we are together for many months, but don't seem to know each other's stories.' In order to implement narrative ideas within a cell group context, I would suggest that group leaders be trained in two particular areas. On the one hand, it would involve developing in them a certain conversational artistry which would enable them to pursue conversations with 'narrative intentions' (see 2.4.2.5). Developing this artistry within a pastoral setting would mean fostering a 'not-knowing' posture towards others (see 1.3.4), learning to ask questions from this 'not-knowing' position (see

2.4.2.5), mining for the seeds of an alternate and hopeful story in the midst of a dominant problem-saturated story (see 1.3.4), and understanding Christian spirituality as a socially constructed experience (see 2.4.2.4). Here it must be stressed that narrative conversations can be built around various conversational themes and not just problem-saturated ones. On the other hand, it would mean that group leaders should learn how to enable members of the cell group to be compassionate witnesses/a reflecting team to the conversations in their midst. In this regard I want to return again to the notion of 'katharsis' (White 2000:77) in its classical sense (see 1.2.2), and align myself with White's (2000:77) conclusions:

I have consistently found that to evoke katharsis in this classical sense...has been invaluable to team members in orienting themselves as a community of outsider witnesses to the tellings of the stories of people's lives - in their preparation for engaging in outsider-witness retellings, and in their reflections on the constitutive effects of these retellings with regard to their own lives.

Secondly, in the work of doing Christian spirituality, a local congregation can allow its members to participate in the stories of those who have suffered deeply and/or immersed their lives in the suffering of others and/or pursued their spiritual journeys in church backgrounds different from their own. In the previous section (see 5.2.3), I pointed out how bringing in 'outside voices' and listening to their stories generated alternative possibilities for a richer spirituality. The words of the research participants regarding these effects have already been extensively quoted in Chapters Three and Four. I include here also the observation that the outside voices themselves found their participation in the research group worthwhile. After we had thanked Christine for being with us, she said: 'And I'd also like to say thank you for the privilege of being able to share my story a little.' At the end of our conversation with Rob, he said: 'It's been very valuable to be with you all.' For Stephen it had been 'very encouraging'. Hence,

in creating space for its members to encounter outside voices, a local congregation serves both its members and those beyond its margins.

In a previous publication I have described one specific way in which a local congregation can enable its members to participate in the stories of outside voices (Hudson 1999). Using the concept and metaphor of a 'pilgrimage', I tell the story of 'the Pilgrimage of Pain and Hope' - an eight day immersion in the lives and stories of our suffering and ecumenical neighbours (Hudson 1999:19-28). Built around three ingredients (Encounter - Reflection - Transformation) the pilgrimage experience exposed over one hundred members of a local South African congregation during the 1980s and early 1990s to outside voices of marginalised and suffering people (Hudson 1999:43-100). Aware that not everyone can go away on an eight-day pilgrimage, I explored how to make the pilgrimage experience a part of everyday life (Hudson 1999:103-114). Although it has many narrative overtones, in the light of my research journey, I would now strengthen this narrative aspect of the pilgrimage experience. In particular, I would highlight the importance of a 'not-knowing' approach to outside voices, paying attention to the classical sense of 'katharsis' and exploring with all pilgrimage participants the idea of Christian spirituality as a socially constructed experience.

Thirdly, in the work of doing Christian spirituality, a local congregation can help its members to engage the Scriptures in a manner that correlates with a narrative approach. After the research journey ended, I wondered how I could have done this better for the research participants themselves. In pondering this question, I have been guided by Wright's (1992) image of improvising the missing Act of the Scriptures (see 1.6.2.5). However, in order to do this improvisation, we need 'an immersion in the texts of the Scriptures - soaking ourselves in the language so that when we put down our Bibles we can improvise living out that language in whatever we encounter' (Dawn & Peterson 2000:31). Sadly, as Mulholland (1985:48) points out, our modern culture with its emphasis on 'informational

reading' does not encourage this kind of immersion/soaking in the biblical text. This underlines the need for learning other ways of reading the Bible in our spiritual lives. As Brueggemann (1993b:11) comments, 'the end of modernity requires a critique of method in scripture study...we will have to find new methods of reading'.

Addressing this concern, Mulholland (1985:49-50) draws a contrast between an 'informational' and a 'formational' approach to reading the Scriptures. He describes the difference in six ways. When we read the Bible informationally we seek to cover as much as possible, read in a linear fashion, try to control the text, remain distant from what we read, apply primarily our cognitive/rational faculties and read primarily to find solutions to problems. By contrast, we read the Scriptures formationally when we are more concerned with small portions of the Bible, immerse ourselves in what we read, approach the text in a spirit of openness and humility, allow the words to shape us, apply our hearts as well as our minds, and lastly, instead of looking for answers, 'we come to be open to that Mystery we call God...and allow that Mystery to address us' (Mulholland 1985:56-57). Not only does this formational approach to Scripture reading fit in with the notion of improvising or performing the Scriptures, it also connects with Brueggemann's (1993b:20-21) suggestion that we find an alternative world view with bits and pieces of biblical material (see 2.3.5) as well as with a metaphorical interpretation of God's self-revelation in Scripture (see 1.6.2.3). For these reasons, learning to read the Scriptures formationally would correlate strongly with a narrative approach to doing Christian spirituality.

5.3 REFLECTIONS ON DOING RESEARCH IN A QUALITATIVE WAY

5.3.1 Introduction

This was my first attempt at engaging in formal research. Since we become competent at research only by engaging in and reflecting on it (Wolcott 1992:52),

in this section I will try to describe what I learnt about doing research in a qualitative way. This description is organised around four specific insights which emerged as I reflected on the words of the research participants in relation to their research experience, on conversations with my supervisor and on my own experience as a researcher. I have already described my theoretical orientation with regard to doing research in Chapters One and Two, but I will supplement the descriptions of my insights with relevant theory where possible.

5.3.2 Clarifying personal insights

First of all, in doing qualitative research, I learnt that making the research process a shared activity enriched the participation of those involved and made it more meaningful. This insight was prompted by Paul's comments when he contrasted his research journey with two other research projects in which he had participated:

Also I've been involved in two research projects and I found them very different. In both the others the researchers did not tell me of their intentions, and there was absolutely no feedback. I saw them both once and the research wasn't mentioned again. I asked them later whether they had finished and they said, 'Yeah, it's finished...I got my Masters', and that was it. This approach has made me feel much more included and honoured. I think my honesty levels have been higher here than in the others as a result. There was a lower trust there, and I also didn't feel diagnosed here. Both the others were Psychology subjects and I felt very classified.

Earlier in the report I outlined the ways in which I tried to make the research process a collaborative process. These ways included making explicit my own biases, assumptions, and intentions, emphasising the co-construction of meanings and constantly inviting the research participants to give feedback on

any written research material (see 2.2.3, 2.2.4). Judging by Paul's comments described above, making the research process a shared activity helped me honour the ethical concerns I had as a researcher (see 2.2.1). However, this commitment to collaborative research raised a dilemma with regard to the nature of the researcher's input surrounding conversational themes that emerged in the research process. In other words, as the research journey unfolded, I became uncertain as to 'the extent to which reciprocity in disclosure is desirable' (Limerick et al 1996:456). Does collaboration in the research process include the sharing of personal meanings, or is it limited to asking questions?

While the scope of the report does not allow a thorough exploration into the above dilemma, one possible resolution could lie in giving the research participants opportunities to interview the researcher. As I reflected again on the transcripts, especially in the light of my commitment to make the research a collaborative enquiry, I became aware that it was only I who had asked questions on the research journey. Hence, I wondered whether I could have strengthened the shared dimension of the research process by providing opportunities at the end of each session for the research participants to interview me, especially with regard to my research concerns and the questions I had asked. I am aware that the procedure of offering this opportunity would contrast strongly with the traditional interviewing situation in research 'in which the interviewer elicits and receives, but does not give information' (Oakley 1986:30). Nonetheless, I am convinced that it would contribute to an experience of the research process as a shared and ethical one.

Secondly, in doing qualitative research, I learnt that the way questions are asked affect the experience of those involved. This insight arose mainly from Dot's expression of appreciation for the way in which she was interviewed:

I didn't feel threatened or judged. You didn't say 'that's wrong', or 'that's not the way to believe'. Also, in the way you asked the questions, you were quick to discern whether we understood your

questions, and if we didn't, you rephrased it, or if we were struggling, you would say, 'let me ask it this way'. Another thing too, you respected our feelings of maybe not wanting to answer some questions. A few times you said, 'You don't have to answer if you prefer not'.

Darren indicated that he shared Dot's view when he said: 'I also enjoyed the questions. What I liked about the stories and the questions was that you challenged us to explore what we were saying.'

The expressions of appreciation led me to reflect both on the questions that I had asked and their effects on the lives of the participants. While the questions were asked with clear narrative research intentions in mind, I tried to ask them from a position of not-knowing and curiosity rather than one of pre-understanding and expert knowledge (Freedman & Combs 1996:118; Griffith 1995:127-130, see also 2.4.2.5). This seemed to have at least three discernable effects. It appeared to lessen the pressure on the research participants to give 'right answers', which is often an issue in research interviews (Limerick et al 1996:452). As Dot commented: 'I didn't find myself under any stress to give right answers.' Asking questions from this position also seemed to make them more relevant and life-related. Dot remarked: 'What was valuable too was that you didn't have a pre-planned set of twenty questions which you asked all of us. The questions were personalised.' Also, the way the questions were asked contributed, in Sue's words, to making the research process 'a respectful conversation', thus enabling me to honour another ethical concern in research (see 2.2.1). Effects like these deepened my commitment to a research methodology that used narrative questions asked from a 'not-knowing' and curious position.

Thirdly, in doing qualitative research I learnt that the research journey takes place on at least two levels. On the one hand, the research journey is shaped around the specific purpose of the research project (Limerick et al 1996). Indeed,

Wolcott (1992:54) points out that the single most critical feature of qualitative enquiry is the 'purpose guiding the research'. He adds that research purpose 'is the only basis on which decisions about process can be made; the clearer the purpose, the clearer the ways to achieve it' (Wolcott 1992:54). On the other hand, I discovered that 'another' research journey occurs as the research participants and the researcher enter into each other's lives, build relationships and foster community. Andrew alluded to this second level of the research journey when he remarked: 'Regarding the process, it was a bit weird for me. I knew this was a research group, but I almost felt at the end of our times together that we needed to pray. It would have felt so appropriate and respectful of the process.' On reflection, this second level of the research process raised issues for me that I had not fully taken into account when planning the research journey. These issues surrounded the interplay of research and friendship, the ethical tension between pursuing research goals and responding to concerns expressed by the research participants, closure of the research journey, and location of the group. Certainly, were I to engage again in qualitative enquiry, I would want to plan my research with a greater awareness of these issues.

I do want, however, to draw attention to one instance in the research journey where a change in research procedure was prompted by a concern expressed by a research participant. In my interview with one participant, he expressed at some length his struggle to integrate his spirituality and sexuality. While I felt an ethical responsibility to attend in some way to this personal concern, the time set aside for the research interview did not allow me to respond as I would have liked. In sharing this dilemma with my supervisor at the time, I decided to follow up this interview with a personal letter. Indeed, I followed this practice of letter writing with two other participants as well (see 2.4.2.5). In the light of my research experience, it would seem that qualitative research cannot *only* be driven by research purpose as Wolcott (1992) suggests above, but also needs to take seriously the effects of research practices on the research participants themselves.

Fourthly, in doing qualitative research, I learnt that the issues involved in dismantling power inequalities in the research process are complex and problematic. In spite of attempting to construct my research in a collaborative manner, and allowing the research participants to read both the transcripts and research report before they were submitted in their final form, I was still aware of three particular areas of power imbalances in my relationships with the research participants. These areas related to the meeting place I chose, the phases of analysing and interpreting the data, and finally the writing up of the research report. The scope of the study only permits a brief response to these concerns. Were I to do my research again, I would pay more attention to the relationship between myself, the research participants and where we met. Paul highlighted the significance of this issue when he made an unsolicited and intriguing remark: 'I also appreciated moving from the church hall into your office. I felt this was your space and you were allowing us all to be part of it, and this was a big thing for me.' Reflecting on this comment made me wonder about the effects of our meeting place upon the participants, and strengthened my resolve in any future research to negotiate more openly the location of group meetings. With regard to the second and third areas of power imbalance, I have become more strongly convinced that, in analysing and interpreting data, and writing up research, the text that is produced from the interpretations of the texts generated in the conversations with the research participants is the *researcher's* story of their lives (Limerick et al 1996:458). In other words, in spite of wanting to share power with the research participants in constructing new meanings, this research report is *my* story of the stories shared by the research participants. Only they can tell their stories in their own voice. Certainly this conviction underlies this research report more strongly than when I first began the writing-up stage.

5.4 REFLECTIONS ON DOING PRACTICAL THEOLOGY IN A HERMENEUTIC/ CONTEXTUAL MODE

5.4.1 Introduction

In this section I describe what I learnt from doing Practical Theology in a hermeneutic/contextual mode. This description focuses on four insights which emerged in the interaction between my reflections on my experience as a practical theologian in the research journey, the conversations that I shared with my supervisor and my own reading in the discipline. In addition to describing these insights, I will also suggest possible implications that each of them may have for those working in local congregations as both pastors and practical theologians.

5.4.2 Clarifying personal insights for myself as practical theologian and pastor

First of all, in doing my research, I learnt the importance of doing Practical Theology from the 'bottom up'. By this, I mean that it is crucial for those involved in this discipline to collaboratively engage *with* people in their experiences of faith and life. This collaborative engagement becomes especially critical when those with whom we engage are marginalised and/or suffering people. Otherwise, as previously indicated, Practical Theology runs the risk of being governed solely by academic theological discourse, disconnected from the everyday contexts and realities of hurting and oppressed people (see 4.4.3). This could be why Ackermann (1996:44), in her reflections on collaborative engagement with marginalised and suffering people, emphasises that 'collaboration takes place outside the academy'. Clearly, 'the conceptual speech of theology has to be grounded again in the experience and language of common people' (Claessens & Van Tillo 1990:201).

Practical Theology from the 'bottom up' therefore implies taking seriously the life-experiences of people as they describe them. Since these descriptions are

usually story-shaped, it could be said that if 'there's anything worth calling theology, it is listening to people's stories, listening to them and cherishing them' (Pellauer quoted in Norris 1993:69). It also follows that in doing Practical Theology 'the story of the experiencing subject is the first voice', while the voice of theology is 'the second one' (Claessens & Van Tillo 1990:206). While engaging with stories *alone* is certainly not enough (Ackermann 1996:47-48), without the elements of story-telling and story-participating, it is highly doubtful whether we could pursue a hermeneutic and contextual Practical Theology. This could be one reason why Gerkin (1986:97) speaks about a 'narrative, hermeneutical approach to practical theological thinking'. However, in my opinion, he does not emphasise sufficiently the inter-subjective processes involved in the doing of Practical Theology in which all the voices involved in the theologising are validated and given space.

Secondly, in doing my research I learnt that those engaged in doing Practical Theology must try to hold in creative tension preferred individual spiritual ways of being with the traditional dogmas of experiencing and knowing God. In other words, the question arose 'how, in giving meaning to experiences, the story of the individual person and the super-individual story of the religious tradition are related' (Claessens & Van Tillo 1990:206). This awareness was prompted by the questions that the research journey raised for me with regard to the 'validity' of our different ways of speaking about God (see 3.5). In situating myself in relation to these concerns, I want to turn away from two possible options and propose a third. On the one hand, I want to turn away from a dogmatic confessional approach to Practical Theology which insists that all Christ-followers locate their spiritual ways of being within specific theological discourses. As I learnt during the research journey, when this happens, it can lead to problem-saturated self-narratives (see 4.3.2). On the other hand, I want to turn away from an approach to Practical Theology that sacrifices all theological dogma on the altar of individual preferences. This option could easily encourage a kind of religious consumerism, nurture a rugged individualism and betray our belonging to each other as the people of God both present and past. Instead of these two options, I want to propose an approach that provides space for an ongoing and open-

ended meaning-making negotiation between dogma and personal experience, pursued by Christ-followers in community. I believe that, to some small extent, this approach characterised the way Practical Theology was done in the research group.

Within the setting of a local congregation, this approach implies that the pastor, rather than telling the congregants what to believe and to do, facilitates a conversation together with them in community between their stories and the themes, metaphors and images of the Scriptures. In this regard, Gerkin (1986:70-71) points out that 'the image of the pastor as interpretive guide and mediator in relation both to the faith tradition and the human situation seems significant as an organising tool'. My research experience suggests that being an interpretive guide would mean the pastor enables congregants both to tell their stories and to participate in the stories of others, placing him/herself in the midst of the tension of contrasting perspectives and, within this tension, facilitating a process whereby the narrative images, metaphors and themes of the biblical stories are mediated so that congregants can place their activities within 'a structure of response to the activity of God' (Gerkin 1986:72). My research experience further indicates that inviting the voices of our ecumenical and suffering neighbours into this conversation facilitates a critical 'hermeneutic of suspicion' towards both our stories and those of Scripture. I believe that this approach would help those engaged in Practical Theology within a local congregation to hold their personal stories and God's story as it comes to us in the stories of the Bible in creative tension.

Thirdly, in doing my research, I learnt that members of a congregation wrestle with issues and questions on which they want to reflect in the light of their faith. Some of these issues were hinted at in the research process: 'We prayed for healing but my daughter still died. What does it mean to pray for healing?' 'I'm uncertain whether to change jobs or not. How do I discern God's will for my life and vocation?' 'I struggle with issues of lust and desire. How can I bring my sexuality and spirituality together?' Issues and questions like these represent possible points of departure for practical theological enquiry. They provide rich

opportunities for the pastor to begin implementing Practical Theology, and to nurture this capacity in others. As Newby (1995:17) remarks :

It is the life experience of church members that theology moves from the abstract to the practical, and the congregational setting is where these issues can be reflected upon.

Given the above need for congregational members to reflect theologically on what they are experiencing, it follows that 'it is central to the mission and ministry of the church both to equip persons for doing practical theological thinking in relation to all activities of life and to provide occasions with both individuals and groups when practical theological thinking may take place in a more disciplined and careful fashion' (Gerkin 1986:68). These two tasks imply several inter-related responsibilities for the pastor who seeks to do Practical Theology in a contextual/hermeneutic mode with his/her congregation. It means that the pastor considers seriously organising and integrating her/his pastoral ministry around the image of himself/herself as 'interpretative guide'. By using this particular image, I want to stress that I am not implying that the pastor should do the interpreting on behalf of others. Instead, as I have described above in my second insight, it means that he/she *facilitates* skilfully a process whereby congregants can reflect upon their personal lives in the light of their faith. Using this image as a guide for pastoral ministry means that the pastor provides conversational arenas where congregational members can articulate those questions and issues on which they want to engage theologically. By beginning with their lived experience in this way, the pastor builds, together with the church members, a thoroughly contextual framework for doing Practical Theology (Cochrane et al 1991:17).

Being an interpretative guide also means that the pastor constantly enables church members to connect their varied life-stories with the grounding biblical stories of the Christian community (Gerkin 1997:111), thus making possible the construction of new meanings by which they can live their lives. Perhaps this is why Sweet (1999:425) maintains that the major requirements for pastors to graduate from seminary is to know the stories of the Bible and to master the

biblical narratives. Following these steps, I believe, would point the way forward for the local congregation to become 'a center for practical theological discourse' (Newby 1995:15).

5.5 CONCLUSION

Perhaps the most important thing I have learnt from exploring a narrative group approach to spirituality in this qualitative research project is that neither life, nor spirituality, nor qualitative research, nor Practical Theology is neat and tidy. Instead they are all complex, messy and untidy. Co-authoring spiritual ways of being, as a result, does not mean working with a new set of principles, abstractions and generalisations, or with big ideas, grand visions and sweeping eternal truths. Indeed, it involves us immersing ourselves in the details of our lives, and in the stories of our faith, and then improvising after the manner of Jesus, in our place, our city, our country, a life of faith, hope and compassionate caring (Dawn & Peterson 2000:vii-x). During the research journey, it was the research participants and outside voices who taught me this, and my last word is to thank them most sincerely for sharing in this collaborative quest.

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APPENDIX 1

CO-AUTHORING SPIRITUAL WAYS OF BEING: A NARRATIVE GROUP APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Information sheet for invited group participants

Thank you for your interest in this project. Please read this information carefully before finalising your decision to participate. Should you have any questions about the content of this information sheet, please do not hesitate to raise them with me.

What is the purpose of the group?

Currently I am in the process of completing a Masters in Practical Theology (with specialisation in Pastoral Therapy) at the University of South Africa. In order to meet the requirements for this course, I must write a research thesis. My research focus revolves around a narrative approach to Christian spirituality.

Why have I approached you?

I needed five research partners in this project. Since I hoped that they would be able to make use of any research findings, one factor in approaching you relates to your present leadership involvement in the local congregation. Another was your clear intention to develop a Christian spirituality in your own life.

What will research participants be asked to do?

We will meet together on a weekly basis for ten weeks. Each session will last 1 ½ hours. The sessions will be audio-taped and written out afterwards by myself in summary form. These summaries will be made available to you for verification and/or adjustment. No one else shall listen to the audio-tapes besides myself.

In the group meetings I will explore conversationally with each participant his/her personal story of faith. During these conversations the rest of the group will form an audience. After each conversation the group will share their responses to what they have heard. While I do have certain areas of interest, the agenda for these conversations will rest finally with the research participants themselves. In between group sessions, the participants will be invited to read selected parts of the Biblical story.

At the first session we will discuss and clarify the rights of the research participants with regard to these conversations. These will include the rights of the participants to set boundaries for the conversations, not to answer any question to which they would prefer not to respond, and terminate any line of questioning with which they are uneasy.

Should you agree to become a group participant, you will be asked to give your consent for the information gained during the group sessions to be used in the research document. Before this report is submitted, it will be made available to the participants for their comment. Strict confidentiality and anonymity will be maintained with respect to each participant's personal identity in the report. Invited participants will be given the names of the other research participants before the first session.

APPENDIX 2

CO-AUTHORING SPIRITUAL WAYS OF BEING: A NARRATIVE GROUP APPROACH TO CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY

Consent form for invited group participants

I have read the Information Sheet concerning the research project and understand its purpose. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can request further information at any stage.

I know that -

1. my participation in the project is entirely voluntary.
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time.
3. all the audio-tapes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project, and that a copy of the final research document will be retained by the University of South Africa and by the Institute for Therapeutic Development.
4. I will receive no payment or compensation for participating in the study.
5. all personal information supplied by me will remain confidential and anonymous throughout the project.

I hereby confirm that I am willing to participate in this research project.

.....
Signature of participant

.....
Date