

# “People who will accept, love, and nurture your growth” – Supporting Faith Development in Emerging Adults

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## Abstract:

It is widely recognised that emerging adults (EAs) are disengaging from faith communities, particularly in the Global West. However, EAs remain engaged and interested in faith and spirituality. So how can faith communities support the faith development of emerging adults? To effectively understand faith development for EAs a model is needed that is dynamic, non-normative, and able to describe meaning-making processes. Using a systems model, faith development can be described as growing complexity within that system, which is represented as faith becoming more personal and applied in the lives of EAs. Lewis’ Model of Faith Transition (2020) analyses change and development of complexity in faith systems through the resolution of dissonance and provided the theoretical framework for analysing experiences of EAs. We engaged 25 participants connected with the Salvation Army, from varying contexts, in lived experience interviews and explored their faith transitions through Lewis’ model. The participants described their experiences of faith disruption and dissonance, and the resources used to reach a resolution. As we analysed our data, we drew connections between the resolution pathway (reaffirm, reconsider, revise, and reject), the types of dissonance, and the resources used by EAs to resolve their dissonance. These connections present the potential to identify which resolution pathway an EA is tending towards based on their type of dissonance and suggest what resources faith communities can use to support them in their faith development.

## 1. Introduction & Background

### 1.1 Engaging Emerging Adults in Faith Development

It is a widely recognised issue that emerging adults (EAs) are disengaging from faith communities. Whether expressed as disaffiliation from religious identity or reduced participation in faith communities, a range of literature from the Global West has recorded this phenomenon (Cronshaw et al., 2016; Hughes, 2015; Kinnaman & Hawkins, 2011; Penner et al., 2011, among others). This represents a series of challenges for churches and institutions; chiefly, a failure of the Church in its mission to help this cohort become and grow as disciples of Jesus.

However, whilst EAs are disengaging from faith communities and Christian identification, this does not mean that they are disengaging from faith. Whilst Hall et al (2016) found that EAs decreased in a range of spiritual wellbeing indicators over the course of their college years, they also found an openness to ‘questing’ and exploring spiritual questions. Barry and Abo-Zeno contend that “many emerging adults value religiousness and spirituality and explore such beliefs as they strive to develop their identities further” (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014, p. 21). An impression develops of EAs who are not necessarily closed

to faith, but find either the faith of their youth, or the type of spirituality presented by churches, unconvincing or unsuitable for their spiritual development. How can faith communities bridge this perceived gap, and be helpful resources for EAs as their faith develops? To address this question, first we must understand faith development in general, as well as the specific dynamics experienced during emerging adulthood.

## 1.2 Faith Development Theory

There are numerous models for describing faith development, most notably Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' (Fowler, 1995). Fowler's landmark work synthesised structural developmental theory and 'faith' to describe the movement of an individual's faith development over time. Fowler was able to describe faith as dynamic, changing, and thus developing. As a result, many other faith development theorists arose (Oser & Gmünder, 1991; Streib, 2001; Westerhoff, 2012).

As ground-breaking as Fowler's 'Stages of Faith' is to understanding faith development in individuals, it has not escaped criticism. Fowler's work can be considered too closely aligned to age-based structural development and overly simplified into normative stages (Kaplan, 1983, p. 59). Whilst Fowler's system speaks to the structures of faith (practice or the 'how' of faith), it fails to adequately account for changes in the content of faith (doctrine/beliefs or the 'what' of faith) (Lewis, 2020, p. 82). Thus, rather than a definition of faith formation that is tied to stages or structures, we describe faith or spiritual development as the "process of meaning-making designed to facilitate the search for the sacred that may or may not involve connections to religious institutions" (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014, p. 22).

If as explored, development theory and faith development can be synthesised, it is important to understand EAs through a developmental lens. Arnett, a key theorist of emerging adulthood, described it as:

*"a distinct period of the life course for young people in industrialized societies. It is a period characterized by change and exploration for most people, as they examine the life possibilities open to them and gradually arrive at more enduring choices in love, work, and worldviews."*  
(Arnett, 2000, p. 479)

The world of EAs is one of dynamism, experimentation, exploration and as a result, a lack of normativity (Arnett, 2000, p. 471). This poses challenges to effectively understand faith development in EAs if the models developed rely on normativity of human developmental stages.

## 1.3 Faith Development for Emerging Adults

To effectively understand faith development for EAs a model is needed that is dynamic, non-normative, and able to describe meaning-making processes. This leads us to Lewis' work exploring faith transitions in emerging adults (Lewis, 2020). Lewis built on Fowler's work by synthesising developmental systems theory (DST) and 'faith' to effectively describe faith transitions in EAs. Lewis' model supports the notion of other researchers such as Kaplan that consider development as change over time in order to achieve a new level of complexity rather than moving towards perfection (Kaplan, 1983, p. 59). A simple definition of a system as more complex is the level of differentiation and integration compared to other systems (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993, p. 156). In other words, when considering EAs faith systems we can examine their faith development (complexity) by how

personalised (differentiated) and applied (integrated) their faith system is in their lives. This poses the question that our research explored: how can faith communities support EAs to develop a more personal and applied faith?

#### 1.4 Lewis' Model of Faith Transition

As discussed in section 1.3, Lewis (2020) undertook the conceptual clarification of applying DST to Christian theology to understand in greater detail the dynamics of faith transition in emerging adulthood, a time commensurate with a sustained period of religious and spiritual struggle (Lewis, 2020, p. 13). Lewis' goal was to develop a model or framework that could help facilitate the examination of faith transition in the lives of EAs. This model is the theoretical framework used to inform our research.

##### 1.4.1 Describing Faith Systems of Emerging Adults

As discussed in section 1.3, Lewis' application and synthesis of DST and 'faith' allowed for EAs' faith systems to be described in greater detail.

Firstly, an important notion is that of the faith system being embedded as part of an overall ecological context as described by Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner describes nested series of dynamically interacting systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, macro-, and chronosystem) that operate within the dynamics of process, person, context and time (Lewis, 2020, pp. 124-126). It is the interaction of these contexts and systems that EAs' faith systems can find a mixture of "meaning filled resources as well as dissonance-forming challenges" (Lewis, 2020, p. 127).

Secondly, it is imperative to understand the nature of the faith system. A faith system is characterised by its "capacity to self-organise, self-regulate, self-construct as well as reconstruct itself such that it maintains and develops its own enduring integrity" (Lewis, 2020, pp. 128-129). In this way, a faith system is dynamic and ever-changing.

Finally, we can understand characteristics of faith systems as closed to open, simplistic to complex, and conventional to unconventional. Closed systems can be described as those that interact only with themselves and the components that make up the system. For example, a completely closed faith system could only draw on spiritual practices, education, and beliefs that they currently understand or hold. Closed human systems, including faith systems, are assumed to have a limited utility and lifespan. Open systems, however, can interact with, process, and incorporate elements of the external environment. For example, an open faith system can engage with new ideas and faith practices (Lewis, 2020, pp.119). It is also important to note that closed and open systems are not binary opposites, rather a continuum. For faith systems to survive an optimal degree of interaction with the external environment is required. For example, closed systems can fail to adapt to the environment and open systems can lack definition and dissipate over time (Lewis, 2020, pp. 120). It is also important to note that all faith systems, are open in some shape or form (Allport, 1961, p. 109). As discussed earlier we are all shaped by our ecologies and thus must have an 'open' system of faith to some degree.

Another key characteristic of faith systems are their simplicity and complexity. As discussed in section 1.3, we can understand faith system complexity as a key characteristic of faith development. To achieve greater complexity requires an optimal balance between three key factors: system rigidity, flexibility, and resilience. Rigidity is the ability of a system to utilise existing resources. Flexibility is the ability to remain open and responsive to the external environment. Finally, resilience is the ability to incorporate new resources and capacity (Lewis, 2020, p. 156). In terms of faith systems, a simple system is one that is unable or unwilling to interact with the external environment and prefers to be closed and uniform when faced with adversity. A complex system, however, can engage with the external environment to incorporate meaningful resources that allow adaption to fit with the environment in a cohesive way. For example, when faced with a challenging circumstance a more complex system can confront the adversity and more readily adapt than a simple system (Lewis, 2020, pp. 169-170).

Faith systems can also be described as conventional and unconventional. A conventional faith system can be categorised as one which reflects more 'mainstream' or orthodox Christian beliefs. Conventional faith systems are more likely to be accepted and recognised by faith communities. Unconventional faith systems are those that reflect a varying degree of difference to 'mainstream' Christian beliefs or unorthodox beliefs. Unconventional faith systems are more likely to be found in those who are on the 'fringes' of faith communities or in some instances rejected by faith communities.

This research used these characteristics of faith systems to understand faith development in EAs.

#### 1.4.2 Lewis' Model of Faith Transition

Based on the theoretical foundations of faith systems, as well as research into the experiences of EAs, Lewis articulated the process of what occurs when an EA undergoes a transition in their faith system.

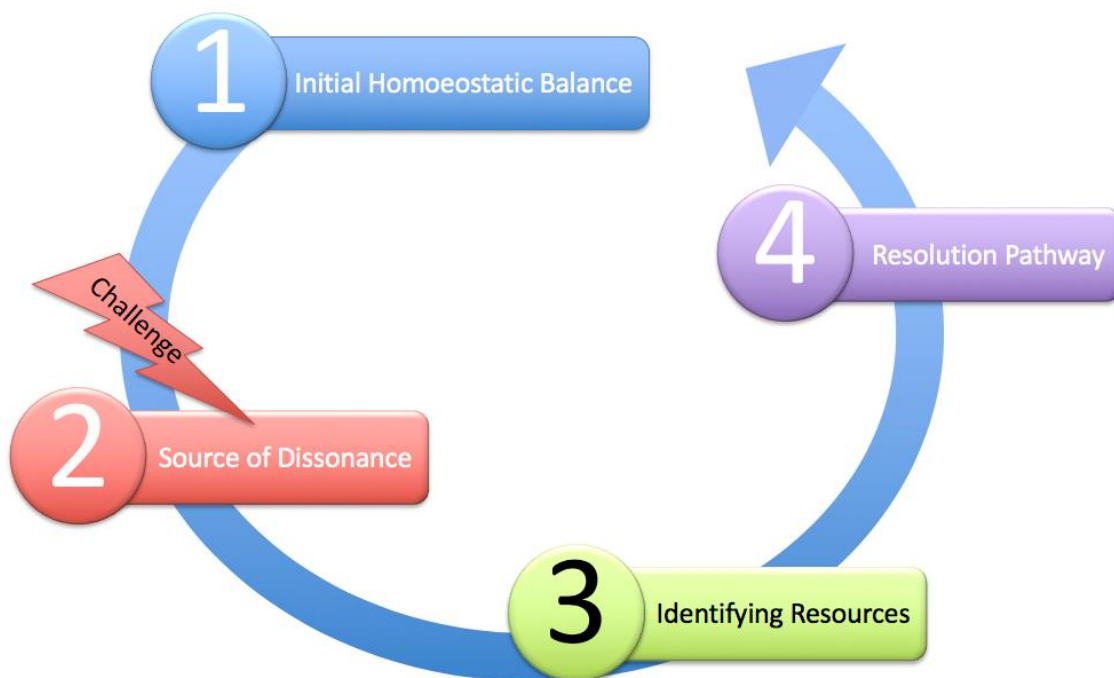


Figure 1. Lewis' Model of Faith Transitions (Lewis, 2020, p. 190)

**Phase (1): The Initial Homeostatic Balance** reflects the original stable faith system of the emerging adult. This phase seeks to understand the content and structure found within the EA’s original faith system to help identify the extent of change.

**Phase (2): Dissonance and Disorientation** is characterised by an experience of challenge or disruption to the original faith system. This phase seeks to identify both the context (environment or milieu) and content of the dissonance in order to determine which aspects of the original faith system have come into question.

**Phase (3): Identifying Resources** examines resources the EA uses in response to resolve the dissonance/disruption to their faith system. This phase identifies the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of resources used by the EA.

**Phase (4): Resolution Pathway** examines the change of the faith system. This phase allows evaluation of change in content and structure of the EA’s faith system and description of their ‘new’ stabilised faith system in comparison to the ‘old’. Lewis (2020, pp. 223-228) articulated 4 kinds of resolution pathway:

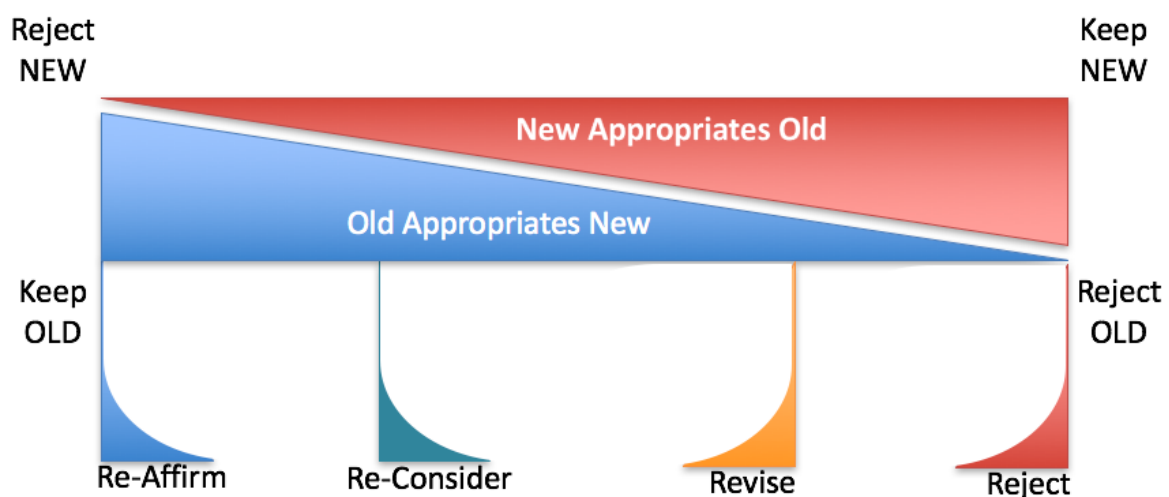


Figure 2. Faith Resolution Pathways (Lewis, 2020, p. 228)

In the ‘reaffirm’ path, the new ideas and experiences initiated by the dissonance do not provide a compelling reason to change, and instead the content and structure of the original faith system are confirmed, possibly with a renewed commitment. In the ‘reconsider’ pathway, the old system remains the point of reference, but undergoes some change to accommodate the new system elements. For the next two pathways, the new faith system elements become more compelling, and meaningful change to the faith system occurs. In the ‘revise’ pathway, the elements of the old faith system remain, but are significantly adapted in the face of new elements. Finally, in the ‘reject’ pathway, nothing remains of the old faith system. This is typically experienced as a disaffiliation from faith but can also be a conversion to a new faith.

### 1.5.3 Applying Lewis' Model to the Research Project

The framework Lewis' model provides for describing the dynamic nature of EAs' faith systems, their meaning-making processes, and tracking non-normative structural change, allows faith development to be analysed in EAs. This research used this model to understand how EAs' faith systems had changed, and evaluated the development of complexity in faith systems, and thus how personal and applied their faith systems had become. The researched aimed to add to the body of knowledge by confirming the utility of Lewis' model for this kind of evaluation, as well as investigating characteristics of individual resolution pathways (dissonance and resources), to identify potential supports for the faith development of EAs.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Research Approach & Design

The notion of lived experience is built on the assumption that "young people have each constructed their own views of the world and these need to be recognised, described and understood" (Stuart et al., 2015, p. 33). A qualitative approach, as it is employed in this study, delves into the meanings and interpretations that young people construct from these experiences, and thus constructivist and qualitative approaches are appropriate (Choak, 2011, p. 90; Creswell, 2014, p. 8). In order to understand young people's lived experience, a phenomenological research methodology was employed. "The goal is to arrive at an understanding of lived experience that is both rigorous - based on systematic observation - and imaginative - based on insight" (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p. 5).

### 2.2 Sampling

This research presented in this paper is a subset of a larger research project engaging in the lived experience of young people and EAs connected with the Salvation Army, which was a longitudinal study beginning in 2019. The selection of these participants for this research was based on the concept of purposeful (or purposive) sampling. Purposeful sampling means "selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study" (Patton, 2015, p. 1). The subset for this part of the project engaged 25<sup>1</sup> participants from across Australia. Efforts were made to ensure a variety of contexts (including urban, suburban, regional, and rural), as well as expressions of the Salvation Army (such as traditional, contemporary, missional, and small congregations). There have also been efforts to ensure a diversity of backgrounds, including gender, age, cultural background, and sexuality. The criteria for their selection were based upon a lived experience of the vision of the Salvation Army; in particular, the experience of transformation in the context of hardship and injustice during their adolescence or emerging adulthood. This also typically meant that they had converted to Christianity and had little or no prior church experience. As described above, efforts were made to engage participants from the 2019 study. 11 participants elected to re-engage with the research project. This initial group of participants was then bolstered by additional participants who fit the research criteria to increase the sample to 25. This approach to sampling is unapologetically strengths-based, used to identify current best-practice engagement with young people.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that participant numbers in the findings reference the larger research project, and thus exceed 25.

### 2.3 Data Collection

An effective method of capturing lived experience observations is through semi-structured interviews, as they are participant-led and capture their point of view (Stuart et al., 2015, p. 123). Semi-structured interviews are ideal for the study of “phenomena as they present themselves in individuals’ direct awareness and experience” (O’Leary, 2014, p. 138). The interviews took the form of life story narrations, focussing on experiences of adolescence and emerging adulthood. Specific questions were asked about experiences of spirituality, with a focus on challenges and changes that might indicate dissonance or transition. This approach allowed participants to connect their answers to their biography, exploring what happened and how they felt about it.

### 2.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected was analysed using thematic analysis, “an accessible, flexible, and increasingly popular method of qualitative data analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). The process is “iterative and reflexive” (Squires, 2023, p. 463), with ideas emerging at each stage of analysis and data being interpreted and re-interpreted as new insights come to light. As such, analysis was iterative, beginning as part of the data collection process (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 307), including in-interview member checking, where emerging themes will be fed-back to, and discussed with, participants to determine their validity and resonance (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 57). This approach utilises a deductive approach as described by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), where data is compared to pre-existing codes developed from our theoretical lens described above, which allows for “the tenets of social phenomenology to be integral to the process of deductive thematic analysis while allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data using inductive coding” (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006, p. 83). Using this approach to thematic analysis, connections were drawn between participants’ experiences, previous studies, and relevant theory to critically examine the research topic and the question of the lived experience of EAs undergoing faith transitions, and the resources that assist them in navigating these transitions.

### 2.5 Limitations

We recognise that there are some weaknesses to this approach. Significant weighting of interview data does not allow for triangulation, save from occasional conversations with local practitioners to provide context for the interviews. This presents the challenge of the limitations of young people’s “memory, experience and articulacy”, as described by Lewis and Stanton (2022). As the subject of this research is quite conceptual (descriptions of spirituality), interviews may struggle to properly capture the experience of teenagers (Long & Dart, 2001, p. 75). Furthermore, because we were led by young people’s own descriptions of their experiences of spirituality, there is not one common definition of spirituality to analyse their contributions. Finally, as discussed above, the sample is narrow, limiting application in some contexts.

## 3. Findings

The lived experience narratives of the participants were categorised using Lewis’ Faith Transition model, as described above. Each participant’s narrative was analysed to determine their experiences of dissonance, the resources they used to resolve that dissonance, and the faith resolution pathway

that best described their transition. Using this categorisation, the specific elements of faith development in each resolution pathway were analysed.

Given the complexity of narratives, the ongoing experience of change, and sometimes even their inarticulacy, mapping each participant’s narrative into a resolution pathway was not always a simple task. As shown in Figure 3, there were seven participants for whom no transition or resolution pathway was evident. For some of these participants, they did not express any particular challenge or dissonance in their faith system that had required them to utilise resources to resolve. For others in this group, whilst faith challenges had existed, they remained unresolved, open questions that they were still wrestling with. For participants where a sense of challenge or dissonance was salient, it was a further challenge to determine if the disruption to their faith system came from the catalytic experience, or the participant’s interpretation of it, or even the response of the faith community<sup>2</sup>. Often a re-examination of interview data was required to determine their original faith position (homeostasis) and how it had changed, which was also enriched for those participants from the longitudinal group in the research. Another useful strategy was to think about how the source of authority had changed for participants. For example, if a participant had moved from an implicit trust in the truth of what their faith community had told them to relying more on their personal interpretation of truth, that represented a change in their faith system and a certain kind of resolution.

Resolution Pathway	Participants
Reaffirm	7
Reconsider	4
Revise	5
Reject	2
No salient dissonance and/or resolution	7

Figure 3. Categorisation of Participant Faith Resolution Pathways

The distribution of participants across the resolution pathways is influenced by the sampling procedure. Because we were primarily engaging with EAs who had positive experiences of the Salvation Army, there was a bias towards the reaffirm and reconsider pathways. However, this was offset by the participants from the longitudinal cohort, some of whom had disconnected from the Salvation Army and had resolution pathways in revise and reject. It is also worth noting that the researchers maintain informal contact with some participants and have noted further changes and resolutions in their faith systems. Whilst that data is not included in this research, it is worth noting that whilst these pathways are resolutions, they are not final. However, this does not mean that the processes and resources discussed are not helpful for the faith development of EAs.

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<sup>2</sup> This phenomenon was also noted in Lewis’ research: “The task of identifying when an interview participant was experiencing dissonance was often fairly straightforward, as such episodes were normally marked by the presence of negative affect. Delimiting the chronology of these episodes was a little more complicated, but often could be determined. However, ascertaining the nature of the systemic failure that impelled the movement into dissonance was much more complicated. This usually entailed distinguishing between the precipitating event and the actual aspects of the system that were being challenged by the event.” Lewis, R. (2020). *Changing Faith: The Experience and Resolution of Disruptive Episodes in the Faith of Christian Emerging Adults* University of Divinity]. Melbourne.



The following sections explore the lived experiences of faith development for EAs in each resolution pathway, as expressed through participants' accounts.

### 3.1 Reaffirm

*"[My friends] ask questions and make statements that are challenging and damning to my faith, and [I wonder] if I made the right choice, or if I'm still making the right choice. But then going back to prayer and connecting with people around the church solidifies that meaning, making me know that I definitely did make the right choice."* - Participant 47

*"[After my Mum got sick], I was like, 'What is God punishing me for?' And then that's all I thought about. But the leaders that ran the church, prayed over us every day. So, I knew in the back of my head, I've got friends and my [youth group] family have got my back tonight, and will pray over my family."* - Participant 49

*"I stopped going to church and [youth program] when Nana died because at the time I did blame God a little bit. But just this year, we got new [church leaders] and I thought, 'Oh, I might just go back.' I went back to [youth program] again and I said to them, 'I'll be at church this Sunday,' and then never went. Went back to [youth program] again and said, 'I'll be at church this Sunday' Never went. Then I ended up going and just slowly started making my way back."* - Participant 45

For participants who demonstrate reaffirm resolutions, when faced with external stressors and doubts, they find their comfort or security in their original faith positions, as well as their faith communities.

For these participants, dissonance emerged from a variety of different contexts:

*"I've been to [conservative] churches before, but I've never paid attention enough to know what they're really about. So, I think it's interesting being told [conservative positions] and going, 'Wow, [I'm] in the minority here.' And seeing the reality and essentially unintentionally getting straight into [conservative Christianity] and not liking it very much"* - Participant 1

*"Whenever Christianity comes up in the conversation, it's never a great time. [My family] always ends in some disagreement, I don't even have to say anything."* - Participant 23

*"I've got friends at work and family friends who are not anti-religion, but they don't understand it anywhere near as well as other people."* - Participant 47

*"I guess [being rejected by faith organization because of their sexuality] put a lot of doubts in my mind. They are the people that brought me [into Christianity], and they preached that everyone was welcome in the Kingdom, but they almost show the opposite ... And if that's the group where my foundation started it made me doubt in my mind about whether my foundation was strong ... And that was just challenging to think about. Whether what I was feeling was my connection or actually something else and that I'd just been mistaking it the whole time"* - Participant 2

In the face of these contexts or catalysts, participants described doubt and rejection. Usually, these dissonances emerge from outside of the faith system. Something external, like a different expression of faith, stressful events, or interpersonal challenges (like opposition, conflict, or rejection) enters and challenges the system (as opposed to internal conflict or incongruities).

The participants described the resources they used to resolve these dissonances:

*"I think my faith in general has been influenced by many that I respect. But there's a very particular lecturer that I had in [Bible college formation course] that I think has also seen Christianity as more of a practical practice. And he would even make arguments that Jesus' teachings could be seen as financially left-leaning. And I think that's impacted me on how I see the purpose or the actions that Christians today need to take."* - Participant 1

*"Well, I think for me, what really helped was that especially at [their faith community], we talk about how [faith] is our ministry work and how it's lived out ministry ... We read the text, it's all about how do we apply it when we're out in the outreach van? And I think that really helped me to go, "You know what, it's just about love. It's about caring for other people."* - Participant 23

*"But then going back to prayer and connecting with people around the church solidifies that meaning, making me know that I definitely did make the right choice."* - Participant 47

*"I've met up with [church leader] a few times and sat and had coffee and she talked to me. Sort of like the first time I met my mentors and they're helping me."* - Participant 45

*"We really believe that the church has got a good culture. It's just, a lot of young adults aren't coming. I think that, it would be easy to be like, "Oh, there's no young adults here. Let's go to a church where there's young adults." But it's like, "Well, then there's going to be no young adults here and how are we going to fix that and change that?" So I think that was our mentality rather than, "Oh, let's go and find [another church], let's be here and let's help."* - Participant 38

These participants described engaging with interpersonal resources that encouraged, supported, welcomed, celebrated, empowered them, as well as conventional Christian practices. This is perhaps unsurprising for those in the reaffirm pathway, as churches are typically designed to affirm a version of faith, and build belonging around those norms and practices.

### 3.2 Reconsider

*"Spiritually, [COVID] was hard, because church was online. And it wasn't great, because it's always better to be in-person. And I drew more towards the book of James, with facing trials. I would pray that COVID would end, and we'd all be happy again, and doing the things that we normally would do. But then realised later, that God's doing something in this. So, rather than praying it away, I was praying, God use this as an opportunity to do whatever He wants to do."* - Participant 24

*"So I always knew about [faith]. But then when I started going to youth group, I began seeing myself, that's the best way to put it. Began to have a conscience for these kids, began to feel sorry for them. I was beginning to read the Bible. And because I was a history buff, a lot of things started to surprise me ... It just began to make sense."* - Participant 58

*"So [faith] was like a tradition. It wasn't really a relationship. It took me a lot of time to really learn the word of God, because I'd come to church and I'd want to hang out with some of the guys my age in youth, and not really try and learn God's word. Because I feel like it was just the same stories, sometimes boring. But over time, understanding who God really is. And with real life experiences and maturing, you end up really getting strengths, like closer to God. And it's not boring because it's amazing."* - Participant 43

Participants who resolved using reconsider pathways were sometimes those who found their faith challenged, but upon renewed reflection and guidance were able to modify their faith to incorporate

the new perspective (such as in Participant 24). Others were those for whom faith had been nominal but had then increased committed and found more meaning in their faith. Finally, though not present in the quotes above, Participant 40 started in a position where they viewed themselves as a non-Christian outsider to their faith community, but upon reflection and processing, became open to the possibility that they could identify as a Christian.

This is a sample of how they described dissonance:

*"I think it is due to scepticism. I don't think there's been a point where I've said God isn't real. And I'm not sceptical that he exists but I just like to take into account everyone else's different perspectives."* - Participant 40

*"Even though I was a Christian, like on-the-fence Christian. I had these mini debates with some of the atheist kids in my class. And I would go back home and go on YouTube, try and get some ammunition so I could hit them with it when I came back. But I did struggle a lot because I wasn't in the word. I was only looking at those two minutes clips and because I was a Christian, I was just debating my faith because that's what my parents believed in."* - Participant 43

Rather than dissonance mostly originating from forces outside their faith system, participants on a reconsider pathway described an emerging awareness of the limitations or inadequacy of their faith systems. For example, Participant 24 (above) began to question their understanding of the way God acted in the world (in light of Covid), or Participants 40 and 58 becoming disaffected with the nominal faith of their youth. For Participant 40, the positive experiences they had in a faith community provoked a re-evaluation of their scepticism towards Christianity's truth claims.

*"But then I realised later, that God's doing something in this [Covid]. So, rather than praying it away, I was like praying, using this as an opportunity to do whatever He wants to do. Because He's going to get rid of that when it's time to get rid of that. So, I just embraced it for what it was, and took it as an opportunity to develop myself as a person and improve myself."* - Participant 24

*"There's going to be those hardcore Christians, but Salvation Army is really hip and trending with the times and they really care about people, not just trying to hit hard on these ideas of what it is to be a Christian. It's about how to incorporate aspects of Christianity in your own life and how it influences yourself and others."* - Participant 40

*"I feel like [my girlfriend] was brought into my life for a reason. Because as soon as that happened they really taught me to be disciplined and really learn the word of God. ... Someone I could communicate with and who can relate it to the Bible. Because during times when things go wrong in your life, sometimes you don't even think about God. It's sometimes the last thing you think about, but having that outside person to remind me, "Hey, remember what we read about this? Remember what we read about that." You start actually inputting it into your life."* - Participant 43

*"I went to the youth group and then obviously it's a church. So during the God time I just started reading the Bible. Because growing up my mum, she used to take us to church and she used to read us the stories and I used to memorize them."* - Participant 58

To resolve these experiences of dissonance, participants engaged with their faith communities and spiritual practices. Again, this is unsurprising, as these are typically the domain of the 'old' faith system, which maintains the primacy in this pathway. Of note is Participant 43, whose romantic

relationship with a Christian was a cause of spiritual development, a narrative that emerged for a number of participants.

### 3.3 Revise

We now move to the resolution pathways that experience significant modification to their faith systems, beginning with the participants in the revise pathway.

*“Well, I've been back and forth with believing in God and then not believing in God. I do believe there is a higher power out there and I've probably had signs, whether it's God or another god or like guardian angel-type thing. I'm not dead-set like I'm a God believer. If other people believe in God, I'll respect that and say, "Yeah, that's fine.” – Participant 22*

*“Where do I currently sit? I sit currently in the middle. I don't believe in Him and I do believe in Him. I sit in the middle because for me, I don't believe in choosing sides for anything. You just got to be yourself. I'm my own self.” – Participant 28*

*“[Faith] was a bigger part of my life. I did more activities that was surrounded by it. Like who knows? It's likely that I'll come back into it later in my life, but [not] just at the moment. I don't think it's a phase. I don't think it will ever go away. But it was a much bigger part of my life and it was very helpful at that time.” – Participant 39*

*“I think that was the moment where I realized and came to accept that yes, you can have both [being transgender and Christian].” – Participant 41*

There were two main narratives for participants in this resolution pathway. The first were those who had disengaged from faith communities (Participants 22, 28, and 39). They describe maintaining some sense of faith, and even warmth towards it, but whether to the disruptions of life or to their faith communities, faith is less meaningful in their lives. The second narrative is those who have developed a more meaningful faith as a result of re-evaluating their original beliefs. Participant 41, having grown up in non-LGBTQ-affirming environments synthesised their faith and their sexual identity; Participant 48 (see below) stripped back traditional beliefs and behavioural norms of their faith community that felt incongruent with their personal experience of the world to develop a synthesised faith that could retain some connection whilst having utility in their day-to-day life.

*“I haven't seen much of [faith community], because I've been working and I do double shifts on Sundays, so I can't come to [meetings]. And I start when youth group starts. But when I see them out, they're always talking to me, asking me how I'm going.” – Participant 22*

*“Last time I was at church would've probably been two years ago. I kind of lost the trust of God is real after [the youth leader] left. Because [he] was the only youth leader that actually helped me and prayed for me and I felt comfortable with. He was the only person at that church that I'd trust.” – Participant 28*

*“I think because of COVID it was really hard for me, especially because I don't come from a family of Christians and there hasn't been youth group. And so I wasn't surrounded by Christians I've also become very busy. So that also made it hard. But also I found that the camps, they always really spiritually helped me. And they ensured my faith and I always grew a lot from those camps, but because they haven't happened in like two years or three years or however long it has been, it's been really hard to stay on track.” – Participant 39*

*“It put a halt to my faith because I thought that I couldn't be both [transgender and Christian] because that's what I'd been told mostly through the school.” – Participant 41*

*“A lot of [church] is no swearing, no drinking, no tattoos. One of the things that is debatable obviously is men and women. That's the only way to do things. If you don't do certain things, you're going to go to hell. I don't know. I'm kind of like, well, but then if the whole ‘going to hell if you don't do certain things’, what happens to the atheists? So that kind of doesn't seem fair on them.” – Participant 48*

For these participants, the dissonance is considerably different from those in the first two pathways. Given the pathway is associated with change, it is understandable that their descriptions and interpretations of their dissonance are more emotive and have greater effect on their behaviours. Their experiences of dissonance are both caused by and lead to separation from their original faith communities, as well as significant questioning of the authority of those communities to arbitrate faith. There is a greater focus on determining their own belief, rather than fitting into the ‘right’ belief of their faith community.

*“And I have done some soul searching, if that's what it's called. And it's led me to believe there is a higher power out there and I have had signs. I've said, “If God is real, do this, or let this happen,” and it's happened. So, I'm like, “Okay.” But I'm not dead set on God at the moment. I'm still just building myself up to that.” – Participant 22*

*“I don't really agree with you shouldn't get tattoos, tattoos are bad. I'm like, well, my dad's an integral part of the church and he's got tattoos. I say that to people and they go, “Does your dad have tattoos?” I'm like, “Yeah, bro”. And I'm like, “He also had his ears pierced.” – Participant 48*

*“[Alternative faith community] is a place that I do feel really, really safe in because I know there is no one who is going to hurt me. If somebody has some kind of issue with [being transgender], they usually just won't say anything, but generally 99% of people are accepting or at least tolerant.” – Participant 41*

Given an increased separation from faith communities, it follows that the resources used are less dependent on those communities, and more dependent on personal reflections and ‘outside’ voices. Sometimes this reflection is theological, with participants contrasting their foundational beliefs (such as “God loves everyone”) with the beliefs and practices of their faith communities. For others, reflection draws upon a confidence in their own ability to navigate life and meaning-making apart from the structures of a faith community or institution. Finally, those who leaned on guides or Christian communities tended to gravitate towards different voices from their original faith systems, like unconventional mentors or new (to them) faith communities.

### 3.4 Reject

Finally, there were two participants who narrated reject resolutions. As discussed, reject pathways can be deconversion from faith, or conversion to a new faith. Our two participants reflect this.

*“[Interviewer: so you were disconnecting, and became pregnant, and felt ashamed, and it all mixed together to disconnect you from faith?]: It all just was horrible, it all just happened at once and all disconnected me completely.” – Participant 15*

*“But when I came to the Salvation Army, it changed a lot about me. Introduced me to some young adult groups, introduced me to the leaders. And I started connecting with people. Fridays, we come in, have fun, play some games. And I start feeling that love again. I start having that confidence again. ... Oh, this is the place where I belong.” – Participant 44*

Participant 15 experiences a series of disrupting life events for herself, and to her faith community. In the midst of these, her existing resources and beliefs prove inadequate to make sense of what she is experiencing, so she disengages from the faith community, and from faith. For Participant 44, Christianity presents a new, more welcoming, and personally congruent faith system.

*"They have some certain laws. If somebody is a sinner, like somebody drinks and smokes and you shake hands with that person, [there's a] calculation of sin that you have. How could that be? So it was very challenging for me to believe their religion. And I started doubting that religion. But the worst part for me was when I was part of [a faith community]. They said they wanted to make someone a leader. They have positions. So I said, "You know what? Okay. I want to be part of that team." But they discriminated against me because I was new, they were saying lot of things about me, I could not be [a leader]. So I didn't feel welcome. And I started questioning myself. I said, what kind of religion is this? And I said, you know what? I'm going to stop worshipping God. I was very angry, even at God." – Participant 44*

*"I did street chaplaincy for a while, and then I fell pregnant and didn't feel comfortable going out on the streets at that time. And then [my youth leader] wasn't allowed to do it anymore because of her choices with her partner, so that also was a big, 'well, I'm not doing that if they can't do it because I don't see that as fair'." – Participant 15*

Reject pathways represent a strong disaffiliation. This is caused by a repudiation of beliefs; perhaps a feeling or decision that the content of the original faith position is wrong or not true. This can be caused or accompanied by a sense of disappointment or betrayal by the original faith community, or from an internal incongruity.

*"[Mentors] sit with me and talk, we'd go for coffee. The pastor was very nice to me. He tried to encourage me. Even Sundays, if I don't come to church, he will call me no matter how many times. Sometimes I see you, I don't want to pick up the call. He will call me on the phone, we'd chat. And I start feeling that love. I start feeling like, "Yeah, this is a religion I want to be part of." Even though I was questioning myself, I didn't come to church. After church, some few people from the church, they'd go to my house and pay me a visit. So I started feeling that love again." – Participant 44*

*"When the people you feel most comfortable with and really connect with also leave the church, and aren't there in the same aspect, and obviously they need to move on in their lives ... I'm an anxious person, so if I don't know or have these connections with people, I'm not going to go to [faith community], which is hard." – Participant 15*

Whilst it may seem counterintuitive that there are resources to help resolve towards a reject pathway, like any other pathway the dissonance requires resolution. Especially in light of conversion narratives, significant resources are required to help a switch of allegiance, that in some ways mirror the reaffirm pathway (encouragement, providing guidance around beliefs, etc.). For deconversion narratives, the presence or lack of resources can affect how resolved the pathway really is for a person, as in Participant 15. Rather than a cogent choice to reject their faith position, their disengagement led to a lack of reflection, that left them with little articulation of how they felt about their present meaning-making system.

As the participants' accounts demonstrate, there are significant differences in the experiences of EAs who resolve to different pathways. In the following section, we discuss how understanding the distinctiveness of each pathway allows us to best support those EAs with the resources they need to develop their faith.

## 4. Discussion & Implications

The findings of this research, when considered in the light of other studies and literature, present implications for engaging with EAs to aid their spiritual development. Understanding how EAs experience faith transitions by addressing dissonance with resources can help us engage and support them to navigate these transitions and develop a more complex faith system.

### 4.1 Nuances in Resolution Pathways

Considering the differences found across the resolution pathways continuum that help us understand EAs' experiences of spiritual development. As noted, some participants were unable to be categorised due to lack of salience of dissonance or resolution. This could be a reflection of Hill's (2019) findings that for many young people and EAs, religious questions are stymied by "a lack of opportunities to discuss religious or spiritual matters, a lack of interest or a passive engagement with religion and spirituality, active discouragement on account of questioning being perceived as disrespectful, or religious communities offering the 'answers' as opposed to cultivating questions" (Hill, 2019, p. 30). However, like Hill, we note that the actual process of engaging in the research helped participants clarify these questions and explore their responses.

Our observations of the overall characteristics of the resolution pathways are depicted in Figure 4 below. Across the continuum there is a shift from experiences of belonging as primary to experiences of authenticity. Whilst we agree with Day that "belief and belonging are interdependent, with beliefs being explicitly located, produced and practised in the public and the social realm" (Day, 2009, p. 276), it is also true that this can lead to vulnerability to faith systems. If, as described by many participants, belonging feels conditional on agreeing with beliefs or behavioural norms, disengagement from a faith community may be necessary if the content and structure of faith is incongruent with a personal sense of authenticity. Another dynamic present across the continuum of resolutions is that the outside pathways (reaffirm and reject) have a sense of certainty and definitiveness for participants, whilst the inside pathways (reconsider and revise) are expressed in agentic terms. In general, participants on the outside pathways talk about how things 'must' be, whereas those on the inside pathways discussed the choices they made. This confirms Lewis' commentary on the model (Lewis, 2020, p. 222). Moving across the continuum can generally<sup>3</sup> be described as moving from conventional faith systems to unconventional faith systems. For reaffirm, the faith system is constructed, a certainty. For reconsider, faith is being constructed, as nuance and complexity is added. For revise, faith is being deconstructed, as critical questions are being raised and explored. Finally, for reject pathways, the old faith system experiences destruction (which leads to the questions about what may arise in its place). Finally, after resolution, the faith system tends to be more complex, except for those on a disengagement pathway, where they might be more unconventional, but still quite simplistic. In becoming more complex, their

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<sup>3</sup> This is obviously dependent on the individual's homeostasis. It is possible that an individual starting from an unconventional point might revise their position to a more orthodox faith expression.

experience of faith is more personal and applied. There is more certainty and/or agency regarding the content and their structures are more meaningful.

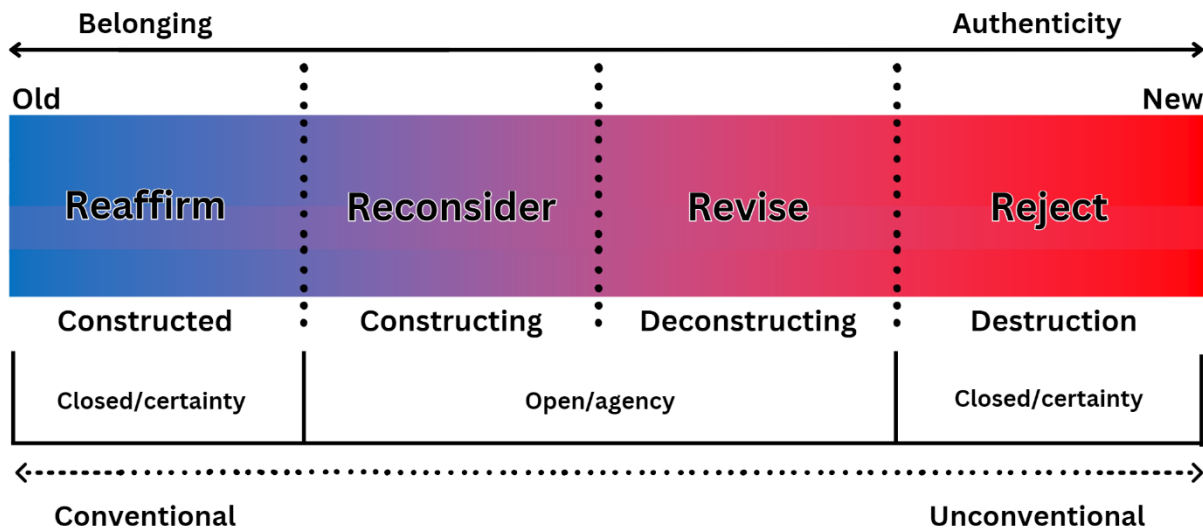


Figure 4. Characteristics of Lewis' Faith Resolution Pathways

#### 4.2 Using Experiences of Dissonance to Identify Resolution Pathways

Across all the pathways, there are common contexts or narratives of dissonance. Noting the presence of these in the lives of EAs might indicate that dissonance to their faith system may occur. Firstly, external events, including the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent restrictions, were catalytic moments for the introduction of dissonance into the faith system. Manglos (2013) has described how some kinds of life stressors, such as family breakup or trauma, negatively affect religious involvement. Many of our participants, by dint of the sampling process, had experienced trauma. Sometimes these experiences were the catalyst to conversion, as faith in God was presented as a response to their experience. However, as they experience various further difficulties and trauma, it could challenge their initial experiences, leading to dissonance in their system. A second common narrative of experience was doubt. This doubt could emerge as a response to the external events described above, or from internal tensions. Doubt can be associated with poor mental health outcomes for religiously affiliated EAs (Haney & Rollock, 2020, p. 247), but exposure to other worldviews can equally be a catalyst for both exploration and clarification (Abo-Zena & Ahmed, 2014, p. 227). A significant cause of dissonance for EAs was churches' attitudes towards sexuality and LGBTQ issues. This was significant not only for EAs who identified as LGBTQ, but also for those identifying as heterosexual. EAs are more likely to hold affirming views of sexuality (Singleton et al., 2019, p. 16), and be less judgemental (Ream & Rodriguez, 2014, p. 213). As Participant 59 expressed it, "[churches] can be racist and not inclusive and homophobic ... that puts a downer on [my faith]". Finally, a common narrative of dissonance was interpersonal conflict, especially if these relationships were important to the structure of faith (such as family, church leaders, or peers).

Whilst these four narratives of dissonance were common across the pathways, how they were experienced and resolved was expressed differently. By observing how each pathway experienced dissonance, it may help identify what kind of resolution pathway might be helpful for EAs who share these experiences.



Those on the reaffirm pathway typically experience dissonance as external forces disrupting their faith system. These new and unusual events, or different and challenging ideas about faith, cause confusion or discomfort. Sometimes, dissonance is experienced as conflict or rejection from 'outsiders', including non-Christian friends and families. Bosma has discussed how young people who convert into faith can sometimes experience negative responses from their parents, leading to complicated feelings about their new faith position (Bosma, 2020, p. 66). For EAs who eventually resolved through reaffirming, dissonance tended to challenge the content of their faith system, rather than their structure.

Those on the reconsider pathway experience dissonance as an increase in complexity in life and faith. Their experience can be summed up by the statement, 'I don't understand this', which causes them to question their personal competence or understanding of their faith system (rather than the elements of the system). Another experience of dissonance is EAs who are faced with the choice about whether they will take their faith seriously. For EAs who eventually resolved to a reconsider pathway, dissonance could mean the content and/or structure of their faith system was challenged, but ultimately in a way they can develop and grow rather than substantially change.

Those who resolve on a revise pathway express their feelings of dissonance through behaviours that are typically problematised by faith communities. They push norms and boundaries, and ask critical questions of tradition, leadership, and orthodoxy. They may experience or even engage in conflict within the faith community, or disengage (either to a new community, or altogether). For EAs who resolved to revise, the content of their original faith position had ceased to make sense and was no longer adequate or rigorous considering their experience. The structures of their faith system seem to have no application to their day-to-day life. Whilst they retain some personal connection not their sense of faith, or to the faith community, they are confronted by the question: 'Do I actually believe this?'

Finally, as discussed above, those who resolved to reject pathways experienced their dissonance acutely. They may use phrases such as 'this is wrong' or 'this isn't true' to describe the content of their faith system. The faith system has lost its relevance or utility to their lives. They may also experience a range of strong negative emotions, such as betrayal, anger, or disappointment. Typically, they express dissonance through opposition, disconnection, and denial of their original faith system.

Figure 5: Experiences of Dissonance in Resolution Pathways

### 4.3 Categories of Resources that Resolve Dissonance

If we can begin to identify the kind of resolution pathway an EA is tending to based on their experience of dissonance, it begs the question as to what kind of resources are helpful for resolving each type of faith transition. Four broad categories of resources EAs used to navigate their faith transitions emerged from our data. Below we shall briefly describe each category. However, it should be noted that these broad categories are applied differently depending on the type of resolution pathway EAs experience. The nuances of how each resource is used in each pathway will be explored in section 4.4 below.

Reaffirm	Reconsider	Revise	Reject
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External forces disrupting the system</li> <li>• New and unusual challenging life events</li> <li>• Different or confronting ideas about faith</li> <li>• Conflicting expressions of faith/community</li> <li>• Feelings of interpersonal rejection from the outside (friends, family, faith communities)</li> <li>• Content challenged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I don’t understand this”</li> <li>• “Will I take my faith seriously or not?”</li> <li>• Increased complexity in experience of life and faith</li> <li>• Doesn’t challenge authority, but seeks better understanding</li> <li>• Content and structure challenged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Do I actually believe this?”</li> <li>• Boundary and norm pushing</li> <li>• Critical questions of tradition, leadership, consensus</li> <li>• Interpersonal conflict within faith community</li> <li>• Disengagement (to none or new)</li> <li>• Content doesn’t seem to make sense</li> <li>• Struggles to find application</li> <li>• Personal connection remains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “This is wrong”</li> <li>• “This isn’t true”</li> <li>• Loss of utility</li> <li>• Irrelevant</li> <li>• Strong negative emotions: betrayal, anger, disappointment</li> <li>• Destruction, rejection, disconnection</li> </ul>

A safe and supportive faith community was mentioned by many participants, particularly those who resolution pathways privileged their old positions. Faith communities can be places of meaning-making and “emerging adults who actively participate in a religious group use the signs, symbols, and rituals of the congregation or community in a way that is *personally significant*” (Whitney & King, 2014, p. 143, emphasis in original). Faith communities were resources when they affirmed and encouraged, as well as provided practical support and sustainable practices to grow in faith (Drovdahl & Keuss, 2020, pp. 142-143). However, faith communities could also act as resources by providing new spaces for questioning and being hospitable (Powell et al., 2016). Sometimes the faith community that is a helpful resource is not the one that an EA is originally connected to, and some EAs found communities on the internet helped them navigate dissonance. Whilst faith communities can be resources in many ways, it should be noted that they do not seem to be as effective in making dissonance salient, with their default stance of affirming orthodoxy. This role was more clearly taken by the mentors and guides EAs engaged with.

Many EAs spoke glowingly of the impact that mentors and guides had had on their lives. Adults, whether they be found in families, faith communities, educational settings, or events, have “an important role to play in the faith development and retention of religious youth” (Vaclavik et al., 2020,

p. 22). These mentors and guides demonstrated care for them, but also had deep and sometimes challenging conversations about faith. They asked EAs about what they were experiencing, what they thought and helped them reflect on their circumstances (Setran, 2013, p. 206). Sometimes these mentors were key leaders from within the faith community, like pastors or youth leaders. Other times, they were people with more unconventional faith positions, that helped EAs engage with critical positions. Sometimes they were more peer-based, like supportive Christian friends or romantic partners (Barry & Abo-Zena, 2014), who could be the source of faith 'prompts' (Erdvig, 2020, p. 297).

Whilst EAs utilised interpersonal resources such as faith communities and mentors, they also utilised personal resources. One personal resource EAs used was Christian practices. Bass describes Christian practices as "the things Christian people do together over time to address fundamental human needs, in response to and in the light of God's active presence for the life of the world" (Bass, 2019, p. 5). The EAs in this study utilise a variety of practices to resolve dissonance and develop their faith. Some turned to prayer for comfort and guidance. Others read the Bible, with some using apps to motivate and encourage them, and others engaging in more detailed study. Some grounded their faith in their sense of vocation and service practices helped them navigate dissonance<sup>4</sup>. This reflects current literature on EAs' engagement with faith practices. Douglass (2022) found that a project dedicated to engaging EAs in faith and mission resulted in increased scriptural engagement. Mitchell et al (2016) asserted that engaging EAs through communal faith practices is a way of reengaging them with faith communities.

The most personal and interior resource that EAs used to resolve dissonance was self-reflection. Sometimes this was a personal audit of their experience, personality, and values. Others more explicitly engaged in theological reflection, using foundational principles to determine how to respond to their faith and the world. Erdvig (2020) lists reflection among the resources used by EAs to explore questions of faith. In describing how EAs developed one aspect their faith (their sense of purpose), Liang (2017) detailed the process of discovery and reflection that helped them understand firstly themselves, and then their sense of purpose.

#### 4.4 Supporting Emerging Adults through Faith Transitions

As described in section 1, EAs' faith develops by navigating transitions through distinct resolution pathways, which leave them with a more personal and applied faith system. Now that we have articulated how pathways may typically be experienced by EAs, and a general overview of the resources they use to resolve dissonance in their faith systems, we can formulate specific responses to each pathway that will be most helpful, as show in Figure 6 below.

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<sup>4</sup> Though for others, being in volunteer positions could be problematic as they begun to question orthodoxy.

Experiences of Dissonance			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• External forces disrupting the system</li> <li>• New and unusual challenging life events</li> <li>• Different or challenging ideas about faith</li> <li>• Conflicting expression faith/community</li> <li>• Feelings of interpersonal rejection from the outside (friends, family, faith communities)</li> <li>• Content challenged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I don’t understand this”</li> <li>• Increased complexity in experience of life and faith</li> <li>• Doesn’t challenge authority, but seeks for better understanding</li> <li>• “Will I take my faith seriously or not?”</li> <li>• Content and structure challenged</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boundary and norm pushing</li> <li>• Critical questions of tradition, leadership, consensus</li> <li>• Interpersonal conflict within faith community</li> <li>• Disengagement (to none or new)</li> <li>• Content doesn’t seem to make sense</li> <li>• Struggles to find application</li> <li>• “Do I actually believe this?”</li> <li>• Personal connection remains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “This is wrong”</li> <li>• “This isn’t true”</li> <li>• Loss of utility</li> <li>• Irrelevant</li> <li>• Strong negative emotions: betrayal, anger, disappointment</li> <li>• Destruction, rejection, disconnection</li> </ul>
Reaffirm	Reconsider	Revise	Reject
<p><b>Faith communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Affirm beliefs</li> <li>• Encourage and support them</li> <li>• Facilitate like-minded peer groups</li> <li>• Fill gaps in knowledge</li> <li>• Provide opportunities to participate in community</li> </ul> <p><b>Mentors and guides</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-engage through relationship</li> </ul> <p><b>Christian practices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage existing meaningful Christian practices</li> </ul> <p><b>Self-reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Encourage strengths-based reflection</li> </ul>	<p><b>Faith communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More nuanced education</li> <li>• New practical opportunities to apply faith in life and community</li> </ul> <p><b>Mentors and guides</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Analyse and ask questions to make dissonance salient</li> <li>• Encourage to take agency regarding faith</li> </ul> <p><b>Christian practices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce to new practices</li> </ul> <p><b>Self-reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop evaluative frameworks</li> </ul>	<p><b>Faith communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusive faith communities</li> <li>• Acknowledge alternative perspectives</li> </ul> <p><b>Mentors and guides</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unconventional mentors</li> <li>• Encourage critical questions</li> <li>• Tools to build self-awareness</li> <li>• Connect to new faith communities</li> </ul> <p><b>Christian practices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explore new Christian practices &amp; traditions</li> </ul> <p><b>Self-reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools to articulate their foundations, and evaluate their beliefs in light of them</li> </ul>	<p><b>Conversion</b></p> <p><b>Faith communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articulate point of difference</li> <li>• Welcoming and accepting</li> <li>• Affirm new beliefs</li> </ul> <p><b>Mentor and guides</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate trustworthiness</li> </ul> <p><b>Christian practices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce and support Christian practices</li> </ul> <p><b>Self-reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help identify faith narrative</li> </ul> <p><b>Deconversion</b></p> <p><b>Faith communities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connect to new spaces and communities</li> </ul> <p><b>Mentors and guides</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exit well by maintaining relationship</li> </ul> <p><b>Christian/meaning-making practices</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New meaning-making practices</li> </ul> <p><b>Self-reflection</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reconstruction of what they are now 'for'</li> </ul>
Resources to help			

Figure 6. Resources to support dissonance resolution

As described in section 4.2, by examining the expression of dissonance in an EA's life we can see what kinds of resolution pathways they are tending towards. For each pathway we have identified particular resources and action that faith communities and people who support the EAs can take to assist their faith development. However, it should be noted that we do not view these paths as deterministic, but broadly descriptive. For example, an EA could be assisted to reframe their experience of dissonance, which may result in a different resolution pathway.

If you identify that an EA may be on the reaffirm pathway, perhaps if they experience initial doubts, difficult circumstances, or the rejection of those outside the faith community, a key task is to be a space of welcoming, encouragement, and affirmation. In many ways, this is the pathway that churches are best equipped to respond to. Practical support and care for EAs is important, as well as connecting them with like-minded peer groups. It is helpful to encourage them to lean on existing faith practices in their lives that they have found helpful, and to help fill any gaps in their knowledge or Christian education. Where EAs have begun to disengage due to dissonance, a caring mentor who can invite them back into community, as well as significant participation in the life of community, can be helpful.

If you identify that an EA is on a reconsider pathway, perhaps as they respond to increased complexity with statements of confusion or face the question of the role of faith in their life, then opportunities to add to what is existing should be explored. This could look like deeper or more nuanced Christian education, exploring innovative ideas or traditions. An EA could be introduced to new Christian practices they have not tried before to try and help them locate the practices that are personally meaningful for them. This can also look like new opportunities to serve and apply their faith in community or mission, especially in ways that will challenge simplistic expressions of faith. Mentors can be especially helpful in this resolution pathway, as they analyse and ask questions to make dissonance salient, rather than seeking to suppress questions or doubt. Finally, whilst it is true of all faith development, EAs on a reconsider pathway should be encouraged to take agency for the role faith plays in their life.

EAs on a revise pathway present a more complex challenge for the support faith communities offer. As discussed, faith communities are much better equipped to promote orthodoxy and belonging, whereas revise pathways are engaging in boundary pushing and the quest for authenticity. However, faith communities that are 'open' as described by Lewis (2020, p. 202) can present faith not as a static set of beliefs but a range of questions to be explored. It is important to acknowledge the alternative perspectives these EAs are exploring, ideally through unconventional mentors, who may sit outside of power structures of faith communities. EAs can be encouraged to develop their critical questions, but also be taught tools for self-awareness so that they can articulate what their theological and ethical foundations are. Finally, for some EAs on a revise pathway, the most helpful response can be to help find them alternate faith communities that better connect with their expression of faith. These may be additional to their original faith community (including online spaces and podcasts) or leaving to engage in a new space.

When considering EAs on a reject pathway, it is useful to separate responses by the two forms reject can take – conversion or deconversion. For those EAs converting from one faith system or worldview, it is important to demonstrate the trustworthiness of the people and content of the new belief system. These EAs are not naïve to how faith systems can be inadequate but are looking for systems that better

engage with their experience and needs. It is important to articulate how the new faith system is different, and to affirm their new choice, whilst undergoing the process of reconstruction. As mentioned above, in some ways it shares many characteristics with the kinds of supports made in the reaffirm pathway.

Supporting EAs who are de-converting is a difficult task for faith communities. It may feel like the antithesis of their mission, come with a sense of failure, or personal sadness or conflict. However, if we fail to help EAs resolve their dissonance, the alternative is the death of the faith system altogether, and a challenge to their meaning-making processes. Many readers would recognise that people can maintain positive and caring relationships even if differences of theology or faith emerge. It is also important to help EAs who have rejected one faith system construct their new worldview and value system, so that they are not merely 'against' their original position, but 'for' something. This may involve finding new spaces and communities of meaning-making, even if they are not faith communities, and structures that help them navigate life.

## 5. Further Research and Conclusion

This paper adds to the body of knowledge about the faith experiences of EAs by examining a specific cohort: those who have initially converted from situations of hardship and injustice, and continue to maintain some connection to faith in their emerging adulthood. By interpreting those experiences using Lewis' Faith Transitions model, we have demonstrated its effectiveness and utility for understanding the ways that EAs 'do faith'. We have also provided practical supports that faith communities can provide to EAs who are undergoing transition, which can empower congregations and leaders to work in a space that has typically not been effective. In doing so, they will help EAs develop a more personal and applied faith.

Further research could be done to explore the implications of our data. The model of supports we have provided could be used and assessed in pastoral settings. The cohorts could be significantly expanded, with more opportunities to hear from EAs on revise and reject pathways. Research conducted as a standalone project (and not as part of a wider study, as this project was), could go into more depth regarding specific experiences of dissonance and transition. These two aims are being addressed by the Your Story research that Lewis & Stanton are currently undertaking (2022), and we look forward to the knowledge that study will add. Finally, significant thought should be given to how these ideas can be communicated to practitioners in local and frontline settings, who may not be the typical audience of academic publishing.

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