Pulled from the Shoreline in Search of Spacious Spirituality: The Journeys of Women of Evangelical Christian Backgrounds

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Pulled from the Shoreline in Search of Spacious Spirituality:

The Journeys of Women of Evangelical Christian Backgrounds

by

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Abstract

This study explored the lived experience of spiritual distress (SD) from the perspective of four women aged 25-35 years from evangelical Christian (EC) backgrounds in Western Canada. Using a qualitative design, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and semi-structured interviews, this exploratory study revealed SD to be a dynamic, tension-filled, ongoing journey. The journey is metaphorically characterized by four ocean-themed, non-linear phases: 1) inhabiting the familiar yet limiting shoreline of EC; 2) being pulled out to the expansive, unknown sea; 3) navigating the storm and contending with existential uncertainty, relational wounding, and traumatic experiences within EC; and 4) floating in an unfinished, yet more tenable and spacious spirituality. Importantly, all four phases were affected by two undercurrents: 1) ongoing tensions, and 2) isolation and loss. These findings illuminate an SD journey that pulled participants from the containment of EC to a more nourishing, spacious spirituality more aligned with their values and burgeoning self-authorship.

This thesis hopes to honor oft-silenced stories of SD and encourage deeper awareness and understanding regarding SD in social work research, policy, practice, and education.

Key words: religion, spirituality, evangelical Christianity, spiritual distress, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)
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Thank you to my family, my friends, and my partner in life, Jeremy, for “following my career with interest” (Bowler, 2021, n.p), being endlessly curious, and supporting me so well. Many of you are deeply spiritual people, and many of you have your own experiences with spiritual distress. You have generously encouraged this work.

Thank you to the participants, Eva, Gwen, Eliza, and Anna. You are brave, vulnerable, and wonderful, and I could truly never have done this project without you.

I have been buoyed and nurtured by each of you.

Territory Acknowledgement

The online interviews for this thesis, and most of its writing, occurred in my home on the unceded lands of the Tsimshian peoples. As a settler person of Dutch heritage, I am a privileged visitor on these lands.

I want to offer my gratitude to the land that holds me and nourishes me daily. I am grateful to the peoples who have dwelled on and stewarded this land since time immemorial.

In a thesis about spiritual distress, it is essential to name colonization, and acknowledge its role in perpetuating spiritual distress and oppression upon Indigenous peoples. I also want to name the deep spiritual traditions that are held by Indigenous communities, which continue to nurture healing and foster resilience.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all who have been pulled from the shoreline and are finding ways to navigate new waters. You are in good company here.
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Chapter One: Introduction

Situating the Researcher

“He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (New International Version [NIV] Bible, 2011, Micah 6:8)

This verse was commonly expressed in the predominantly white, suburban, evangelical Christian (EC) churches of my upbringing in Western Canada. Growing up in EC churches, I heard many messages of service grounded in divine love and self-sacrifice and witnessed these words in practice by deeply compassionate and committed individuals. The call to “lose your life” so you can find it (Matthew 10:39, New International Version) through a vocation of service was compelling to me, and when I began social work studies, it felt like coming home. Nearly a decade since my first social work class, I still feel deeply connected to these spiritual teachings as a human and a social worker. My sense of connection to these teachings has waxed and waned as I traversed my own experience of spiritual distress (SD). As will be explored further, SD can be defined as “tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters with the supernatural, with other people, and within oneself” (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015, p. 565). The growing existential disquietude and ongoing doubts about religious doctrine that began in my early teens followed me into my early twenties. My social work program’s emphasis on anti-oppressive practice theories struck a chord, but challenged some of the orthodox, binary perspectives of EC. In recognizing my own privilege as a white, cis-gendered, able-bodied woman with class comfort, I began to explore my own interlocking identities tied to privilege and oppression in relation to the church. I was distressed by the harms perpetuated by the church, from colonization to homophobia to sexism. Connecting with people of diverse worldviews exposed me to the vibrancy of humanity, while
challenging Christianity’s doctrine of inherent sinfulness. I felt increasingly out of place in EC churches as my own values drifted farther from EC norms.

As I completed my degree and transitioned to my first social work roles in youth work, my questions and seeking continued. I felt untethered and confused about my spirituality, and I did not know how to express what I was going through. An avid reader and writer, I turned to my journalling practice, where I tend to process difficult emotions as the following entry demonstrates:

“I want you God. I want good things. I want to love people. I don’t know how to reconcile all this. You say that your yoke is easy and your burden light, but I am burdened by the epic exclusivity of it….where to from here? ~ Journal Entry

Although I am no longer personally affiliated with EC, having gone through a process echoed in the literature, including chronic doubt (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015) existential fears (Ellison & Lee, 2010) and ultimately, disaffiliation from EC (Lee & Gubi, 2019), I remain deeply invested in exploring spiritual journeys. As literature suggests (see for example, Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Dura-Vila & Dein, 2009) SD does not necessarily result in disaffiliation with one’s faith. SD experiences and outcomes are as diverse as the humans that hold them, and continual research exploring diverse manifestations of this phenomenon can further illuminate this understanding.

Experiencing SD and witnessing it in loved ones led me to critically question how other women of EC backgrounds understand and make sense of this phenomenon in their own lives. Were their experiences similar or divergent from my own? Did we share similar sources of our struggles, and were they able to reconcile their distress at all? Because I was interested in depth over breadth, and meaning of a phenomenon, I knew a qualitative design, and interpretive phenomenological analysis in particular, would allow me to explore the lived experiences and associated views of SD from the perspective of
women aged 25-40 with EC backgrounds residing in Western Canada.

Although during the most acute stages of my SD I struggled to be honest with myself or others about my spiritual angst, finding more spacious ontologies and an enlivening social life outside of evangelicalism gradually allowed me to speak about my story. Here I am, like many “me-search” researchers (Nash & Bradley, 2011, p. 2; Kress, 2011) before me, exploring the area that I once hid from. I now know that my story, while it is my own, is not an isolated experience. There are many people who wrestle with the big questions, and who feel torn between their search for authenticity and their desire for communal belonging. This thesis hopes to offer some voice to these often-private inner battles.

I am grateful for the many people, animals, and places in my life that have offered me time and space to wrestle, and a soft place to land as I came into closer alignment with my own values and began to accept greater uncertainty. Their tenderness has reinvigorated my trust in the healing power of relationships with the divine, with other beings, and with the land. The process of unravelling my own experiences of SD across cognitive, emotional, and relational domains has allowed me to rebuild a nourishing spiritual life. This thesis project has offered a gracious site for me to continue to evolve in my own understanding of SD by unearthing and making sense of the stories of four women with similar backgrounds as my own.

**Situating the Present Study: Background and Relevance**

“Religion is supposed to be good for you. Yet people get hurt in religious systems, sometimes seriously” (Winell, 2006, p. 1).

The lack of understanding and awareness I encountered about the manifestations of SD, both in the research literature and within social work practice, further drew me to this line of inquiry. In my later
and current social work practice as a youth counsellor, I recognize a lack of inclusion of spiritual matters. For instance, I recall distressed youth requesting that I pray with them and feeling both personally and ethically unsure about how to proceed, as I had not encountered content on spiritual approaches in my education. These experiences reinforced an interest in the care of the whole person—including the often-unspoken spiritual elements.

It is necessary to incorporate an awareness of these topics into social work research, policy, education, and practice, as social workers in a variety of roles may encounter clients confronting spiritual concerns, including SD. There is a growing awareness in social work regarding incorporating spiritual aspects in the work, and this study adds to this aim (see for example, Belcher & Sarmiento Mellinger, 2016; Crisp, 2020; Gardner, 2020).

As I began to explore the literature, I found that while many studies confirmed the relationship between religion, spirituality, and positive mental health outcomes (see for example Captari et al., 2018), a smaller body of literature addressed SD. The available SD (also termed spiritual struggle) research comes predominantly from empirical psychology and has utilized quantitative methods with primarily white, Christian, American populations (see for example, Abu Raiya et al., 2015; Ano & Pargament, 2012; Exline et al., 2000; Noth & Lampe, 2020). This literature conveys that SD is a complex phenomenon that can negatively affect mental health. SD can be defined as “tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters with the supernatural, with other people, and within oneself” (Abu-Raiyah, 2015, p. 565). The research has examined various facets of SD which can include painful conflicting emotions, chronic doubt, disillusionment with one’s religious upbringing, moral and existential concerns, cognitive dissonance, social isolation, and interpersonal strife in religious settings (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Ellison & Lee, 2010, Pargament, 2011). SD is also commonly segmented into three types: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and struggles with the divine (Pargament et al., 2006). Although I saw my own experience and the experiences of some of my friends
in these descriptions, I wanted to know more about the contextual influences, interconnections, and personal impact of the phenomenon. This remained lacking within the quantitative body of knowledge. Therefore, I began exploring the limited qualitative literature on SD.

I found very few qualitative studies from a social work perspective, and few exploring Canadian populations. While the available qualitative writings illuminated the complexity of SD, I recognized the importance of expanding this body from a social work perspective with attention to women’s experiences, as the literature did not often focus on a broader examination of lived experience particularly in the context of the gendered experience of SD. My choice to focus on women’s experiences stems from three factors. First, I am drawn to women’s experiences due to my insider status as a woman who has undergone SD. Secondly, there are few quantitative or qualitative studies exploring women’s experiences in this area, and finally, my methodology, IPA, requires a homogenous sample.

My search for a suitable methodology led me to interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Its emphasis on lived, embodied experience, appreciation for participant and researcher subjectivity, and concern for meaning making all aligned with my values and intentions for the study (Smith et al., 2009). IPA is philosophically grounded in an interpretivist research approach, which provides my theoretical underpinning. Consistent with an IPA approach, having an insider experience of SD is of value in studying the topic (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, the purpose of this IPA study is to better understand the lived experiences and associated views of an SD journey from the perspective of women aged 25-40 with EC backgrounds.

**Research Questions and Objectives:**

This study aimed to shed light on this experience by exploring the following main research question, sub-questions, and objectives:

Main research question: What is the lived experience of SD for women of EC backgrounds?
The following sub-questions informed the study:

- How does SD affect participants’ mental health?
- How, if at all, have participants reconciled their SD?
- How, if at all, might identity markers (e.g. gender, age) affect participant’s experiences of SD?

Overall, the main objectives of this study were as follows:

- To explore how women of EC backgrounds understand and experience, and make meaning of their SD journeys
- To offer an increased understanding of how SD affects the wellbeing of women with EC backgrounds
- To increase awareness and improve support for people with SD in social work practice and allied professions
- To contribute to current conceptual and theoretical frameworks of SD

**Structure and Organization of the Thesis**

Chapter One has offered background on myself and the research and noted the social relevance of exploring the phenomenon of SD from an IPA approach. Chapter Two discusses key definitions and provides a review of the SD literature. Chapter Three discusses IPA methodology, and the associated methods of in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Chapter Four introduces the four participants and presents the results and analysis. Finally, Chapter Five discusses the findings by situating them in comparison to other studies and literature. It also presents limitations, future possibilities for research, implications, and the conclusion.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The SD scholarship is ripe with slippery, contested and overlapping concepts. Exploring the intersections of spirituality, wellbeing, and evangelicalism through a social work lens has led me to scholarship in disciplines as wide ranging as history, theology, and nursing, as these topics are examined from a range of lenses. In addition, throughout my thesis journey, which began in 2020, I have observed an increase in scholarly literature examining spiritual struggles. While this increase has posed challenges for staying up to date, it also validates the relevance and urgency of this topic. I am encouraged by the rising tide in this area and this thesis contributes to the conversation.

This literature review outlines the relevant scholarship for this thesis’ inquiry into the SD experiences of four women of evangelical Christian backgrounds. First, I provide definitional clarifications for the terms religion, spirituality, faith, and existential. I then provide a brief introduction to the topic of social work and spirituality, spiritual sensitivity in social work, and the social work literature on spiritual challenges. Following these framing conversations, I introduce the quantitative and qualitative SD research, including a working definition for SD, mental health implications of SD, and further resonant terms related to SD. Finally, I discuss evangelicalism and women in evangelicalism to set the context of the study population.

Definitional Clarifications

Religion, faith, and spirituality have been conceptualized in many ways across disciplines. For the purposes of this study, I draw from the Handbook and Religion and Health (Koenig et al., 2001; Koenig et al., 2012) and leading social work and spirituality scholars Canda, Canda, and Furman. Canda, Canda, and Furman’s (2020) book, Spiritual Diversity in Social Work: The Heart of Helping, draws on Ed Canda’s work in the area for more than the past three decades, and was a cherished
companion on this thesis journey. In their second edition of *The Handbook*, Koenig et al. (2012) propose that “religion involves beliefs, practices and rituals related to the sacred” and originates in an “established tradition that arises out of a community with common beliefs and practices” (p. 37). The term “faith” can refer to both an aspect of one’s religious belief (e.g., having faith, trust, or belief in God), but is also often used interchangeably with religion, as asserted by Canda et al. (2020). For example, one may adhere to a faith (such as Christianity) just as they adhere to a religion (Canda et al., 2020). Spirituality is more broadly defined by Koenig et al. (2001) in the first edition of the *Handbook* as “the personal quest for understanding answers to ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationship to the sacred or transcendent, which may or may not lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of community” (p.18). Canda et al. (2020) conveyed their definition of spirituality, and later provide a full chapter to discuss the nuances and variety in defining this expansive term. For Canda et al. (2020), spirituality is a process of development that includes a search for meaning and a sense of purpose, an orientation around key priorities, engagement with transcendence, and relationship/connectedness with oneself, other beings, the universe, and “ultimate reality” (p. 5). The terms “religion” and “spirituality” overlap to include “the subjective feelings, thoughts and behaviors that arise from a search for the sacred” (Hill et al., 2000, p. 68). When utilizing the term “SD” I intend to encompass experiences that originate in both religious and spiritual contexts.

An additional term of relevance that overlaps with SD is “existential.” While this term is linked with the existentialist school of philosophy, in more common parlance, “existential” matters consider issues related to existence (Canda et al., 2020). These are the issues of “ultimate concern” (Tillich, 1957, p. 1) that beckon us to question what it means to be human. Many religious and spiritual queries are existential in nature, but not all existential queries will invoke divinity or the sacred. As this thesis explores distress in relation to spirituality and religion (EC in particular) the term SD rather than
“existential distress” is used. Still, “existential” is a helpful and resonant adjective in these conversations about matters of being.

Amidst these various contested terms, Piedmont and Wilkins (2019) conveyed the centrality of what they call “numinous” (p. 84), meaning the capacity for spiritual and religious engagement in the lives of all humans. These forces can provide guidance and illumination towards “a sacred destination” (Pargament, 2011, p. 136) throughout life’s challenges, but they can also underpin deep distress. As Taylor (1996) asserted, “God [or any higher power] exists as a belief in people’s minds and hearts and this belief has definite consequences in shaping a person’s response to the environment” (p. 88; in Dein, 2010, p. 527). If our religion and/or spirituality lacks flexibility, fails to respond to the inevitable challenges of life, and conflicts with our social environment, we may fall into distress (Pargament, 2011).

Social Work, Spirituality, and Religion

Social work, spirituality, and religion have shared a complex relationship over the decades. Canda et al.’s (2020) text offers a comprehensive framework and theory on spirituality and includes a range of spiritual matters relevant to the social work profession, including spiritually sensitive practices, spiritual assessments, spiritual development, ethical engagement with spirituality, and historical context. While social work can trace its roots to religious institutions and motivations, this link was gradually severed in favor of a non-sectarian approach in social work (Canda et al., 2020; Crisp, 2017). The role of providing spiritual care was placed upon religious leaders and chaplains and removed from the increasingly professionalized social work realm (Canda et al., 2020). But the conversation on social work and spirituality has never halted. Graham et al. (2007) argued that beginning in the 1990s, interest in spirituality and social work re-emerged, with explorations considering the key areas of “social justice work and community organizing; social work pedagogy; and social work practice” (n.p). In addition, in
more recent years, increasing discussions about cultural awareness and Indigenous ways of knowing have propelled the exploration of social work’s spiritual and religious competence (see for example, George & Ellison, 2015; Baskin, 2022). Further examinations have considered linkages among eco-spirituality, environmentalism, and social work (Coates et al., 2006). However, Canda et al. (2020) argued that spiritual and religious matters continue to remain marginalized in social work, and the need to advocate for their inclusion in mainstream social work persists.

Although most students, practitioners, and clients of social workers have expressed interest in the integration of spirituality into practice, this area continues to remain largely unaddressed in schools of social work and professional development trainings (Boynton, 2016; Boynton & Mellan, 2021; Kvarfordt et al., 2017; Moffatt, 2019). As social workers play a key role in supporting individuals through existential and spiritual concerns related to life transitions, traumas, and crises, and encouraging positive spiritual outcomes, building spiritual awareness is essential (Boynton & Vis, 2017).

Canda et al. (2020) recommended a spiritually sensitive practice approach within their text. A spiritually sensitive approach to social work practice involves awareness of the presentation and impacts of spiritual realities in clients’ lives, and an attentive response to these experiences. Spiritually sensitive practice should also include personal reflection on one’s own worldview and continued professional development with regards to the role of spirituality in practice (Canda et al., 2020; Boynton & Mellan, 2021).

In many cultures, spirituality is inextricably intertwined with cultural beliefs and worldviews. Consequently, developing our spiritual sensitivity as practitioners is linked with developing cultural humility, as first expressed by Tervalon and Garcia (1998):
Cultural humility incorporates a lifelong commitment to self-evaluation and self-critique, to redressing the power imbalances, and to developing mutually beneficial and non-paternalistic clinical and advocacy partnerships with communities on behalf of individuals and defined populations.

Fostering a spiritually sensitive, culturally humble practice approach remains important for providing holistic support to peoples of diverse spiritual, religious, and cultural lived experiences.

**Spiritual Distress in Social Work Literature**

Although spiritual discussions in social work are increasing in response to the call for greater inclusion of spirituality, the topic of SD and its intersections with practice lacks exploration. For instance, Canda et al. (2020) present only several paragraphs on SD and struggle, and some brief consideration of the resonant but distinct phenomenon of spiritual emergencies within their chapter on spiritual development. Spiritual emergencies refer to experiences wherein sudden, destabilizing spiritual experiences overwhelm an individuals’ capacity to integrate their newfound learnings (Grof & Grof, 1990). This may include mystical experiences such as visions, near death experiences or profound meditative awakenings (Grof & Grof, 1990). While spiritual emergencies may be part of a person’s SD journey, this thesis does not concentrate on this particular phenomenon.

Boynton’s (2016) qualitative grounded theory research on children’s spirituality pointed to connections between trauma, grief, and loss (TGL) and spiritual struggles, as well as the significance of spirituality in posttraumatic growth. Boynton’s (2016) findings also demonstrated the at times taboo nature of spirituality, along with the resulting isolation felt by children as they explored and relied on their spirituality following TGL experiences. Kvardfordt (2009) also offered insight into spiritual development from a social work lens. Their work on spiritual abuse and neglect of youth illuminated the harmful impact of such abuse on children’s sense of meaning, purpose, belonging, and
ethics. Additional related social work research on spiritual struggle has examined ageing, medical and hospice contexts, areas where spiritual questions about suffering, death, and the afterlife may emerge (Duncan-Daston et al., 2016). This literature has echoed concerns about a lack of training in spiritual matters, despite frequent spiritual concerns brought up by ill and dying clients (Duncan-Daston et al., 2016).

A small body of social work literature has explored LGBTQ+ individuals’ experiences with faith communities and has cultivated tools for practitioners supporting this population (see for example, Hollier et al., 2022; Levy & Lo, 2013). This literature is particularly noteworthy for this thesis, as EC adheres to Biblical interpretations deeming homosexuality sinful, and this can have a profoundly detrimental impact on LGBTQ+ individuals and allies (Lapinski & McKirman, 2013). Furthermore, social workers engaging with LGBTQ+ clients may encounter spiritual challenges in clients as part of their experiences and their stories. Although this is not a major focus of this inquiry, it is important to integrate an awareness of SD in the experience of LGBTQ+ individuals in broader discussions regarding social work and spirituality.

Additionally, the American Psychiatric Association’s (2013) DSM-5, a taxonomy of mental disorders, included “spiritual and religious problems” (Brown, 2005, p. 29) as a contextual code to supplement a diagnosis. This addition is not well integrated in many clinicians’ assessment processes. Furthermore, some critique the code for “spiritual and religious problems” (Chandler, 2012, p. 577) as part of a larger cultural project that pathologizes and “medicalizes” life. Others could argue that its inclusion in this foremost clinical text supports wider validation for spiritual and religious struggles (Scott et al., 2003). While this conversation must continue, it remains evident that practitioner awareness and confidence in responding to spiritual and religious challenges are limited, and this warrants further research, training, and practice integration (Canda et al., 2020; Kvarfordt et al., 2017).
What is Spiritual Distress?: A Deeper Dive

There appears to be a growing body of quantitative psychological research and discussion focused on American populations. This empirical literature has utilized the term “spiritual struggle” in large sample surveys using instruments such as the Religious Spiritual Struggles Scale (RSSS) (see for example Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Exline et al., 2014). Within this work, spiritual struggle is commonly divided into three types: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and struggles with the divine (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2016). Some literature has examined terms and processes such as religious strain (Exline et al., 2000), “dark night of the soul” (Dura-Vila & Dein, 2009, p. 32), “wrestling with God” (Rolheiser, 2018, p. 8), or “crises of faith” (Webb, 2001). There is empirical and grey literature examining spiritual abuse, religious trauma, religious disaffiliation, and religious deconstruction. In this thesis, I chose the term “spiritual distress”, which for the purposes of this study is loosely defined as any experience that involves “tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters with the supernatural, with other people, and within oneself” (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015, p. 565).

Quantitative Spiritual Struggle Literature

The quantitative literature, rooted in the field of psychology, has described that spiritual struggles may include a troubled relationship with the divine, painful emotions related to one’s religion and/or spirituality, chronic doubt, disillusionment with one’s religious upbringing, moral and existential concerns, and interpersonal strife in religious settings (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Ellison & Lee, 2010). These difficult experiences can shake a person’s existential foundations, implicating relationships with the divine, faith communities, our friends and families, and certainly, ourselves. For religious adherents, religion can “lie at the center” (Wilt et al., 2017, p. 54) of one’s worldview and orientation to life, and as such, any struggles in this realm can be deeply destabilizing. This destabilization may have significant impacts on our wellbeing.
The literature has demonstrated strong linkages between experiences of spiritual struggles and adverse mental health outcomes, including depression, anxiety, and suicidality (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015; Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; McConnell et al, 2006; Wilt et al., 2021). Many quantitative studies have utilized the Religious and Spiritual Struggles Scale (RSSS) a validated assessment, to measure levels of both positive and negative religious coping, finding that negative religious coping methods (such as viewing God as punishing) are associated with “spiritual discontent” and “poorer adjustment” (Pargament et al., 2000; Pargament 2011; Tomás & Rosa, 2021).

Spiritual struggle has been associated with self-esteem struggles, challenges with painful emotions related to one’s religion, chronic doubt, and cognitive dissonance (Ellison & Lee, 2010; Exline et al., 2000; Nica, 2020). While acute distress certainly has impacts on mental health, some literature has demonstrated that modest levels of spiritual struggle can also result in significant repercussions for wellbeing (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015). These intrapersonal struggles have been shown to have strong links with negative physical and mental health outcomes and may be exacerbated in religious communities where expressing one’s distress regarding their religion is socially unacceptable (Ellison & Lee, 2010).

In addition, increasing research has demonstrated that spiritual struggle warrants targeted attention as a distinct and complex phenomenon that “cannot merely be reduced to other psychosocial experiences” (Ano & Pargament, 2012, p. 431; Abu-Raiyah et al, 2015; Piedmont & Wilkins, 2019; Wilt et al., 2017). The spiritual aspect of the struggle may be the most salient in decreased wellbeing and may require a spiritually oriented intervention (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015). Given these findings, it is vital to integrate deeper awareness of spiritual struggle into every helper’s professional toolbox to increase their capacity in conveying meaningful support for clients. By employing a qualitative, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, this thesis aims to illuminate the lived experience of SD. These elements are limited in quantitative studies utilizing the pre-established RSSS tool.
Qualitative Research

The quantitative psychological literature has offered some descriptive and explanatory approaches to spiritual struggle and distress. However, there are increasing calls for qualitative research, which can provide a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of the textured experience of SD (Ano & Pargament, 2012; Wilt et al., 2020). The qualitative literature, while growing, remains thin. In the following section, I outline qualitative findings on SD. I also discuss studies considering the resonant terms spiritual abuse, disaffiliation, and deconversion. I close with a brief consideration of the grey literature on religious trauma and deconstruction.

In 1996, nursing scholar Smucker conducted a qualitative phenomenological study of 10 adults of various ages, genders, and religious identities who had each experienced SD following a troubling life event. Smucker’s findings revealed SD as a process involving “breaking” and “rebuilding” of the “web of life” (p. 84). While Smucker’s findings are compelling, my thesis does not contain its exploration of SD to experiences following traumatic events. Rockenbach et al.’s (2012) phenomenological study of spiritual struggle in college students explored the prevalence of spiritual concerns among emerging adults. The phenomenological study, which interviewed 10 young men and women, highlighted the importance of contrast in spiritual struggle. “Conflicting, contradictory and paradoxical” (p. 62) lived experiences were present in participants’ self-concepts, relationships, and existential meaning-making processes throughout their struggle.

Spiritual abuse may be a catalyst for spiritual distress. Spiritual abuse can be defined as a “misuse of power in a spiritual context whereby spiritual authority is distorted to the detriment of those under its leadership” (Ward, 2011, p. 901). Psychotherapist Wehr (2000) considers how during spiritual abuse, we may be “piously coerced” (p. 53) to give up our inner perspective, agency, and honesty by a dominating spiritual force, whether it be a spouse, employer, or faith institution. This abuse can occur on a national scale, as demonstrated by the attempted genocide of Indigenous spiritual traditions in
Christian settler-colonial states (Baskin, 2022). Following spiritual abuse there may be a sense of “contamination” (Wehr, 2000, p. 46) related to all things spiritual, and individuals may feel that they must turn away from the divine to regain their security. Wehr (2000) asserted the importance of reconnecting with one’s inner integrity or “spiritual centre” (p. 46) in the healing process.

Several studies have also examined the experiences of leaving Christianity, a phenomenon referred to in the literature as disaffiliation, apostasy and/or deconversion. Lee and Gubi (2019) described the impacts of cognitive dissonance, damaging doctrines, painful emotions, loss of identity, and numerous other salient themes in their qualitative analysis of disaffiliation from evangelicalism to atheism. Fisher (2016) expressed that although many religious people undergo some sort of beliefs evolution, there remains a gap in mental health professionals’ awareness in this area.

Utilizing post-structural analytic approaches, psychotherapist McSkimming’s (2014) Australian dissertation considered disaffiliation from Christian fundamentalism among 20 participants of multiple genders. Their study found that participants engaged in self monitored Christian identities within Christian fundamentalism, and that they reconstructed their identities through the disaffiliation process. McSkimming (2014) emphasized the value of post-structural therapy for individuals struggling with their faith, as this approach deconstructs the numerous narratives influencing our identity stories and provides space for counter-stories.

Two dissertations are of particular relevance for the proposed study, as they examine women’s experiences. Smull’s (2000) dissertation unearthed the “emotional double-binds” (p. 158) or moral dissonance, inner conflicts, and challenges with restrictive rules and gender roles in their study of 10 women who disaffiliated from Protestant fundamentalism. Another American IPA dissertation of seven women who disaffiliated from Protestant fundamentalism examined both the challenging and empowering psychological, identity, gendered, and relational elements of leaving the faith (Gillette, 2016). The psychological findings revealed traumatizing impacts for individuals exiting a faith, and
identity findings demonstrated impediments to identity development and expression. The gendered findings exposed an experience of internalized oppression, as well as empowerment upon leaving the faith. Relational findings emphasized ongoing interpersonal struggles following disaffiliation, alongside the value of building a new community for healing and support.

**Grey Literature: Religious Trauma and Deconstruction**

While less explored and validated in academic literature, religious trauma is a commonly used term within online groups discussing religious and spiritual concerns (Reclamation Collective, 2020; Religious Trauma Institute, 2020). In her book, *Leaving the Fold*, psychologist Marlene Winell (2006) outlined a description of “religious trauma syndrome” (RTS) based on her personal and clinical perspectives on the harmful impacts of faith. Winell describes RTS as a condition experienced by those exiting an authoritarian faith, and who are coping with damaging impacts of their religion. Winell drew links between religious trauma symptoms witnessed in her clients and complex-PTSD, noting the lasting impacts of religious wounds on a person’s psyche.

An additional common term is religious deconstruction, which refers to a systematic and critical analysis of one’s faith (Relevant, 2021). Online communities such as the Reclamation Collective, the Religious Trauma Institute and Evolving Faith are but a few spaces where those going through a “deconstructing” process of separation from or wrestling with evangelical Christianity can find like-minded souls. While some leaders in online deconstruction communities have explicitly renounced their prior faith, many portray an ongoing faith expression, but one that has shifted and evolved through their deconstruction. Although there is a paucity of scholarly research on deconstruction, Fekete and Knippel (2020) have explored virtual deconstruction communities, noting that these online realms are one of the few safe spaces for people to honestly explore their distress. The authors argued that with the dawn of the internet, the isolation of SD may be mitigated by a growing tide of supportive online groups. These online spaces, including podcasts, Facebook groups, and Instagram influencers, are exploring spiritual
struggle and deconstruction through the voices of lived experience, addressing the taboo of SD, and challenging isolation.

**Who Experiences SD?**

Spiritual distress is not confined to certain populations. Large-sample studies have demonstrated that spiritual struggles are experienced by diverse peoples across socio-economic, ethnic and faith affiliation intersections, although the literature is still dominated by white, Christian, American samples (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Ano & Pargament, 2012; Ellison & Lee, 2010; Wilt et al., 2021). Thus, further research is needed to consider the diverse experiences of certain groups.

For instance, for some Black individuals, religion may be deeply embedded in mental health struggle and recovery (Schieman et al., 2006; Tuffour, 2019). Este (2008) described the importance of the Black church in providing worth and pride and protection from racist oppression for its members. And Natarajan et al.’s 2022 qualitative study highlighted the racialized experiences of women of color in evangelical settings, noting damaging messages and painful impacts. These findings point to the importance of further research that accounts for the intersections of ethnicity and religion and spirituality. Although this is vital work, this study does not focus on the intersections of race and SD.

Gender and faith create another fertile intersection for exploration. Numerous studies have found that women are more spiritual and religious than men, and that women’s experience of spirituality has a more relational quality (Robinson et al. 2019; Desrosiers & Miller 2007; Lee et al. 2019). Additionally, women appear to experience more spiritual struggle, which some have theorized may be a result of women’s marginalized status in larger society, and often, within their faith tradition (Bryant & Astin, 2008). These findings validate the importance of inquiry into women’s unique experiences, as this study aims to do.
Summary: Quantitative, Qualitative and Grey Literature on SD

The quantitative and qualitative literature noted above have contributed to the evolving understanding of SD and its possible manifestations. There is a niche but significant body of quantitative spiritual struggle literature asserting the links between spiritual struggle and mental health challenges. A small but growing number of qualitative studies and dissertations are emerging to offer a more nuanced, textured picture of SD. There is also a lively digital world exploring religious trauma and deconstruction, although the empirical literature has yet to broadly explore these terms.

In the empirical literature, gaps remain, as many studies do not consider women or Canadian populations, and many focus primarily on disaffiliation as opposed to the holistic lived experience of an SD journey. Some studies do not consider the SD of a particular population, instead, they offer insights from individuals across various identity intersections (for example, age, gender), limiting our understanding of the possible situated nature of the SD experience (see for example, Smucker, 1996). Further in-depth phenomenological inquiry with women of EC backgrounds experiencing SD, as the proposed study aims to do, can expand this arena from a unique perspective.

Contextualizing the Study Population

In this section, I begin with a brief introduction to EC. This is followed by a consideration of EC’s relationship to mental health, and EC in the Canadian context. Finally, I provide a brief description of literature regarding women and the evangelical tradition.

Evangelical Christianity

Although scholars of religion continue to discuss what constitutes an “evangelical”, this debate is beyond the scope of this thesis. Each person affiliated with EC may define their faith in a unique way, as informed by their subjective experience. Still, for the sake of this contained review, I will present generalizations on EC gleaned from the literature.
Evangelicalism is a branch of Christian Protestantism. Protestantism emerged in 16th century Europe during the Reformation, a historical process that created a shift from the corporate power of Roman Catholicism to a theology rooted in personal connection with Jesus (Fahlbusch, 1999). Bebbington, an oft-cited scholar of evangelicalism, crafted a definition of evangelicalism, now termed the Bebbington quadrilateral (Guenther, 2008, p. 375). This quadrilateral contains the following four features of evangelicals: “conversionist”, “crucicentric”, “biblicist”, and “activist” (Bebbington, 2003). Conversionist belief requires individuals to personally repent and “accept Jesus as their Savior” (Guenther, 2008, p. 374) to receive salvation: all humans throughout the world who do not have a repentance experience are at risk of eternal damnation. Crucicentric belief centralizes Jesus’ death on the cross as the necessary atonement for sin. For Bebbington, evangelicalism is biblicist as it places special emphasis on the inerrancy of scripture and considers the Bible as God-inspired and the sole authority for the church. Finally, an activist sensibility requires genuinely converted evangelicals to be committed to doing good works, such as missionary work and evangelizing (Guenther, 2008; Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015). Some evangelicals may also be fundamentalist Christians, but not all evangelicals would resonate with this contested term. Still, both evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity share historical roots (Marsden, 2006). Fundamentalist groups usually have an authoritarian and absolutist stance to religious practice, and often define themselves in opposition to secular culture and ideologies (Ruthven, 2005).

Evangelical congregations often carry a shared subculture wherein adherents participate actively in the church community, have a personally salient faith life that includes reading the Bible and praying regularly, and share their faith with non-believers (Gallagher, 2004). Evangelicals throughout North America often engage in a shared market of evangelically oriented books and music (Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015).
While Bebbington’s definition of evangelicalism focuses on theology and history, Butler (2021) argued that any discussion of evangelicalism must also include attention to social and political factors. In her book, “White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America” (2021) Butler charted a history of a movement deeply implicated in and shaped by racist practices and policies. Ultimately, she contended that “evangelicalism is synonymous with whiteness” (2021, p. 11). Many explorations have emerged in recent years exploring the links between evangelical Christianity, patriarchy, whiteness, homophobia, racism, and nationalism (Natarajan et al., 2022; McKinzie & Richards, 2022; Howard et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2021; Gorski, 2021; Margolis, 2020). Many evangelical believers maintain conservative moral values about gender and sexuality (Reimer & Wilkinson, 2015). This includes opposing LGBTQ+ marriage, emphasizing men’s God-ordained authority, and upholding virginity prior to heterosexual marriage. Certainly, evangelicalism does not exist in a vacuum and is profoundly intertwined with historical, cultural, and political currents.

Regarding mental health concerns, EC communities may prioritize spiritual reasoning for mental health challenges and encourage congregants to seek spiritual support from a pastor, prayer group, or Christian counsellor (Lloyd, 2021a; Lloyd, 2022). EC individuals with mental health challenges may face EC-specific barriers to accessing mental health care. These barriers can include a skepticism of “secular” counsellors and psychiatric intervention and prioritizing spiritual healing (e.g. prayer) for psychological struggle (Lloyd, 2021a; Lloyd 2022). Still, Lloyd (2022) expressed that some EC communities are increasingly integrating bio-psycho-social frameworks alongside spiritual reasoning, and that these expressions will vary dependent on the congregation.

**Evangelical Christianity: Canada and USA**

In contrast to mainline Protestant Christian demographics in Canada (including Anglican and United churches), which have declined since the 1960’s, evangelicalism has maintained or grown in number, currently representing approximately 8-12% of the Canadian population (Guenther, 2008).
Evangelicalism in Canada is comprised of an ethnically diverse collection of churches and over 100 denominations (Guenther, 2008). Bowen (2004) cited Bibby, the foremost sociologist of religion in Canada, noting that Bibby has altered his prior argument that “religion is insignificant in everyday life” (p. 22) in Canada, to an argument that Christianity is not disappearing in Canada, but instead is changing within a national fabric of other religions and non-affiliates.

While scholars have contended that evangelicals on both sides of the border have more in common with one another than with their non-evangelical fellow citizens, there are differences between the religious contexts of Canada and the USA (Malloy, 2009; Reimer, 2003). Perhaps the most distinctive difference between the two nations is the role of evangelicalism and religiosity in public life (Malloy, 2009). Historically, Canadian evangelicals’ engagement with and impact on politics has been overshadowed by our American neighbors.

What continues to be uncovered and warrants further exploration is the potential growing influence of an American-style evangelicalism in Canada, especially in the wake of the Trump era. The 2022 Trucker’s Protest in Ottawa was one recent Canadian event that stoked this form of politicized faith, which previously had been less common above the 49th parallel (Ross, 2022).

**Women and Evangelicalism**

Evangelical churches generally uphold conservative perspectives on gender and sexuality (Gallagher, 2003). This includes teachings on God-ordained differences between men and women, validation for men’s “headship” in all institutions, and the subsequent doctrine of submission wherein women take a subservient role to men (Bendroth, 1993).

Bendroth (1993) has argued that patriarchal structures marginalize women’s perspectives within the church and are implicated not only in displays of benevolent sexism, but in gendered violence, as conveyed in her study on women in evangelicalism. Some scholars have noted how an emphasis on women’s submission can have abusive consequences, as women in harmful situations may be hesitant to
defy men’s headship by protesting or leaving (see for example Appelros, 2014; Burn & Busso, 2005; Klement & Sagarin, 2017; Wendt & Zannettino, 2014).

A critique of evangelicalism includes an analysis of purity and rape culture, both phenomena implicated in gendered violence (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Klement and Sagarin (2017) conveyed that purity culture enforces women’s virginity and critiques expressions of sexuality outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage. They asserted that its manifestations vary and can include requiring modest dress and perpetuating shame regarding sexual thoughts or actions. Purity culture finds linkages with rape culture, as it enforces women’s responsibility in maintaining purity and preventing men from “stumbling” in lust (Stanley, 2020, p. 121). Rape culture messaging obscures sexual violence, instead placing responsibility on victims of violence and framing unwanted sexual advances as permissible (Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Klement and Sagarin (2017) ultimately argued that this messaging serves to prevent reports of sexual violence within larger society, and within church communities. The #ChurchToo movement which came in the wake of the #MeToo movement, has illuminated the disturbing reality of gendered violence, sexual abuse, and cover-ups within EC institutions (Bogen et al., 2022; Allison, 2021; Bailey, 2022; Smith & Meyer, 2022).

Gendered experiences of SD within evangelicalism warrant an examination as women and church communities react, respond, or adapt to shifts in societal norms. Each woman’s experience of SD within this subculture is unique, but is certainly informed by the gendered historical, theological, and cultural underpinnings of her religious community.

**Chapter Summary**

This literature review has aimed to provide the reader with a sense of the pre-existing knowledge within which this study is situated. I have considered the key terms religion and spirituality, noting their distinctions and overlaps. A working definition for spiritual distress (SD) has been expressed, and reiterated here:
SD is “tension, strain, and conflict about sacred matters with the supernatural, with other people, and within oneself” (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015, p. 565).

The gap in social work’s integration of spirituality in research, education and practice has been illuminated, and literature validating the importance of a spiritually sensitive and culturally humble practice approach was presented. A discussion on the social work literature on the topic of SD was provided, and SD scholarship was explored.

As discussed, SD and spiritual struggle scholarship is most often considered through quantitative psychological studies with large samples of primarily American, Christian, and white populations. This body of literature has found robust links between spiritual struggles and negative mental health impacts, demonstrating the significance of increasing mental health workers’ awareness and confidence in addressing spiritual needs. The qualitative literature exploring SD is limited but growing and has emphasized the resonant concepts of spiritual abuse and disaffiliation. There is considerable online presence exploring religious trauma and religious deconstruction, although this language is not yet commonly found in empirical work.

Finally, the study population was contextualized by presenting information on EC. EC is a branch of Protestant Christianity that as defined by Bebbington (2003), places strong emphasis on personal salvation through Jesus, the authority of the Bible, evangelizing to non-believers, and active expression of one’s faith in the world. In contrast with American evangelicalism, Canadian evangelicalism has historically been less politically active, although this may evolve and shift with socio-political tides. Lastly, findings regarding women within EC and scholars’ critiques regarding patriarchy in EC were imparted. A patriarchal perspective within EC emphasizes men’s leadership and women’s submission, and the importance of women’s sexual purity. At the time of writing this thesis, EC subculture and institutions are facing ongoing cultural critiques regarding racism, homophobia, and sexual abuse cover-ups.
Chapter Three: Methodology

This study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as articulated by Smith et al. (2009). Participants shared their experiences through semi-structured interviews over the Zoom video platform. The following chapter is divided into two parts. First, I provide a rationale for the theoretical methodological foundations of this study, including a brief introduction to qualitative research, interpretivism, transpersonal theory, and IPA. Secondly, I describe my recruitment, data collection, data analysis and knowledge dissemination processes.

PART I
The Qualitative Approach

A qualitative approach was deemed most suitable due to the exploratory nature of this study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). As Tolman and Brydon-Miller (2001) evocatively noted, the qualitative approach allows us to “pry open territory about which we have only vague hunches” (p. 31). The limited literature and at-times ineffable quality of spiritual matters certainly calls for a paddle into unknown territory. In addition, qualitative research allows for deep examination of phenomena such as spiritual distress which may be limited by quantitative approaches, such as closed-answer questionnaires (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). In qualitative research, we can open space to explore the contextual information that shape a participant’s experience (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4). As discussed, this study explores the following question: What is the lived experience of SD for women of EC backgrounds?

Interpretivism

The proposed study is informed by an interpretivist approach (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001; van der Walt, 2020). This paradigm posits an ontology of multiple realities constructed through our unique, socially situated life experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Epistemologically, interpretivist approaches acknowledge that both researcher and participant are involved in co-creating knowledge and
affirms that the research does not present objective or neutral facts, but rather subjective, interpreted understandings (van der Walt, 2020). Due to the role of the interpersonal dynamic in the data generation, interpretivist methods require trust, relational engagement, and personal reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001). The interpretivist researcher must acknowledge and reflect upon the contextual layers at play in a single participant’s narrative, as well the influence of their own personal context and perspectives. Interpretivism can be viewed as the large umbrella under which IPA and its theoretical guideposts, rests.

**Transpersonal Theory**

Transpersonal theory addresses concerns regarding meaning and values and furthers its consideration to the spiritual dimension and “higher states of consciousness” (Cowley, 1993, p. 527). While the transpersonal perspective has been explored in social work, its influence is relatively recent (Canda & Smith, 2013). This theory is not affiliated with a particular religion, but rather, integrates insights from Eastern and Western philosophy, and contemporary scientific findings (Canda et al., 2020). Transpersonal theory advocates for attention to the spiritual nature of challenges and encourages researchers and practitioners to expand their openness to spiritual realities (Birnbaum & Birnbaum, 2008). For transpersonal researchers and social workers, reality is more than the material—rather, there is a multi-dimensional, metaphysical reality beyond our immediate sensory awareness that warrants attention (2008). In addition, transpersonal theory affirms spirituality as an innate human capacity that fosters a developmental process of growth towards wholeness, harmony, and connection with all things (Canda et al., 2020). This spiritual orientation appreciates that knowledge can emerge from material, external sources as well an inner contemplation and immaterial sources (Ferrer, 2001; Ferrer, 2011). In this thesis, rather than exploring SD solely through a lens of materialism, an appreciation for transpersonal theory legitimates the role of the spiritual in human experiences. Transpersonal theory also
finds linkages with phenomenology, my chosen methodology, as both consider holistic, embodied experiences that may transcend verbal description (Todres, 2007; Valle, 1998).

Rationale for IPA

I was drawn to IPA as an approach as it explores how people make meaning of life experiences while providing insight into the richness and mystery of our lives (Smith et al., 2009). The topics studied in IPA should be of significance to participants—in other words, they should “matter” (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p. 103) to people. IPA aligns well with inquiries into spiritual matters, which can be challenging to examine using more rigid methods. While the researcher’s interpretation is appreciated and seen as unavoidable at every stage, IPA commits to grounding these interpretations in the participants’ accounts (Larkin & Thompson, 2011).

Although the quantitative literature has described types and impacts of spiritual struggle through survey data, this body of literature did not resonate with my hunger to dive deeply into the lived experience of SD. Additionally, while I value deconstructing the societal discourses and power structures wrapped up in evangelicalism, I sought a method that looked at the soul and essence of the experience, rather than analyzing its sociological skeleton. Methods grounded in post-structuralism, such as discourse analysis (Johnstone, 2017), would be more suitable for this deconstructive purpose.

My own spiritual distress experiences have been murky, isolating waters, and I craved a methodology that honored this existential bewilderment. Narrative inquiry was another possible methodological choice for this intention, but I remained drawn to exploring the phenomenon of SD, as opposed to the stories that wove through this lived experience (Clandinin, 2007). I hope that the findings of this project will resonate for readers with spiritual distress experiences, and for practitioners seeking a glimpse into the lived world of this under-discussed experience. Consequently, I wanted to pursue a method that recounted in rich detail the inner world of spiritual distress. IPA’s respect for individual
lived experience, appreciation for human agency, and awareness of researchers’ undeniable subjective involvement in their projects struck a chord. Phenomenological methods are valuable when exploring topics that impact the researcher, as this intimacy with the topic offers a window into the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). My own experience with the phenomenon may also provide the closeness that researchers hope to gain in qualitative research, while offering a sense of familiarity for the participants, as I have walked a similar path (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

**Practicing Phenomenology as a Helper**

Encountering scholar/therapist Finlay offered me a further moment of connection with IPA’s hermeneutic phenomenological approach. Finlay’s 2011 work *Phenomenology for Therapists* outlines the skills, that at our best, helping professionals might bring to phenomenological research: we are often practiced in using an authentic, engaged presence, we are accustomed to self-awareness and reflexivity, we value stories and the power of witnessing, we utilize our bodily, emotional felt-senses to generate insights in ourselves and clients, and we can tolerate discomfort and unknowns in relational settings, among other overlaps.

Finlay (2011) reminds us that in research, as in social work practice we may not invoke massive transformations, but we can convey something of significance by merely witnessing and validating our participants’ and clients’ stories. This awareness was encouraging for me, as at times I have fallen prey to the common practitioner judgment that research is all too distant, disconnected, and somehow ‘out there’, even as I was wading through this thesis! Direct practice seemed to be the truest site for personal growth, relational connection, and professional development. Diving into this phenomenological research project has demonstrated the value in dwelling with meanings and cultivating deeper curiosity and openness towards what individuals bring forward.
These factors discussed above, as well as IPA’s helpful structure for novices led me to choose this method. I now continue with an exploration of IPA’s theoretical touchstones, beginning with its foundation—phenomenology.

**IPA Touchstone 1: Phenomenology**

Contemporary phenomenological methods often fall within two streams: the descriptive or the hermeneutic (Finlay, 2011). While descriptive phenomenology seeks to distill and describe a phenomenon and reduce the influence of researcher bias, hermeneutic phenomenology incorporates the inherent role of human interpretation, as well as social influence, in exploring the phenomenon (van Manen, 2016). IPA was birthed within the hermeneutic phenomenological school of thinking and claims hermeneutic philosophy (discussed later) as one of its three theoretical touchstones (Smith et al., 2009; Finlay, 2011).

Although phenomenology emerged as an existential philosophical stream with philosopher Husserl’s work (1859-1938) in more recent decades it has been taken up as a research methodology in numerous forms (Finlay, 2008). These methods include hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry (van Manen, 2016) transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) and embodied inquiry (Todres, 2007). Methodologies underpinned by phenomenology, such as IPA, aim to explore the “essence” of an experience (Jacobs, 2008, p. 90). Phenomenology differs from qualitative methods that explore discourses, concepts, or texts, and instead focuses on the meaning of the experience as it is lived (van Manen, 2016). This perspective acknowledges the embodied and “textured” (Boden et al., 2019, p. 223) nature of our engagement with the world within its social layers (Smith et al., 2009). It seeks to plumb descriptive richness and paradoxes, drawing on the stories, images, metaphors, emotions and felt sensations associated with the lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Phenomenology seeks to describe a phenomenon as it is lived, without imposition of external theory, pre-suppositions, or explanation, and
with diligent attention to the researcher’s influence on the research endeavour (Finlay, 2011). Ultimately, it is about asking “what is this experience like for you?” (van Manen, 2016).

A key element of phenomenological research is a phenomenological attitude. This attitude views the phenomenon with curiosity, openness, and a willingness to see things freshly, or with a “disciplined naivete” (Finlay, 2011, p. 23). This approach challenges our desire to overlay prior theories onto the phenomenon, and instead, to co-create a space with the participant and throughout analysis and writing for the phenomenon to be voiced, witnessed, and encountered anew. While the researcher’s perspective informs the process, the intention is to allow one’s perspective to lie fallow during the interviews as much as possible. The phenomenological attitude requires critical self-reflexivity of one’s own biases, and willingness to openly explore these in the research process by “bracketing” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 13) or setting aside the researcher’s perspectives. This is not to say that the researcher can cut out their own viewpoints from the final presentation of the phenomenon. Instead, as affirmed by interpretivist underpinnings, the researcher’s interpretation is both unavoidable and welcomed. The researcher’s aim, then, is to explore their assumptions and interpretations while staying open to moments where the phenomenon discloses an element of itself freshly (Finlay, 2011).

**Phenomenology and Embodiment**

IPA, like other phenomenological methods, requires researchers to move beyond paraphrasing or describing participant’s words—rather, we need to attend to the intuitive, bodily meanings, or “felt senses” (Gendlin, 1996 in Finlay, 2014, p. 6) that arise for the participant and the researcher. Merleau Ponty, a key phenomenologist and influencer of IPA, as cited in Finlay (2014), argued that “the whole body is engaged in the world” (p. 6); it is our primary source of understanding and relating within ourselves and the world. Embodied awareness includes attention to sensory, emotional, and intuitive
experiences as they arise in the body (Finlay, 2014). In addition, our bodies and the world, or our context, are interconnected. We are part of the world, and it is part of us (Finlay, 2011).

Throughout the research process, I aimed to draw out intuitive, sensory, and bodily experiences as well as direct verbal content, further encouraged by IPA’s holistic, phenomenological approach to a participant’s world (Smith et al., 2009). For instance, throughout the interview, I inquired about participants’ inner felt experience of their descriptions, including possible images, metaphors, or physical sensations that were arising for them. I noted body language and tone to the best of my ability, despite limitations imposed by online interviewing. I also noted my own emotional experiences and the potential interpersonal connection between researcher and participant and considered these aspects in the analysis.

IPA Touchstone 2: Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is the study of interpretation. This touchstone posits that humans are meaning-making creatures, and we are constantly interpreting and making sense of our experiences. While hermeneutics is its own historically distinct school of philosophy from phenomenology, the two did eventually collide to form hermeneutic phenomenology through Husserl’s work (1936/1970). IPA’s originator, Smith (2009), noted that the method is consistent with an interpretivist research approach, as hermeneutic commitments acknowledge the socially situated and contextually-influenced nature of participants’ meaning-making endeavours.

IPA describes a double hermeneutic, which acknowledges that both the participant and the researcher are making meaning of what is shared (Eatough & Smith, 2008). Researcher-participant intersubjectivity is respected, and the contexts, lenses, and interpretations of all people involved are explicitly understood to be inherently woven into the findings (Finlay, 2011). Acknowledging the importance and inherency of subjective interpretation, Smith et al. (2009) actively encouraged IPA
researchers to engage deeply and relationally with research participants, more so than concerning oneself with bracketing one’s perspectives from the encounter. Still, to be reflexive in the interpretative process requires awareness of the influence of one’s positionality, a feature resonant with interpretivism.

A key element of hermeneutic phenomenology, including IPA, is the hermeneutic circle, a never-ending interpretation process wherein the researcher dwells with their interpretations and assumptions, challenges these, encounters fresh meanings, dwells further—and on and on around the circle towards a deeper understanding (Smith et al., 2009). Still, there is always more unsaid than what is said, and unknowns will always remain (Todres, 2007). Ultimately, the research findings will always be woven through the participant and researcher’s lenses and can only offer a “partial and provisional” (Finlay, 2011, p. 195) glimpse into the phenomenon.

My own lived experience of spiritual distress as a woman from an evangelical background was recognized to have an influence on my interpretation of the data. Although I no longer align with EC, I have insight into this subculture. While understanding EC subculture may benefit me in relating to and making sense of participants’ worlds, it can also result in undue assumptions. Given these identity facets, reflexivity through the hermeneutic circle, as required in IPA, has been essential.

**IPA Touchstone 3: Idiography**

IPA’s idiographic approach differentiates it from other models of hermeneutic phenomenological research (Finlay, 2011). Idiography is the study of “the particular”, (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29) as opposed to the general. Phenomena are explored in a particular context from the view of a particular population, and consequently, participants are purposively selected. This approach allows for in-depth, detailed analysis of lived experiences in the chosen context. Zooming in slowly and diligently into one person’s subjective experience is important. Following close interpretation of each person’s account, themes can then be explored across individuals, but this cross-case analysis can only occur once each participant’s
narrative has been given due exploration on its own terms. Further, idiography challenges generalization and reductionism and allows for an intersectional appreciation of each individual’s story (Danso, 2015). I was particularly drawn to this idiographic angle, partially due to its novelty for me as a novice researcher who originally assumed that research findings had to be vast and general. The idiographic approach honors the specific in a similar spirit to social work, which, at its best, aims to witness, validate, and illuminate the inherent dignity and humanity of each unique individual. I value this idiographic sensibility and imagine that researchers in the helping professions will find resonance in its contribution.

**PART II: Methodological Process**

**Recruitment and Eligibility Criteria**

Participants were recruited using snowball sampling through my contacts from the EC community in Western Canada (Creswell & Poth, 2016). Snowball sampling identifies potential participants by passing recruitment information through a chain of people who can identify “information rich” (Creswell & Poth, 2016, p. 159) participants. My contacts from the EC community were provided with a package including a letter of invitation and recruitment poster (Appendix A), which they offered to potential participants. My sampling followed guidelines suggested by Smith et al. (2009) for IPA: purposive, criterion sampling was utilized, a process which Creswell and Poth (2016) note intentionally seeks participants who meet certain criteria relevant to the phenomenon of interest. Following Smith’s (2009) recommendation for novice researchers, I interviewed a total of four individuals for the study.

For eligibility, participants met the following criteria:

- Confirmed that we have not shared a social circle and/or do not have a pre-existing relationship
- Confirmed that they were willing to share and reflect on their personal experience of SD and its impact on their mental health.
• Confirmed that it has been a minimum of 6-months since any acute mental health distress, including active suicidal or homicidal ideation. Drauker et al. (2009) note that research participants who have reported experiencing harm due to study involvement are most often those who were in acute distress at the time of the study.
• Self-identify as having experienced SD related to EC.
• Self-identify as a woman.
• Have an EC background, regardless of their current religious or spiritual identification.
• Were informed by EC subculture in Western Canada.
• Between the ages of 25-40.
• Able to participate in an online 60–90-minute interview.

**Screening Call and Informed Consent**

Individuals who were interested in participating in an interview contacted me via email or telephone to schedule a screening call. During the screening call, we reviewed the informed consent and the study information, including risks, benefits, confidentiality, last chance for withdrawal and possibilities for knowledge dissemination. We also discussed their eligibility for the study and explored any questions or curiosities. The last opportunity for withdrawal was two weeks following their transcript review, as participants were provided with a transcript and the opportunity to remove any content from their transcript following their interview. This provided participants with the ability to withdraw content fully before the data analysis, as extracting their data post-analysis was not possible.

Once individuals were informed about the study and had their questions answered, I requested that they reflect on our conversation and provide a signed written consent form via email if they chose to participate. If they had any further questions, they were encouraged to email or phone me for clarification.
Data Collection

Following research ethics board approval and informed consent procedures, individuals participated in a 60–90-minute semi-structured, recorded interview via Zoom. The video call included demographic questions, including gender identity, age, ethnicity, educational level, years affiliated with EC, and current religious or spiritual identification (if applicable). Following the interview, I encouraged participants to be aware of any further reflections that emerged in the coming days, and to be aware of possible latent emotional responses and the importance of self-care. All participants received a list of online support resources they could access if need be.

During the interview, I used the interview schedule (Appendix D) as a guide, but I followed the participant’s lead as the conversation evolved and utilized probing questions to elicit elaboration. The interview schedule was provided to participants prior to their screening call. Several participants took time prior to the interview to review the questions and journal potential responses, although this was not a requirement. Participants selected their own pseudonyms for the study.

As discussed, I collected my own inner and embodied experience during the research process through journaling and audio recordings through my phone. For instance, following each interview I would take time to free-write about the interview, including the thoughts, emotions, and sensations I was experiencing throughout and in the moment. In following days, when I found myself reflecting on aspects of the interview, I would aim to pause and consider the bodily experience of this reflection. This reflective process allowed latent responses to be witnessed, acknowledge, addressed, and considered in the analysis.

Data Analysis

Smith et al. (2009) delineated clear instructions for IPA data analysis, encouraging researchers to remain immersed in the transcript, and to stay close to the lived world described by the participant. It is
important to maintain the interpretative goal, which differentiates the process from thematic analysis (Smith et al., 2009). Smith and Nizza (2021) have recently published a text outlining several new terms in the analysis process. What were once “emergent themes” are now titled “experiential statements”, and a cluster of experiential statements form a personal experiential theme (PET) (Smith & Nizza, 2021).

I followed these IPA steps, which are discussed in further detail below (Smith et al., 2009):

- reading and re-reading the transcript
- free-writing my thoughts and biases line-by-line on the transcript (Larkin & Thompson, 2011)
- initial exploratory coding and noting
- developing experiential statements
- searching for connections across experiential statements
- developing personal experiential themes (PETs)
- repeating the above with the next case
- making connections across cases

After each interview, I read through each transcript in depth and discussed them with my supervisors. I followed Larkin and Thompson’s (2011) guidelines for freewriting one’s biases and assumptions about the interview at the start of exploratory coding. This activity increased my reflexivity about the interview and highlighted subconscious biases that could impact subsequent coding. For instance, while freewriting on a transcript, I noted how I was comparing my own experience with SD with the participant’s, seeking either places of connection or differentiation. Recognizing this allowed me to reflect on my propensity to compare my experiences with others and returned me to the
commitment to the phenomenological attitude.

Initial exploratory coding included close attention to each comment and associated body language, and noting of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual reflections that arose through this process. Experiential statements were developed by gradually gathering patterns present in the initial line-by-line exploratory coding. For example, the experiential statement “existential struggle of living with suffering” in Anna’s interview was created by reflecting on the broader concept present in a section of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual coding. This included descriptive lines such as “disturbing to think that what is currently happening is all there is” and “recognizing that there is nothing else”, as well as the conceptual code “coming to terms with existential responsibility of being here.”

This was charted in a three-column document, like the one below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exploratory coding</th>
<th>Transcript text</th>
<th>Experiential Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three layers of line-by-line, numbered coding: Descriptive, linguistic and conceptual</td>
<td>Numbered transcript lines</td>
<td>Broader concepts as informed by the line-by-line coding in the left-most column</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More interpretative, speculative, and abstract ideas emerged as I dwelled with the participants’ words and themes were collapsed and clustered (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). This led to the development of personal experiential themes (PETs), (Smith & Nizza, 2021) a list of overarching themes for a single transcript. Throughout the analysis journey, I repeatedly returned to the transcript to re-immerse myself in the participant’s words. To aid the development of PETs, I also printed out each emergent theme and accompanying key quotations and used a large bulletin board to visually map
higher-order themes. Once I had tentatively completed a single transcript, I repeated the process with the other participants’ transcripts.

The final step was cross-case analysis. I once again used the bulletin board method to visually interpret the connections, tensions, and distinctions among the personal experiential themes of each participant. At times I had to step away from the analysis to allow ideas to sift and sinter, as I did not want to force the results. In keeping with the phenomenological attitude, it was important for the phenomenon to emerge organically from the data. This process resulted in a provisional map of key thematic findings.

Smith et al. (2009) asserted that analysis is an iterative process and continues as the researcher writes up the findings. Indeed, as I have written the results section, I have had the opportunity to iteratively refine my understandings of the phenomenon. Throughout writing, I tried to allow the phenomenon to continue rising, which resulted in some themes blooming in detail while others shrunk. For example, while the theme “Isolation and Loss: Lost at Sea” was once a sub-theme, it gradually formed into its own theme, which demonstrates my interpretative sense that isolation is a central and permeating piece of the women’s experience of SD. Smith et al. (2009) referred to this experience using the metaphor of the magnet – some themes attract greater discussion during the iterative analysis process.

Phenomenological writing aims to draw the reader into the lived experience of the participants through “evocative” (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 569), at-times poetic language choices. I have chosen to use metaphor and imagery throughout the findings section, as this can have a significant impact in sketching out the holistic experience of a phenomenon. I have also chosen to include my own reflections and embodied responses throughout the results, as IPA encourages researchers to implicate themselves within the work and honours the validity of subjective experience (Smith et al., 2009).
Disseminating the Results

This study will be found via University of Calgary’s online thesis database. I also plan to create and conduct workshops and a visual toolkit for service providers, university classrooms and churches. These resources will discuss the results with an emphasis on implications for service providers and clergy and will focus on the literature review, broad themes, and practice implications to further protect anonymity of participants. In addition, I will make efforts to present the findings in an engaging and accessible manner, such as presenting the findings on podcasts. I aim to communicate the results through conference presentations and published reports.

Trustworthiness

With regard to trustworthiness and reliability, I was informed by Yardley’s (2000) principles for assessing qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigor, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. Smith et al. (2009) chose to highlight Yardley’s criteria, although there are alternate modes of determining rigour in IPA (see for example, De Witt & Ploeg, 2006). Sensitivity to context was demonstrated in multiple ways, including sensitivity in the relational process of interviewing, as this contributed to meaningful data, and sensitivity to the social context of participants. Commitment and rigor required that I remained personally committed to thorough and thoughtful processes in coherence with IPA principles, and that steps in the research were undertaken diligently. Transparency and coherence refer to clarity of communication regarding the research stages within the written product. I have attempted to demonstrate this transparency within this chapter. Coherence also requires clear linkages with IPA “touchstones” (Yardley, 2000, p. 182) as opposed to those of other approaches. Finally, impact and importance consider whether readers can find resonance or use in the study. It is my hope that this essential factor will be achieved through this thesis and its future knowledge dissemination tools.
Summary

In this chapter I introduced this study’s methodology. I explored and rationalized the qualitative approach, interpretivism, transpersonal theory, and IPA, my chosen method. I described IPA’s key theoretical elements: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography. I then outlined the steps involved in undertaking this research, including recruitment, data collection, analysis, writing, and knowledge dissemination. In closing, I discussed the approach for assessing trustworthiness for this thesis.
Chapter Four: Findings

Participant Introductions

Over the course of my field work, which began in early 2022, I had the privilege of interviewing four women with EC backgrounds. I spent hours closely examining their interview transcripts, which slowly began to paint a glimmering and tender picture of complex, distinct, yet interconnected experiences of SD. I had the opportunity to drink in participants’ stories, paying them deep attention. This is a gift I do not treat lightly.

Acclaimed grounded theory researcher and social work scholar Brené Brown (2018) noted, “we all have a story that will break your heart. And if you really listen, we all have a story that will bring you to your knees” (para. 4). While I can only hope I have engaged this intention to really listen, it is undeniable that these women’s complex stories have sunk into my core.

I only caught a glimpse of the fullness and fluidity of these women’s lived worlds, tucked within the particular moments in history we shared. Who they are continues to evolve and shift far beyond any words contained here, but I hope that their words—and my subjective interpretations and co-construction of their words and meanings—resonate and connect across the spectrum of human experience.

The brief descriptions that follow explore each participants’ journey, with the aim of introducing the reader to their stories. More textured explorations of their reflections, with quotes from their interviews, are offered in the findings section. The following table (Table 1) provides a snapshot of several features of the four participants. I have attempted to provide information as expressed by participants. The participants self-identify as women and were all born into Christianity-practicing families. They were all influenced by EC settings in Western Canada.
Table 1: Demographic Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Eva</th>
<th>Gwen</th>
<th>Eliza</th>
<th>Anna</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age range</strong></td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>25-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ethnic identity</strong></td>
<td>“Mixed, but white passing”</td>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>“European mutt” and third-generation Canadian (white)</td>
<td>“Mennonite” (white)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Level of education</strong></td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree, some Masters</td>
<td>Bachelor’s, some Masters</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
<td>Bachelor’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Years affiliated with EC</strong></td>
<td>Approximately 20 years</td>
<td>Over 25 years</td>
<td>Continues intermittent affiliation since childhood</td>
<td>Approximately 20 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current religious or spiritual identity</strong></td>
<td>Agnostic / post-Christian</td>
<td>Christian mystic</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Agnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Although participants demonstrated hesitancy labelling themselves)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pronouns</strong></td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>She/her, They/them</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>She/her</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eva

Eva’s story is full of hard-won wisdom, and a deep, committed engagement to spiritual seeking and personal integrity. Speaking with her was absorbing, not only because she was vulnerable and articulate, but because of her “bullshit-detector-slash-prophet” energy—an apt and humorous term her partner bestowed on her, and with which I fully agree.

Eva was raised in a missionary family and lived in several countries throughout her life. Her family eventually settled in Western Canada. Her exposure to various cultures had a profound impact on her understanding of issues of power, privilege, and diversity in EC. These experiences threw into contrast her own intersecting identities, as she described herself as a “white-passing, mixed race” person, who was in some places afforded white privilege, and in others, burdened with racial profiling and bullying. Various geographic locations also altered her family’s socio-economic status, as in developing nations her missionary family had wealth, but in the Western Canadian suburb she spent much of her teens, she and her siblings were “the poor kids in the class.” Eva defines the EC subculture of her teens as the “wealthy, white church.” In this setting, many of her fellow congregants had vastly different experiences of race and class than her family. It was clear from the interview that questions of identity and belonging were prominent throughout Eva’s life.

Eva described her religious father as abusive, and her parents separated when she was an adolescent, a process which she described as leading to her late mother’s “re-emergence” from fundamentalist, patriarchal suppression. These wounds, and perhaps others unmentioned, influenced Eva’s experience of faith as a site of trauma.

While she was comfortable and committed to her EC worldview during her youth, as she entered adulthood, gradual questioning and sense-making led her to a “fringe” faith—still within the Christian realm, but more alternative and progressive. Her fringe faith was shattered by the devastating death of
her mother. This loss disintegrated Eva’s remaining faith structure, and the invalidating responses to her grief from the EC community further distanced her from the church.

Following her mother’s death, Eva explained that she has experienced more expansion in her worldview. She expressed that she needed “time and space” away from the church, and at the time of the interview, no longer attends church. She is also claiming her own boundaries and need for self-care as part of her ongoing self-authorship and emergence. Eva described her spiritual identification as shifting to “agnostic” or “post-Christian”. She has found new ways to engage with the spiritual realm with respect and dignity, an experience that allows space for clear-eyed critique of religion’s challenges and harms. With the passing of time, Eva has found a sense of increased safety when she enters Christian spaces, as she aims to approach her world with curiosity, humility, and non-judgment, while upholding her personal integrity and boundaries.

**Gwen**

Gwen’s SD journey is grounded in the beauty and pain of relationships, both with the divine and fellow humans. Their deep commitment to open, loving relationships, and their ongoing intimacy with Christ were evident in our conversation and left me with a sense of wonder and admiration. Their spirituality struck me, while evoking some sadness, reminding me of a spiritual intimacy I never felt I quite fulfilled within EC.

Gwen asserted that they were “bred” to be a missionary and climbed a sort of career ladder as a Christian leader. They later worked in a small Indigenous community, where they were actively involved in hosting visiting Christian groups and supporting local church activities. Deepening relationships with non-Christian people in the community, and exposure to Indigenous spiritual practices expanded Gwen’s worldview, and their questioning process unfolded. This expansion came with a sense of decreasing belonging in the EC world.
At one point in their expansion and questioning process, Gwen’s church banned them from praying with youth during youth group. The church was unsettled by Gwen’s shifting values. This was deeply wounding for Gwen, as it removed their ties to a valued spiritual activity and threw into question their role and potential future as a Christian leader.

A final “thread” was “snapped” as they put it, when they first had sex—which they had feared might tear their connection with God, the most important and intimate relationship in their life. In EC teaching, sex is reserved for heterosexual married couples. After Gwen’s sexual experience, they realized that no behaviour could separate them from God—because God was always with them. This realization furthered their exploration and expansion of their worldview, while painfully distancing them from their EC community’s belonging, resulting in alienation and loss of belonging. They struggled with judgment from those in their EC community, their family, and from themself, as they reflected on their own harmful actions within the EC worldview.

Gwen’s story is woven with keen awareness of EC’s role in colonization—so much so that they term it “Western colonial Christianity.” They find themself now committed to challenging the church’s colonizing approaches. While Gwen has struggled with the church’s colonial legacy, they remain connected to Christian communities and attend church periodically. Gwen is increasingly able to sink into genuine, agenda-free relationships with people without the burden of having to evangelize. There is a sense of growing ownership of their story, of their current values and beliefs, and a desire to move in deeper spiritual expansion, while resting in the uncertainty and unknowns.

**Eliza**

A central element for Eliza is her ongoing search for meaning, authenticity, and spiritual wisdom. She is deeply committed to continued growth and frames her journey as a “process” of deepening self-awareness, others-awareness, and God-awareness. Within this search is a resistance to
simplifications, labels, and containment, which may have been influenced by the lack of space for exploration within EC. She intentionally chose not to share all details and the full context of her spiritual distress story, staying instead in abstracted reflection. She demonstrated tender protectiveness over vulnerable stories, and a respect for their rich complexity—they are not to be relayed lightly or to be misconstrued. The embodied sense I felt from Eliza was a confident resistance to definition, in beautiful paradox with her expansive curiosity. Her musings are glittering with constant exploratory rhetorical questions and quotes from other seekers.

Eliza was raised in a family that was very involved in EC community and went to church several times a week. She described being the “good kid,” and later attended Bible college abroad. She also experienced complicated spiritual and/or psychological phenomena that Western science could not explain, and accompanying invalidation from others in this area, and throughout other struggles in her life. Eliza wrestled with God and drifted in and out of the institutionalized church.

She was chilled by an icy existential realization upon her return to Canada after one of her trips abroad: her life hadn’t become what she’d hoped. This inspiring wake-up call seemed to catalyze deep spiritual inquiry into past wounds and body memory, informed in part by an exploration of the chakra system and Eastern philosophy. My sense from Eliza’s unfolding description was that she underwent a spiritual emergency in subsequent years as her worldview drastically evolved and realizations flooded into her mind-body-spirit.

She continues an ongoing, and at-times painful process of integration and self-authorship, resisting containment, certainty, and over-simplifications, and leaning into curiosity, openness, and humility about her spiritual path. Eliza seems to honor the uncertainty and unknowns, and shares about experiences of redemption and grace from God throughout her convoluted and at-times challenging process.
Anna

Anna was full of warmth and quick wit, and she flawlessly integrated sarcastic Christian language into her reflections. Her curiosity about the world and other people’s realities seemed to have played a strong role in her shift from EC to agnosticism. She is a mother, and her husband is a racialized immigrant. Her engagement with her husband’s distinct cultural and spiritual values has informed her own cultural humility and deep appreciation for diverse ways of knowing. Anna noted that she continues to attend church partly because she wants her children to be exposed to the positive, moderate elements of the faith. And while she likes her fellow congregants and their faith expression, she explains that she no longer adheres to an EC belief system herself.

Anna had a strongly Christian upbringing. Her family of origin continues to uphold EC values and practices, and she chooses to conceal her own divergence from this path to protect her relationships, and to avoid proselytization. She shares about the fear, vigilance, and anxiety she felt growing up in EC – God was always watching. Her discomfort with EC’s certainty, arrogance and hypocrisy grew, and she began to feel herself drifting from the EC fold. She gradually painfully realized that she was no longer “in.”

She continues to wrestle with the beauty of the faith juxtaposed with distressing experiences and damaging messages. Within this tension, a perhaps necessary appreciation for the complex and the paradoxical emerges, and she names “floating” in a space of relative uncertainty and ambivalence. This is in sharp contrast to the simple existential certainties offered in her former EC worldview.

Anna experienced existential disorientation and alienation as her beliefs shifted, and she continues to lament the losses she suffered as she moved farther and farther from the “in” EC community. While Anna continues to struggle as she makes sense of this journey, she conveys that there
is a calm after the storm, with the healing balms of time, space, and honest friendships where she can share about her process.
Findings

Through in-depth virtual interviews that took place over Zoom, Eva, Anna, Eliza, and Gwen wove stories of their unique SD experiences. Their journeys involved an ongoing pull towards an inner compass of authenticity, values congruence, and self-emergence, even at the expense of social and existential comfort and security. This turbulent experience appeared to be in the service of building a more nourishing, expansive, and spacious spirituality that could contain the complexity of life and align with their integrity.

Although at the nascence of this project, I imagined focusing on the acute experience of SD, the conversations that unfolded were far more scoping and told a tumultuous story of drifting from one’s current worldview to a new spiritual landing place. Each participant seemed to draw a narrative arc through their process as they strived to make meaning, while acknowledging the shifting fluidity of their understandings. While the interview questions drew out experiences of SD, the interviews seemed to organically explore beyond acute situations to encompass a “spiritual distress journey.” The notion of a journey evokes a continued, non-linear process which reflects the reality of the women, who were experiencing ongoing transitions in their ways of knowing and being.

Shifts in religious worldview are often spoken of using terms such as “disaffiliation”, “deconversion”, “apostasy” or “losing faith.” I am hesitant to describe the women’s experiences with the above terms, given the considerable nuance in their spiritual experiences and evolving identities. In addition, this study began as an exploration into SD, not the process of faith transition, although the participants’ discussion of SD organically exposed a shift in worldview. To remain in alignment with participants, and to resist imposing one of the above contested definitions on their experiences, these results will utilize the term “SD journey.”
Anna, Gwen, Eliza, and Eva each describe SD journeys wrought with tensions and paradoxes that they have navigated, and continue to navigate, in their ongoing processes towards finding a spirituality more congruent with their values. This sense of tension is unsettling and tiresome, as the women both desired to stretch beyond EC containment while lamenting the loneliness and loss of EC belonging. While emerging into a new existential realm brings greater space to breathe and explore one’s authentic values, particularly surrounding openness and curiosity, it also appears to bring uncertainty, unsettledness, and losses.

The participants each followed a trajectory that aligns with the metaphor of the ocean. Quotation marks within the theme titles indicate words or phrases expressed by participants, and italicized text also indicates participants’ words. The visual model on the following page displays this thesis’ depiction of SD journeys using the ocean-themed metaphor. The four “phases” track the non-linear, unfinished process of the SD journey, which begins on the “shoreline.” Two themes flow throughout as undercurrents within each phase of the SD journey, depicted at the top and bottom of the model.
Figure 1: Pulled from the Shoreline Model
Model illustrated by Jill Linde
Phase 1: Living on the Shoreline: Participants began their journeys on the sheltered, familiar shoreline of EC. Each woman was raised in an EC community and was once deeply immersed and committed to the EC worldview and way of life. The EC worldview emphasizes abiding by Biblical authority, evangelizing to others, repentance of sins and acceptance of Jesus for eternal salvation, and the importance of Jesus’ death for atonement for sin (Bebbington, 2003). EC upholds conservative, patriarchal moral values around gender and sexuality, and is increasingly critiqued as a subculture intertwined with whiteness and racism (Butler, 2021). On the shoreline EC community is found, and EC patriarchal doctrine and norms are upheld. This phase is not elaborated upon in this chapter, as it was not a key focus of participants’ expressions. It is included in the model to demonstrate the launching point where participants once dwelled.

The following, rather, are expounded upon in this chapter section:

Undercurrent One: Opposing Tides: Experiencing Tensions in the SD Journey: this theme emphasizes an embodied felt-sense the participants expressed as they shared their SD journeys. It is woven throughout the flow of their journey and seems to be both a defining characteristic and catalyst of SD.

Undercurrent Two: Isolation and Loss: Lost at Sea: the entirety of participants’ SD journeys were marked by loneliness and losses. There is a sense that you must figure things out alone, while community and belonging lie across the waves upon the shore in the familiarity of EC traditions, which were no longer wholly viable for the four women.

Phase Two: Pulled from the Shoreline and Drawn Out to Sea: Each participant began to struggle with the containment and rigidity of the EC worldview, and found themselves pulled to a more expansive, authentic way of being in deeper alignment with their values. They stretched out of the dissonance of living within a structure that posed increasing challenges to their authenticity.
This pull often included a questioning period, where the once taken-for-granted ideas and values of EC were questioned, and new realizations flooded in to take their place. The pull is in tension with the draw to stay connected and secure in one’s EC worldview and community.

**Phase Three: Navigating the Storm:** Each participant described internal struggles and deep psycho-spiritual pain as they were pulled from a familiar worldview and community into a space of questioning and uncertainty. In the metaphor of the ocean, this is the storm, the acute experience of distress that tosses and disorients.

**Phase Four: “Floating”: Unfinished, Expanding Process:** Participants are gradually making sense of SD experiences as part of an ongoing evolution, process, and learning journey that shifts with time and space, and as part of a rebuilding/cultivation of a nourishing spiritual life that leaves space for questioning and doubt. This process remains unfinished and will look different for each person.

**Undercurrent One: Opposing Tides: Experiencing Tensions in the SD Journey**

Each of the women described a push-and-pull of opposing tides. There was a felt struggle between the familiarity of EC and the wounds it brings, and between an intuitive draw towards inner authenticity at the expense of reliable belonging in EC community. For instance, Eliza, a lover of language, noted the etymology of “distress”: from the Latin – “distingere”, translated as “to stretch apart” (Oxford Languages, n.d.A). This stretching image feels apt for the multitude of tensions the women navigated.

The sense of opposing tides, tension, and paradox is woven throughout each of the four phases, further emphasizing the complex, non-categorical journey of SD. In this section, I illustrate two interwoven areas of tension in the women’s experiences: firstly, the complexity of spiritual identification, and secondly, the dissonance between a “warm” but harming faith.
“If I Had to Pick a Label”: Spiritual Identity

The trajectory from the shoreline to the vastness of the ocean and its storms, to a “floating” space (as Anna describes it) might be described as a disaffiliation from one’s prior EC worldview. Still, it is not entirely fair to say that the participants disaffiliated from, “left” EC, or “lost” their faith, and then moved on to a new identity. Rather, each participant resisted a containing label for their evolving spiritual identity. Instead, each participant found themselves in a spiritual place decidedly different from where they began on the shoreline, while still tethered to their origins in some way. The interviews revealed that spiritual identities resist binary terms and are experienced as complex and somewhat ineffable.

When I asked about her current day spiritual identity, Eva found selecting a label challenging: “I think if I had to pick a label and I don't, I’m not 100% comfortable with this label, but it's the best one I have, it's agnostic.” Later in her interview, she refined this response, choosing instead, “Agnostic slash post-Christian.”

Another participant, Anna, also shifted from an EC identification to agnosticism sharing that, “I say agnostic because the words “I don't know” feel very resonant, they resonate with me, more than anything else.”

Like Eva, Gwen felt resistant to a single label, but she diverged by maintaining “Christian” in her chosen identification, expressing, “If I were to put a label on it, I would call myself a Christian mystic.”

And Eliza, like Gwen, utilized the term “Christian” (“if I had to check a box”), but she was clear about the slipperiness and complexity of a spiritual identification. She chose instead to challenge the notion of a fixed spiritual or religious identity, and emphasized:
I don't necessarily know if we're supposed to have a religious or spiritual identity, or is that again as separate from our own kind of identity as who we are, as opposed to...I am who I am, and my spiritual identity is wrapped up in how I view the rest of my identity.

Although each of the women certainly have undergone a shift from conventional EC identification, they demonstrated discomfort with the potential containment of a new spiritual label. There was nuance in their identifications. Their responses suggested that they resisted being constricted, labelled, or simplified, just as the ocean cannot be wholly known.

“Warmth” Juxtaposed with Harm

A further key tension mentioned by each of the women was the beauty and “warmth,” as Eliza put it, of the Christian faith, juxtaposed with distressing experiences, damaging messages, and systemic injustices.

For Anna, this wrestling brought not only uneasiness and uncertainty about how to raise her children, but also carried a sense of lament and loss. Hearing Anna share about this was moving and saddening:

[EC] is quite fun actually, man, yeah, I guess that's it. Like, everything in me wants my kids to experience exactly what I did growing up, though, because it was so much fun. But the theological messages that sink into your little heart are just so damaging that you're just like, how do you get like a nice...it's such a kind experience with so many beautiful people and wonderful mentors without the horrific and damaging spiritual messaging.

Like Anna, Gwen felt conflicted about her experience in EC. They were grateful that Christianity “gave me a spiritual life, like introduced me to spirituality or introduced me to a relationship with God”, while acknowledging that “it’s done me a lot of harm.”
They shared in Anna’s lament, acknowledging that “*sometimes I wish I could, like, I mean not really, but I wish I could have that same kind of peace and stability I used to have...*”

In their words, “*I mean not really,*” there is sense that Gwen is lamenting a sense of peace that their former worldview offered, but they remain unsettled about this desire. The SD journey is imbued with these opposing and conflicting desires.

Eva described her experience in the opposing tides, sharing a strong sense of embodied dissonance regarding her connection to her faith, and her pull towards other conflicting areas:

*You want to be authentic, but you want to care for people, but you want to fight for justice, but you want to honor tradition and all of those things are in conflict with each other. And then you want to do it with other people, but you feel like you have to do it alone and...It just keeps going.*

As I dwelled with Eva, Anna, Eliza, and Gwen’s transcripts, the push-pull of the opposing tides became more and more evident as a key feature of the SD journey. Just as swimming in an ocean of forceful, twisting tides is tiring, unpredictable, and frightening, the women’s narratives illuminated the burdensome nature of living in the push-pull. And yet, once they had navigated these opposing tides for some time, it appeared that they were resistant to simple answers or labels, choosing instead to continue swimming in the paradox of the ineffable.

**Undercurrent Two: Isolation and Loss: Lost at Sea**

“...you've fallen off the spiritual boat.

_No one's coming to get you_

_And then you're sinking to the bottom.*”

~ Anna
Loneliness and loss pervade and permeate the SD experience. Originally, this section was nested under the “Phase Three: Navigating the Storm”, which explores the acute pain of the SD journey. But as I continued the iterative writing process, this section bloomed into its own theme, and showed itself to be present throughout each phase, rippling below the surface. Loneliness and loss felt central to the painful nature of spiritual stretching and shifting.

Participants asserted that the taboo nature of SD, especially in EC spaces, posed challenges in sharing about this struggle. As such, receiving the much-needed relational support required to traverse the uncertain journey could be challenging. For instance, Gwen’s vibrant EC community was once a key site of relational support for life’s challenges. As they drifted from the shoreline and farther from traditional EC circles, they continued to face a sense of loss and loneliness:

*And that’s one thing that I miss is, in my life now, is meeting regularly with people and talking to them about like, my life in an honest way and getting supported by them, so that’s something I definitely haven’t really found yet outside of church and yeah, and so I think now, like, coming out of that, it’s like, “yeah where do I, how do I get like, support.”*

Anna also felt this sense of loss, which appeared to be interwoven with the loneliness that came from dwindling belonging to the shoreline. Throughout her interview, she used the language of “in” or “out” to describe one’s binary status of belonging—or not—to the EC circle: “That’s I feel like, that’s the depth of faith distress is the loss of community. Because, like, that’s the juice of evangelical Christianity, is being “in.”

Anna experienced this as a shift from a “beautiful and connective place” to “loneliness and darkness.” She said, “...maybe [drifting from EC faith] felt a little bit more like drowning. Like you’ve fallen off the spiritual boat. No one’s coming to get you and then you’re sinking to the bottom.”
With the loneliness came a longing for the shoreline, its light and connectivity, its fun and passion:

_That’s the problem, is like it’s [EC] so much fun and it’s so amazing that you like, when you lose it there’s nothing else like it. There’s no…there’s nothing that you enjoy…there’s no place to go to be with people, with stirring experiences, like, that give you the emotional high of evangelical worship…it’s all gone._

As the light of the shoreline faded, the realization that they were alone in the ocean surged upon the women, an experience both existentially overwhelming, exhausting, and sad.

While Gwen articulated that God stayed with them in the ocean, as will be explored in Phase Three, Anna struggled to maintain this anchor, and instead felt abandoned at sea, alone:

_...when you’re with God, God’s gonna take care of things. But when you’re all by yourself, you’re like, you’re it. Gotta start to take things on and be alone and manage situations and it’s just exhausting, it’s tiring to just manage life alone. It’s sad._

Participants pointed out the challenges in sharing about their distress, despite the need for connection on the isolating seas. Eva noted how she did not want to express her concerns with EC mentors and friends, not only because they might judge her, but also to protect them from potential distress: “_If they find out that you’re not [a Christian or maybe not a Christian] they get very worried on your behalf, and that is like, another burden to carry almost._”

Self-silencing in a time of great need for relational support furthered a sense of deep alienation. During the interviews, several participants chose to tell their stories using the pronoun “you” more so than “I”. For instance, Anna describes the isolation of losing her connection to divine safety, expressing, “_You’re on your own._” This pronoun choice was evident throughout Anna and Eliza’s interviews, while
Gwen and Eva more readily employed “I” language. I am curious if this “you” pronoun provides some distance from one’s narrative, or some protection for the storyteller. Participants may not have been practiced in sharing these vulnerable experiences, and creating some distance between “I” and the narrative allowed them to tread gently through these oft-hidden waterways.

Keeping their SD hidden could also offer safety to participants. If they did share about their distress and/or departure from the EC shoreline, their relationships could experience tension, and they risked becoming the object of proselytization projects. Anna and Eva spoke about withholding their faith shift from loved ones, while Gwen spoke about distress and judgment from family members once they revealed their shift.

Eliza also affirmed the isolating nature of the SD journey, lamenting EC’s lack of space for existential questions and uncomfortable realities. She did not feel welcome to express her concerns with others in EC. Instead, “it was something you had to figure out for yourself.”

In addition, during our conversation, Eliza chose to “omit details” and shared her experience through a more abstracted narrative. While Eliza only knows the full significance of this choice, as I shared space with her, and in this iterative analysis process, I have wondered if her choice to hold her story close speaks to the often taboo and unspoken nature of SD. As we spoke, she pointed out, “Oh, this is so weird, like...No one ever talks about this stuff.”

SD was experienced as a taboo and unwelcome topic. And Anna expressed that mental health providers are not always safe people with whom to break one’s silence. She voiced her concerns about seeking counselling, noting that in EC circles, Christian counselling is advised. Christian counselling, or counselling with someone who one guesses might be a Christian, could pose a risk of further containment, distress, and oppression. Anna named her fear: “How do I find [a counselor] who is faith accepting without trying to proselytize me into some version of faith?” She also demonstrated concern
for the counsellor’s comfort with SD, noting, “I haven’t talked to a counselor about it because most counselors are kind of horrified to talk about it. Well, I get that sense.” In addition, Anna commented that she would not want to upset a counselor who may be quietly dealing with their own SD by disclosing her own struggles.

Due to this hesitancy and fears of disclosure, I remain grateful to the participants for offering me their stories, knowing full well the hidden nature of SD, and the vulnerability of revealing its wounds. Eva, Anna, Gwen, and Eliza paint SD journeys marked by a sense of isolation, relational losses, and loneliness.

**Phase Two: Pulled from the Shoreline and Drawn Out to Sea**

The participants described an ongoing pull towards values congruence in the midst of the constraints of their EC subculture and worldview. They experienced a sense of dissonance within the structure of EC, a structure that gradually became too restrictive. In the following section, I firstly explore the experience of containment and limitation the women described, and the pull towards expansion and spaciousness that drew them from the shoreline to the unknowns of the ocean. Secondly, I consider a key constraining factor that each participant emphasized: EC’s complicity in systems of dominance and oppression.

**Experiencing Containment in EC: “There Wasn’t Room”:**

When I stumbled upon this quote from Barbara Brown Taylor, shared in a podcast (Bessey & Chu, 2022), I sensed a similar energy as described by participants: “I’m thinking about how tired a tame Christian can get. Tired of self-censoring, tired of swallowing the questions that matter most, tired of putting more energy into being good than being alive.”
The quote expresses an energy of containment, restriction, and limitation, permeated with a fatigue that comes from wrestling with the dissonance of opposing tides. For Gwen, the containment of EC felt limiting to the growth she was yearning for:

-But I realized, when I look back on that and I just felt like, there wasn’t room for fluidity and there wasn’t room for growth and change and to accept other beliefs or to accept other ways and forms of worship and connecting to God and it was always very, yeah, uniform way of knowing God.

Gwen’s deeply relational approach to spirituality was evidenced, as they appeared to desire a more expansive way of knowing and connecting to God. They felt there was not room for their evolving beliefs nor for the potential multitude ways of “connecting” with God.

Similar to Gwen’s struggle with containment, Eva emphasized EC’s preoccupation with rigid certainty, and her own pull towards uncertainty:

-I think there’s something about, like, certainty versus uncertainty that is really at the core for me, so, growing up in a faith tradition that was very certain about a lot of things and certain about a lot of things that aren’t really verifiable or that aren’t actually knowable.

In EC settings, the participants were presented with a binary, either-or understanding of the world, but nuance seeped in and complicated this structure, pulling them beyond. They did not have a framework beyond the binary options provided, which left them puzzled and alienated as they drifted past its restricting but familiar constraints. The struggle with containment is juxtaposed with participants’ pull towards a more expansive perspective in deeper congruence with their emerging values and authenticity.
Anna wrestled with “the impulse to get rid of” she encountered in her EC communities, an impulse that challenged her own desire to “inquire about, discover…” She felt an embodied pressure from EC forces, compressing, constricting, and “squashing” perspectives that challenged EC understandings: “Like, what’s happening inside you is just evil and it just needs to be like, I don’t know, like squashed.”

As Anna was pulled from the shoreline, she encountered a more expansive perspective of God, which challenged her prior image of the divine. She recounted her thinking at the time: “God is this like small thing and there’s a certain group of people within it. My God is too small to be able to fit into that [alternative perspective].”

For Eva, her experience of suppression in EC found some balm through her late mother, who while still within the EC structure, “just had a lot of room for people to be whatever they were.” Eva shared, “And even if she didn’t maybe understand every aspect of it [her children’s lives], she stood up for all of us, she looked for ways to let everybody just be comfortable in their own skin.”

The tightness of living in a space with “no room” was a key component of SD identified by the women. Consequently, there was something resonant about the spaciousness Eva’s mother offered. As she shared about this experience, I felt an opening in my own heart-space, connecting with the expansion of this piece of her story. The women’s experiences demonstrates that while the pull from the shoreline is riddled with tensions and loss, it is a necessary experience, as it allowed them to enter the vastness of the sea, where there is more room to ponder, and move into greater fullness.

**Pushing Against EC Containment: Confronting Racism, Colonialism, and Sexism**

A key area that both catalyzed distress and drew the women closer to their values was in confronting evangelicalism’s complicity in systems of dominance and oppression. This complicity lay in increasingly distressing contrast to their pull towards value congruence and spacious perspectives. The
dissonance they confronted appeared to be an important factor in their pull to the ocean, where they could explore their evolving values. I was struck by each of the participants’ articulate and nuanced examinations of the impact of sexism, racism, and colonialism in EC spaces and practices. Naming these systemic forces may be a meaningful way for participants to place themselves in a socio-cultural context and make sense of the wounding they experienced in EC.

Eliza described a distressing experience while in Bible school abroad, where EC authorities misused their power:

...people used their position in the church or in religion to judge, or to interpret...because they were that authority, there was no, you weren’t allowed to question, you weren’t supposed to question...there was no...it’s just what it was. This “I’m closer to God, I have that hand and you don’t know anything...you just sit down, shut up and look pretty.”

Eliza acknowledged a gendered component in her “shut up and look pretty” comment. She was aware of the impact of patriarchal authority in EC. This authority was experienced in an embodied way, requiring her to “sit down”, to make herself smaller, “shut up”, to make herself compliant, and “look pretty”, to make herself pleasant.

Eva also confronted the constriction of patriarchal EC norms. She found herself submerging her dream to be a pastor in response to EC doctrine limiting women’s church leadership.

She wonders, with a tone of righteous indignation, “why are all these limitations placed on the things that I’m interested in doing? Like, what if I’m really good at it. You’re never going to find out because you’re not willing to open that door.”

For Anna, witnessing her church overlook the realities of systemic racism resulted in a ripple effect of anger and distrust towards EC. She began to see an authoritative version of God mirrored in
dominating systems. One of Anna’s loved ones, a person of color, underwent a traumatic racist experience. In response to this event, Anna reflected,

...if God looks so intimately like the systems that are destroying people, then I’m not very interested in my relationship with that...particularly...and that it flows into your church environment, so no one in our church knew that this [situation] was happening, nor did they really care. And they were really...but they wanted to fix their lights and make their congregation shine brighter physically, and like, you’re just like, what kind of bullshit is this?

Within this stark example, Anna confronted the inadequacy of her church community to respond to “real problems that are happening in people’s lives”, which was in increasingly sharp contrast to her own values.

She shared another experience that evidenced the certainty and accompanying arrogance she experienced within EC. Anna witnessed an exorcism performed by white evangelicals upon a black woman with mental illness, which she now reflects on as a dangerous and disturbing event. This troubling experience was intertwined with white saviorism and racism.

What are we talking about, we all know more about [the woman’s] experience than she does? We’re not going to explore, maybe why this came to be? We’re not going to offer this person like, mental health assistance from professionals? And well, and then there’s another layer of like, of course, the black woman was evil, you know what I mean? [Sarcastic tone] Like, all the black people are bringing in all the mental health and the demons.

Anna expressed how nuanced and socio-culturally complex human experiences can be simplified and limited by the imposition of spiritual explanations. The struggles of a woman with mental illness were spiritually explained to fit within an EC framework, a framework that implicates demonic influence.
With the imposition of this overlay, the socio-cultural forces of mental health stigma, white saviorism, and vilification of black bodies were obscured. For Anna, this erasure of complexity was a display of arrogance and certainty, grating against her values of curiosity and openness. She recognized that the shoreline was inhospitable to many people, and this exclusion, certainty, and arrogance were painfully incongruent to how she wanted to be in the world.

Like Anna, Gwen struggled with certainty and exclusion in what they called “colonial Christianity.” Although they were once passionate about sharing Jesus with others, they began to experience tensions in this practice as they grew in appreciation for the diversity of worldviews of non-Christian people. This was evidenced in an Indigenous community where they lived, and which received many evangelical mission trips from predominantly white church members.

They wrestled with the limited, containing image of God that their EC world offered, wondering instead, “why can’t we see that God has already existed here and has already been working here before you [missionaries] arrived?”

Growing awareness of the harms of colonial Christianity furthered an unraveling of Gwen’s EC beliefs, but also brought with it a self-reckoning poetically similar, yet vastly opposite, from the New Testament’s Apostle Paul:

I had the opposite experience of Paul, who was this person who persecuted Christians and then he, like, you know, became a Christian and changed and wrote all these books in the Bible. I felt like I was the opposite of that and I was just like, a really strong evangelical Christian and then I got my eyes opened up and I’m like, the opposite and I feel like, working against evangelical Christianity now...And that was a common theme, I felt like I was the opposite of Paul and it felt like I really wanted to fight against evangelical Christianity and colonialism and I really felt so moved and like, compelled to action by those who are hurt by evangelical Christianity. And I
also feel ashamed of what I used to do and who I used to be, because I felt like I hurt a lot of people that way.

Gwen acknowledged the harms of EC while implicating themself. They are “compelled to action” to challenge the wounds of colonialism and Christianity, and to address their own role in perpetuating damaging narratives. They also noted the role of colonialism in their own family history, musing, “if [family’s country of origin] wasn’t colonized, like, they wouldn't be Christian today… the Christianity that they adhere to was, is a colonial Christianity, like it's a branch of Christianity that was established by white people and all the books and literature that we read it’s all like, the same…”

Each of the participants experienced an increasing critical consciousness around EC’s complicity in systems of oppression and began to make sense of both their wounding and their authentic values by naming these systems. The dissonance between their values and the EC harms was experienced as distressing and tiresome, and as they tired of clinging to an inhospitable but familiar shore, the tides of expansion pulled them into open waters. As participants explored their own values and drifted away from the shoreline, pieces of their EC worldview begin to disintegrate. And as they were swept out to sea, new pressing questions emerged for the women: how could they stay afloat as they drifted out to sea? And could they remain anchored to the safe familiarity and warmth of their faith communities while expanding their perspectives?

**Phase Three: Navigating the Storm**

“Darkness. It comes…like, you start in this like, light and beautiful and connective place and you just move into loneliness and darkness.” ~Anna

The women described being drawn from the supposed safety and belonging found on the shore into an ocean of uncertainty, unknown depths, and tumultuous storms. They described a sense of disorientation and unsettledness as they desperately tried to navigate these uncertain waters while asking
themselves: will we ever feel ground again? Simultaneously, they recognized that they could not go back to the shoreline unchanged. They had been drawn into the ocean. This emotional pain was likened to darkness. During this time, a spiritual distress sufferer may glance back at the shoreline’s light and safety, only to find themself floundering in the dark, crashing waves.

This theme illuminates the acute experience of distress within the SD journey, and how participants make meaning of these experiences. Three sub-themes are outlined: existential disorientation, relational wounding, and making meaning through the language of trauma.

**Existential Disorientation: “How Do You Be?”**

Being drawn into the ocean brings inner pain, including a profound sense of existential disorientation, as the containing but organized worldview of the shoreline fades into the distance. As Anna asked, how does one “be” in this new landscape?

Anna wrestled with the unfolding loss of her EC worldview, which plunged her into a “meaningless and disorienting” space. She confronted “the garbage that is. What is currently happening.”

She goes on: “Part of losing your faith is just like sitting in the shitty world that is around us…that’s like part of it, is determining like, how do you live right now when there’s nothing else than just right now?”

Facing the “garbage” of reality without the guidance and explanations of an organizing faith appeared deeply anxiety provoking and spun off further existential quandaries. Anna was plunged into a whirlpool of questions and grasped at life buoys amidst the crashing waves. She asked,
if you don’t have any guiding moral, what are you supposed to do day to day?...Sometimes I still open up [my Bible], like, ‘Please, speak to me Lord!’...the anxiety comes from genuinely wondering, what am I supposed to do with my life?

Eva shared this angst of disorientation, alongside a longing for guidance in the uncertain waters:

And you have to navigate all of those things and everybody’s telling you a different answer and you just, you just want instructions and there aren’t any or there’s too many or they contradict each other, and so you just want to be good, both in like, this moral sense but also like in the sense of like, everything’s okay. And you just can’t.

She shared that she just “wants to be good”, both in the sense of being an ethical person, but also in the sense of being “okay” – experiencing rest and equilibrium. As she was pulled out to sea, she lost a sense of reliable certainty and struggled to find a place to ground herself amid contradicting perspectives. A sense of her own “still, small, voice” (King James Version [KJV] Bible, 2020, 1 Kings 19:12) of intuition, her inner compass, was absent, perhaps obscured by the tossing waves, as she grasped for some external source of structure to steady her boat.

**Relational Wounds: “My Heart Broke…”**

As the solid ground of the well-lit shore was shrouded by dark storm clouds and undulating waves, many of the participants’ relationships which were once nourished by the shoreline shifted, faced challenges, or were lost.

For Gwen, the most burdensome element of their SD was found in the space of relational wounding: “It’s definitely relationships, I think the things that hurt me most right now is still the relationships I’ve lost and the way other Christians see me.”
Over the course of our conversation together, a central piece, perhaps Gwen’s compass in the storm, emerged: relationships, both with the divine and with other humans. However, painfully, their deeply relational approach to their faith and to life meant that the relational losses that came with their values evolution were all the more wounding.

Gwen had always been avidly involved in Christian community, service, and leadership. As they struggled with the tensions between their values and the containment of EC doctrine, Gwen’s community grew increasingly uncomfortable with their process. Gwen was removed from a key component of church leadership because of their evolving beliefs, an experience which had a visceral embodied impact on Gwen – it “broke” their heart: “My heart broke when I wasn’t allowed to pray with the youth anymore. It was such an important part of my life, of their lives, and to be banned from the prayer room…[Laughs].”

Gwen chuckled at their almost comical banishment from the “prayer room” because of their increasingly expansive worldview. But the wounding of this cut belonging was disorienting, and spun Gwen into their own whirlpool of questions and fears:

*I really felt so confused about where I needed to be in the church…Where I felt afraid because I built my entire life around church and Christianity and I felt like, ‘oh my gosh, this is the first time in my life, where my views no longer are congruent with the church and where my position as a leader is at stake.’*

After moving to a new city, Gwen continued to struggle, feeling that “I was never going to fit into church. And even with other Christians.”

Gwen was distinct in this study for their strong emphasis on relationships, particularly their intimate relationship with God. Their concern about harming this relationship as they drifted from the shoreline catalyzed a sense of fear and disorientation for Gwen. For Gwen, exploring sexuality outside
of the EC requirements of heterosexual marriage was a fearful step into an uncertain, previously unsanctioned realm:

_"I think everything was hinging on just that relationship [with God], like, “Am I putting this relationship at risk?” And I think the whole time I’m just thinking, I was so like, in love with God, my spiritual relationship with this divine being that I…just never wanted to disrespect it and never wanted to lose that relationship._

They described their first-time having sex as a “snapping of the thread” of their EC involvement—to dwell in metaphor, perhaps a snapping of the rope tethering their boat to the shoreline. Still, Gwen found that having sex “wouldn’t separate me from God…there’s nothing I can do to separate me from God, I guess.”

As they shared this, I felt a sort of wonder, a curiosity, and a longing for that intimacy with the Divine that Gwen so openly and genuinely conveyed. Their realization was so nourishing to the places of tightness, containment, and isolation that pervade the SD journey. Although Gwen was immersed in the crashing waves of the existential unknown, they had found a lighthouse, some sense of grounding within the rising waves. God was in the tumult, the journey. God was in the ocean.

**Making Meaning Through the Language of Trauma:**
**“I’m Just Stuck in This and I Always Will Be”**

Although Gwen has found some peace in the uncertainty, they, like Eliza and Eva, are making meaning of their SD journeys through the language of trauma. Gwen stated: “It’s very traumatic and also very segregating and polarizing…”

Eliza described a challenging process of “sorting through the baggage” of her upbringing and life experiences, both intertwined and inseparable from her family’s avid involvement in EC communities. While some have used the Christian language of “sin patterns,” it has been important for
Eliza to understand past wounds as “trauma responses, not sin patterns.” While Eliza chose not to share details of this wounding, she emphasized the significance of “sorting through” and “uncovering” unaddressed pain, a process which in and of itself was overwhelming and isolating.

From the start of her interview, Eva expressed the traumatizing nature of her SD experience. She shared about the importance of taking the day off work and emotionally preparing for our interview, aware of what she called the “echoes” of distress that could be “drawn into the present.”

One particular situation exemplified Eva’s spiritual trauma. Eva shared about attending a family-obligated church event after having taken space from EC environments for some time. This experience brought on a “physical, visceral” response. She described “putting on her armour” before the event – showing off her tattoos and wearing bold lipstick: “this can’t touch me in the same way.” Still, being in a church setting and hearing a sermon plunged her into a distressing experience:

> Just sitting there and being like, I just have to get through this. I sort of...go completely inward and like, just have, like my toe tapping madly to get through...I’ve blocked the rest of it out, I barely remember going in and going out, any of that. I just really remember sitting there and being completely stuck.

Reflecting on this experience after several years of distance, Eva acknowledged,

> Trauma is something that’s like, the thing from the past that is like, drawn into the present...like this thing from a long time ago never actually went away and maybe it never will. That feeling. Like, “oh I’m just stuck in this and I always will be.”

This sense of “stuckness” is perhaps part of the sense of containment of the EC tradition conveyed by participants. Even within the vastness and expansion of the wild ocean, stuckness may
remain—a seemingly unshakeable tether may bind and continue to limit. Eva described a sense of fear that she will always feel trapped in both the crashing of uncertain waves and the chains of containment.

In exploring what it was like to share this painful memory, Eva named the echo of emotional memory:

*I can definitely like, feel almost some of the milder versions of that come up, and I know that happens when I tell the story, when I re-enter those spaces, like, the echoes of that are still there....I’m charged up a little bit and I always am when I tell a story like that.*

Participants described the need to deconstruct and sort through baggage from their EC upbringings, and illuminated a fear of being stuck in the acute storm of SD. The language of trauma appeared to allow the participants to make meaning of these disorienting, overwhelming and distressing experiences within their SD journeys.

**Phase Four “Floating”: Unfinished and Ongoing Process**

“For always, always, we are waking up and then waking up some more” (Kidd, 1996, n.p).

As conveyed in the above quote, each of the participants emphasized that their experience with SD was an ongoing, unfolding, and evolving process. This process held an embodied felt-sense of stretching and expanding. It seemed that the participants were learning to dwell in the waves, while finding some pockets of healing, even peace, in the once tumultuous sea. This theme is structured in two parts. The first sub-theme considers the emphasis on the SD journey as just that, a journey, or a process. The second sub-theme illuminates the rebuilding and reclamation process that emerges through the SD journey.
“It’s a Thread I’m Still Sorting Through”

While Eva described SD as traumatic, she also emphasized the value of honoring one’s pain as part of the fullness of human experience:

[Spiritual distress] is not an alarm bell for me to say, “oh something’s wrong,” like, no, this seems to be what life is about. That we have some distress and anxiety about big things in our lives, and I think the acuity of it has gone down a lot, which is helpful, although I still have like, moments.

For her, periods of SD about “big things in our lives” are part of an ongoing process that extends throughout one’s lifespan.

Throughout the interviews, the participants honoured the time-specific nature of their reflections, acknowledging that time and space would mould their future thoughts.

Eliza expressed, in response to a question about a spiritually distressing situation, “a couple of years ago, I would have answered that question very differently just based on life and understanding.” and Gwen acknowledged, “I guess when I look back on how much I’ve changed like...several years ago, I, yeah, I wouldn’t be having this conversation with you.”

This ongoing, unfolding, and unfinished process seemed to ebb and flow, with periods of “acuity” or “dire straits”, as Eva noted, and expanding periods of resting in uncertainty.

Gwen validated this by explaining, “I think now I’m just like, embracing the unknown and embracing that it’s not going to look perfect.”

Later in our conversation, they affirmed, “And yeah, and I realized like, how much, how far I’ve come and then realized that I’m constantly changing now and it’s a good thing that I’m always changing.”
These responses demonstrated that the journey remained unfinished, and tidy answers were not always available. In response to a probing question, Eliza exemplified this, noting that, “it’s a thread I’m still sorting through.” Despite the push and pull and seasons of acute storms in the SD journey, the participants conveyed a sense of increasing tolerance for change, uncertainty, and not-knowing.

The fluid process, the ebb and flow of the tides, continues.

“**You’re Just in a Wave Right Now**: Cultivating a Resonating and Spacious Spiritual Life

*When there’s a tragic or chaotic situation happening, there are calm waters on the other side, but you’re just in a wave right now. So just wait. And one day you’ll make peace. You’ll be on the other side. It’ll be calm. ~ Anna*

Although when I commenced this project, my focus was on the SD experience and the interview questions probed at this, each of the participants wove a narrative with pockets of healing. Sharing about their emergence from the darkness seemed important to the women. Including this re-building component is key for conveying the complexity of a SD journey.

As participants learned to ride the waves of SD and calmer waters appeared, they seemed to find anchors and life buoys, places of steadiness where they could cultivate more congruent and spacious spiritual selves. In the above quote, Anna described the acute intensity of SD as temporary, a wave to be ridden, until calmer, more tenable waters appeared. Her words conveyed a sense of trust in the rise and fall of the waves, a process that must be traversed before calm seas are found. The expansive process the women described from containment to deeper value congruence can be likened to what Eva termed “emerging as a person.” The pull from the shoreline into the uncertain seas appeared to be in service of a worthwhile existential task of claiming one’s identity, values, and authenticity on one’s own terms.
Eva’s narrative explored themes of claiming her personal agency, boundaries, and self-care as she was rebuilding a more nourishing spirituality. Following her parents’ separation, she witnessed her mother claim her voice after years in the containment of a fundamentalist Christian marriage: “My mom was actually emerging as a person in her own right for the first time in years, so I was watching her become a person again.”

Witnessing another’s emergence seemed to offer Eva a framework for her own process.

The women’s pull towards values congruence and self-authorship was one of expansiveness, of growing appreciation for the complex and paradoxical, and of coming to terms with uncertainty. As they weathered the storms and rode the waves of their SD journeys, they appeared to find a spaciousness within the ocean, and began to reclaim, integrate, and cultivate a more resonant and expansive spiritual life.

Gwen expressed the embodied sense of this process: “I’m expanding, I am definitely expanding and you know, from what I used to be.” Their words demonstrated a gradual shift from a felt-sense of containment to one of vaster, spacious expansion.

Eliza’s ongoing commitment to inner growth and exploration is emphasized throughout her SD journey. She expressed, “I’m very much in the process of know thyself.” Her journey of deepening self-understanding, while spiritually tumultuous at times, was one of “teaching the skeleton to dance.” As she processed wounds from childhood and EC, she found she was “defrosting” her connection to self, others and God and fostering wonder, curiosity, and humility about life’s big questions. Her journey led her to body-based healing modalities and a growing sense that “your whole life is an integrated whole” – body, mind, and spirit.
Eliza was navigating a connection to the divine aligned with her evolving values, despite the potential judgment of conventional EC doctrine. For her, “as long as I’m content with my walk with God, then that’s the judgment I’ll go for.”

She appeared to be exploring a less-contained, nourishing spirituality. Eva too, was navigating a connection to sacredness in her own unique way. She tunes into a podcast that engages with various religious traditions “with dignity” while addressing the ways in which religions can be “hugely problematic.”

*I think it’s just hopeful to see like, okay, it’s possible. And it doesn’t solve all the problems [of Christianity], it doesn’t make everything go away, but there’s something to faith traditions, even if I don’t want to, or can’t be a part of one in the way that I was growing up, that I can actually respect and still learn from and still have a part of my life. So, it’s a work in progress.*

Like Eva, Gwen was releasing confining images of faith and the Divine, and sinking into curiosity and not-knowing as part of their spirituality:

*I used to just have a very, had like an image of what God looks like, and it's always that children's Bible star in the sky, or like...I always picture God, as this like, it was almost like the silhouette of Jesus, like, long hair but it was this bright light, whenever I prayed I just pictured that bright light with a Jesus silhouette and...it's just so funny, now I don't even picture...I don't know. When I pray, I don't even try to picture who God is anymore. Because I find that is really confining who God is too. And like, I'm just trying to learn different ways of how God presents you know. Yeah, so I think I'm just on this journey of trying to discover more of like, who God is that, yeah that's different from the way I always pictured.*

Releasing confining images of God and the EC doctrine of proselytization has offered further spaciousness for Gwen’s relationships.
It’s just so cool to just finally like, [sighs] build genuine relationships, without this secret agenda of having to minister to them or something...Just loving them for their beliefs and even learning from them. But not thinking secretly they need Jesus [Laughs].

As Gwen expressed this, I felt a sense of relief and breathed a long exhale. Their words brought a liberating release of containment and pressure, opening a flow of presence and agenda-free relating with others. For Gwen, who shared their profound dedication to meaningful relationships with the divine and fellow humans, this re-imagining seemed to offer a spacious softening into a more congruent way of being.

For each of the participants, this spaciousness breathes in and out, ebbs and flows, like the rhythmic flow of the ocean’s waves, expanding, revitalizing. Still, this reclamation of a nourishing spirituality does not appear to be a simple process, but rather holds undercurrents of tensions and uncertainties that the participants continue to navigate.

Although Gwen cherished their growth and expansion, they also lamented the loss of EC’s simplicity:

There was a simplicity to [EC], like, you just had to believe in Jesus and life is good. But outside of that world it's like, there are so many complexities and layers to life, which…but this is the real world.

This is the real world. Once participants left the shore, they contended with a world that they experienced as more complex, but more real. Within this awareness, they began to re-cultivate a spirituality spacious enough to hold this nuance, but this cultivation is always ongoing, unfinished, and expanding. The women were floating in calmer waters, but their tethers to the shoreline remained varied and in flux.
Summary

This findings section has described how Anna, Eva, Eliza, and Gwen make meaning of their SD journeys. This experience was found to be a dynamic, ongoing process rife with tensions, isolation, and loss. The women traversed a process described through a chronological ocean metaphor. The participants began their journeys on the familiar shoreline of their EC communities. A disconcerting sense of push-pull of opposing tides began to plague them, and they gradually felt themselves pulled out to sea, away from their EC communities and worldview. Simultaneously, they felt pulled back to the familiar shoreline of their EC communities. This sense of tension is found throughout the subsequent themes, demonstrating the tumultuous, complex nature of a spiritual distress journey. The SD journey was also experienced as deeply isolating and alienating, and the women often suffered in silence. They expressed challenges in sharing about these taboo thoughts, feelings, and experiences, including with mental health professionals. Once the women were pulled out to sea, they had to navigate acute inner storms of existential disorientation and relational wounding. Several participants used the language of trauma to describe the nature of these storms. Although the participants described deep wounding during their SD journey, they also felt it important to describe the sense of expansion they cultivated throughout their struggle. Protective factors included role modeling, as demonstrated by the comfort Eva experienced by observing her mother’s experience. They discussed their journey as an unfinished process that is resistant to predictable categorization. While not all the threads of their SD journey have been untangled, they carry an appreciation for curiosity and not-knowing amid these tensions. Throughout their process, they have each begun building a more nourishing spiritual life in deeper congruence with their values, but this re-building remains ongoing and continuous.
Chapter 5: Discussion

This qualitative study brought forth a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of SD in the lives of four women between the ages of 25-35 with EC backgrounds in Western Canada. Smith et al.’s (2009) IPA approach was employed to analyze the data for this qualitative inquiry, and transpersonal theory allowed for attention to the potential role of numinous aspects in participants’ journeys. The analysis revealed that experiences were a process, as depicted through a multi-layered ocean metaphor: the shoreline, pulled from the shoreline, navigating the storm, and floating. A sense of tension, as well as isolation and loss, were identified as ebbing and flowing undercurrents throughout each phase.

The participants’ SD journeys were conveyed as just that – journeys – ongoing, tension-filled and expanding processes that have not found neat closure, but instead, continue to evolve as the women’s worldviews shift. Despite much wounding and injuries to wellbeing throughout the journey, the women reported increased curiosity, openness, and expansiveness of their perspectives. Their departure from the shoreline into tumultuous and isolating seas appeared to be in service of a worthwhile existential endeavour of self-authorship. They expressed having found more embodied space to explore their evolving values and self-authorship, which has allowed them to rebuild a more nourishing spirituality within continued tensions.

This discussion chapter commences by discussing identity characteristics in this study. Then, by linking to relevant scholarship, I discuss in greater depth several key elements of the findings through four headings to illuminate possibilities for expanding SD conversations: 1) SD as a Journey, 2) The SD Journey, Tension and Dissonance, 3) The SD Journey Impacts Wellbeing, and 4) The SD Journey and the Pursuit of Self-Authorship.

The chapter then explores implications for social workers and allied health providers that emerged throughout the themes. These implications are written using the “we” pronoun, as I hope to join
with other practitioners, educators, and researchers in strengthening our support for individuals along their SD journeys. In closing, I consider the limitations of this study and offer possibilities for future researchers within this subject area.

**Considering Participants’ Identity Characteristics**

The interviews revealed that participants’ socio-culturally situated identities affected their SD journeys. In this thesis, the influence of gender was more interwoven throughout participants’ reflections, rather than explicitly noted. Still, Eva discussed her desire to be a pastor, which was limited by EC doctrine opposing women’s leadership, and Eliza noted that she felt she had to “sit down, shut up, and look pretty” in the face of some EC leaders. Further related comments from the interviews were absorbed into the larger theme “Pulled from the Shoreline and Drawn out to Sea,” which highlighted experiences of limitation, suppression, and containment in EC.

As conveyed in the literature review, EC largely upholds conservative ideals about gender, including denying women’s church leadership, promoting men’s headship in family, church, and society, and enforcing women’s sexual and moral purity (Bendroth, 1993; Gallagher, 2003; Klement & Sagarin, 2017). Gillette’s (2016) study with seven women aged between 21-48 years who left Protestant fundamentalism explored “gendered consequences” (p. 119) of departing the faith. The participants reported internalized sexism and oppression from patriarchal fundamentalist culture and norms (Gillette, 2016). Smull’s (2000) dissertation with women who disaffiliated from Protestant fundamentalism, like this thesis, conveyed experiences of containment. In Smull’s (2000) dissertation, participants expressed the harmful impact of restrictive gender roles in their church communities. And feminist scholarship has articulated the suppression of women’s intuition and voice within patriarchal systems, and its detriments to psychological wellbeing (see for example, Gilligan, 2006). While the above extant literature affirms gendered impacts, I am hesitant to over-impose a gender analysis lens upon Anna, Eva, Eliza, and
Gwen’s words, as I did not heavily probe this area for clarification. Instead, gendered elements may be recognized in their words based on readers’ own experiences and understandings.

Identity markers related to race and class also affected participants’ experience of SD. Participants expressed concern about EC’s lack of acknowledgement of colonization, racism, and structural harms. For instance, Anna’s EC church failed to respond when a loved one, a person of color, underwent a traumatic racist incident. This experience led her to question whether God and her EC community were simply mirroring the harmful systems she saw oppressing her loved one. Eva explicitly discussed her painful experience of “wealthy, white Christianity” as a mixed-race person raised in a lower-income family. Gwen named her issues with “colonial Christianity” and acknowledged how her East Asian family likely only became Christian due to colonial missionary activity. They consider how their East Asian church in Western Canada consumed EC culture primarily created by white people.

Butler (2021) contends that EC has been and continues to be implicated in racism. In the USA, and I contend, Canada as well, Butler asserts that EC can be “synonymous with whiteness” (2021, p. 11). Indeed, increasing examinations of EC’s complicity and perpetuation of white hegemony have emerged, particularly in response to EC approval of Donald Trump (see for example, Natarajan et al., 2022; McKinzie & Richards, 2022; Howard et al., 2021; Perry et al., 2021; Gorski, 2021; Margolis, 2019). While few studies have examined racialized experiences in EC, Natarajan et al.’s 2022 study illuminated “white idealization” (para. 1) in EC settings and its damaging impact on women of color. Although there are limited studies exploring people of color’s experience in EC, there is grey literature highlighting lived experience (see for example, Luehmann, 2022; Liberated Together, 2022). Butler (2021) and Natarajan et al.’s (2022) work have revealed that experiences in SD are both historically influenced and racialized, findings that offer further context for Gwen and Eva’s comments about EC’s whiteness and its colonial legacy.
While I began this project focused on the acute experience of SD, throughout the interviews, participants painted a wider narrative arc, or journey. It became evident that to meaningfully express the lived experiences Anna, Gwen, Eliza, and Eva offered, that this project would present not only a journey, but an ongoing, expanding process, akin to transpersonal theory’s appreciation for spiritual growth across the lifespan. As noted in Chapter Three: Methodology, this thesis process has been informed by a transpersonal lens. This lens consistently encouraged me to attend to spiritual possibilities throughout analysis, rather than dwelling solely in the realm of the material. Participants’ comments regarding relationship and connection with the divine could be considered through transpersonal theory. While each participant is traversing their own unique, unfinished journey, transpersonal theory also acknowledges a human capacity that pulls us towards transpersonal growth and connectedness (Canda et al., 2020).

In this section, I refine my focus to consider two relevant areas from the extant literature regarding “journeys”: processes/stages from disaffiliation literature, and possibilities related to and Fowler’s (1981) faith development work.

**Disaffiliation Literature**

Akin to the four-phase model presented in this thesis, various scholarly texts utilize processes or stage theories to examine spiritual challenges. For instance, the literature exploring disaffiliation, or losing one’s faith, portrays a process, at times dividing it into stages. Fisher’s (2016) meta-analysis on disaffiliation outlined stages: firstly, individuals question, then go through doubting, then begin deconverting, and finally, they disaffiliate from the faith, and some go on to be in opposition to their previous faith. Fazzino (2014) described “exit narratives” (p. 249) of former evangelicals through three stages: pre-conversion, conversion, and post-conversion. These stage approaches, while helpful, do not
adequately reflect the experience of SD as an ongoing, nuanced and expanding process as conveyed in this thesis. Participants in this thesis did not disaffiliate completely from Christianity, as they each maintained some sense of a tether to the shoreline. Binary options that require a person to be either “in” or “out” of the faith do not offer sufficient creative possibilities for the richness and complexity of the SD journey as expressed by Anna, Gwen, Eliza, and Eva.

The language of religious deconstruction (RD) is more aligned with the experience outlined in this thesis. RD refers to a systematic and critical analysis of one’s faith (Relevant, 2021). Online communities on Facebook, as well as numerous podcasts and Instagram accounts, are exploring spiritual struggle and deconstruction (see for example, The Liturgists, 2022; Exvangelical, 2022; Reclamation Collective, 2020; Religious Trauma Institute, 2022). While “disaffiliation,” “deconversion,” and “losing your faith” imply a stark exit from religion, deconstruction may open space for seekers to remain connected to their faith, while still questioning it. RD does not predict an outcome of the journey, but rather honours the pulling apart, the dialogue, and the wrestling process. This term appears more akin to the ongoing, expanding process described by participants.

**Fowler’s Stages of Faith**

Given Fowler’s impact (Slee, 2004; Canda et al., 2020) in spirituality research, it is important to consider how his work informs and is challenged by the results of this thesis. Fowler’s (1981) six stages of faith development provide helpful guideposts in conversations about our spiritual journeys. The fourth and fifth stages are particularly resonant when considering SD as a process. Throughout the fourth stage, individuative-reflective, we wrestle with the beliefs we have been taught and begin to intentionally choose our own authentic perspectives. This is akin to the women’s pull away from the containment of the shoreline to the unknown but spacious ocean, where they could explore their values. In stage five, balanced-inclusive, we become more open to tension and paradox, and begin to live within
the uncertainty, just as the women in this thesis have an expanded tolerance and even appreciation for nuance and complexity in their evolving worldviews. Still, the linearity of Fowler’s stages is not wholly consistent with this thesis’ findings of an expanding, ongoing, and nonlinear SD journey.

While Fowler’s stages are resonant at first glance, they have been critiqued as inadequate for women’s faith experiences. In *Women’s Faith Development*, Slee (2004) outlined that later scholars have pointed out the relational nature of women’s spirituality, contending that Fowler’s stages are too individualistic and prescriptive. For feminist scholars, spiritual development, then, is not only about moving towards individuation, but also about nourishing and strengthening relationships (see for example, Gilligan, 1993; Miller, 1976). While relationality can be nourishing, it can also pose its challenges. In “When the Mind Leaves the Body…and Returns” Gilligan (2006) articulates girls’ developmental process of “separating self from relationships” (p. 56). In this process, girls’ “inner compasses” (Gilligan, 2006, p. 57) may be submerged in favor of relational harmony and external validation. In this thesis, the women underwent a similar struggle on the shoreline, where their self-authorship was submerged, but their relational belonging within EC was secured. Still, despite the ensuing relational tensions and risk to belonging, the women were pulled into the ocean on a journey of “individuation” which was in service of self-authorship and emergence. Both Fowler’s (1981) emphasis on individuation and later critics’ illumination of the significance and challenges of relationship in women’s development, are present in this thesis’ findings. The tension between these poles is evidenced further in the following consideration of tensions and dissonance, a key undercurrent in this thesis.

**The SD Journey, Tensions and Dissonance**

The experience of a SD journey revealed itself to be complex and tension-filled, resisting simplistic description or categorization. Echoing extant literature on spiritual struggle and faith disaffiliation (Rockenback, 2012; Lee & Gubi, 2019) a consistent experience of cognitive dissonance
(CD) is woven throughout the women’s SD journeys. CD refers to a state of mental discomfort that occurs when a person holds “beliefs, opinions, values etc., which are inconsistent, or which conflict with an aspect of his or her behaviour” (Oxford Languages, n.d. B). In alignment with Rockenback (2012) who described that spiritual struggles may be “conflicting, contradictory and paradoxical” (p. 62), the participants struggled between staying in the comfort and familiarity of the known and venturing out to the lonely unknown where they could embody a more authentic way of being in the world. This dissonance appeared to catalyze a strong pull away from the EC shoreline, as the discomfort it induced became increasingly untenable.

Winnell’s (2006) theorizing about religious trauma syndrome, formulated through her clinical work, highlighted CD and accompanying identity confusion as a central issue provoking religious trauma. In addition, Lee and Gubi’s (2019) IPA study with six participants of multiple genders examined conversion from Christianity to atheism and found that a key underlying reason for religious conversion is CD. Their study noted that for some participants, deconversion can be “unwanted and resisted” (p. 174), not unlike the embodied sense of opposing tides experienced by Anna, Gwen, Eva and Eliza. Knight et al. (2019) articulated that shifting towards disaffiliation, or in the words of this project, moving away from the shoreline, can help resolve one’s CD.

Along similar lines, Gillette (2016) considered spiritual tensions of seven women who left Protestant fundamentalism, noting that while staying in fundamentalist Christianity was not viable for participants, leaving their faith was also painful. Citing depth psychologist Jung’s (1958/2002) thinking, Gillette (2016) suggested that “growing consciousness of the polarized nature of the self brings with it significant freedom, and also tension” (p. 117). Her participants, like the four women in this thesis, found themselves torn between pressures, or pulled between opposing tides. Recognizing their inner dissonance required them to ask central questions about what they believed and how this informs their
way of being in the world. These questions, as Jung (1958/2002) contended, while liberating, bring tension as individuals acknowledge what they may lose.

Emphasizing the ongoing process, Hess (1997) highlighted that women may struggle in a “lifelong dance” of tension “between our dual longings for inclusion and independence” (p. 58). Hess’ language is resonant with this thesis’ language of the opposing tides, which simultaneously pulls the women to the shore (inclusion) and out to sea (independence). In addition, Newman’s (2020) thesis described six male and female young adults’ “searching for God” as a “paradoxical process” (p. iii), further demonstrating the tension-filled nature of an SD journey.

This thesis is congruent with the extant literature regarding the role of dissonance in spiritual distress, struggles, and disaffiliation. It is important to note, still, that Gwen, Eliza, Eva, and Anna conveyed a pervading tension throughout the SD journey that transcends the “cognitive” to include overlapping relational, transpersonal, and embodied experiences. Relationally, participants feel tensions between the potential belonging of the EC shoreline, while desiring the greater values congruence available at sea. From a transpersonal lens, we can consider the tensions felt in participants’ relationship with the divine: in my study SD appeared to relate to an expansiveness of one’s being, beliefs and values, and it appeared to also create a disruption or struggles with the relationship with God, or a reliance on the strength of the relationship with God. In an embodied, felt manner, participants experienced a push-pull, which both pulled them into EC communities and practice (attending church, continuing to pray), and pushed them away to find “room”. These tensions manifested as an undercurrent throughout each layer of their journey, and they continue to ripple through participants’ ongoing, unfinished experiences.
The SD Journey Impacts Wellbeing

The negative impact of spiritual struggles on wellbeing is highly conveyed in the literature, and the participants’ narratives in this thesis were interwoven with varied descriptions of injured wellbeing. Eva, Anna, Eliza, and Gwen experienced existential insecurity, loneliness, relational wounding, cut belonging, and dissonance, and several participants utilized the term “trauma” to describe their struggles (discussed in more depth below). These findings contribute to the growing body of scholarship illuminating the painful components that can arise from religion and spirituality.

Studies with participants who have disaffiliated and/or deconverted from Christianity have found that individuals often experienced periods of distress and insecurity as their worldviews were called into question (Fazzino, 2014; Lee & Gubi, 2009; Nica, 2020; Newman, 2020). And Smucker’s (1996) phenomenological description of SD described SD as a “breaking of the web of life,” followed by a “rebuilding” (p. 84). In the “breaking” phase, participants utilized evocative words such as “adrift” and “floundering” (p.86) to describe their experiences, not dissimilar to the ocean-related metaphors articulated by this study’s participants.

In addition, the qualitative literature addresses the relational wounds and losses individuals face, a finding also validated in this thesis. Gillette’s (2016) participants reported pressures to stay in fundamentalism, as well as experiences of rejection and judgment from Christians. In my thesis, the participants described judgment and a loss of belonging as their worldviews shifted. They felt tensions within their family of origin due to their evolution and experienced a sense of lament for the tight-knit EC community within which they no longer wholly belonged.

With loss of belonging comes a sense of isolation, described in the undercurrent of “Isolation and Loss: Lost at Sea.” In the social work literature, Boynton’s (2016) dissertation on children’s spirituality in trauma, grief and loss highlighted the key theme of “navigating in seclusion.” The spiritual struggles
children undergo as they face painful life experiences are often deemed “weird” (p. ii) and “taboo”, (p. iii) and children have limited safe spaces to process these thoughts and feelings. As I dwelled with Anna, Gwen, Eva and Eliza, the resonance of Boynton’s (2016) language of “navigating in seclusion” continued to emerge. The distress of spiritual challenges is characterized and exacerbated by the isolating nature of the experience.

**Considering Trauma**

“Your body, of course, does not give a damn whether a practice is ancient or modern, secular or religious, proven or unproven. It just wants to experience safety and security” (Menakem, 2017, n.p).

Perhaps most evocative is the participants’ use of the word “trauma” to describe spiritual distress’ profound impact on wellbeing. Although there is considerable social work literature that has considered trauma in general (see for example, Levenson, 2017; Knight, 2015), explorations of religious and/or spiritual trauma are limited. The above quote from trauma therapist Resmaa Menakem (2017) expresses the body’s profound desire for safety and security, which may be compromised in a variety of spaces, including religious settings. As I contend later in the practice implications section of this chapter, spiritually sensitive, trauma-informed practice (TIP) can be of vital importance for practitioners supporting those with potential SD experiences. TIP centers safety and security, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment in service delivery (Levenson, 2017).

This significant descriptor, trauma, is not evidently present in the quantitative body of spiritual struggle studies (see for example, Abu Raiyah et al., 2015; Abu Raiyah et al., 2016; Wilt et al., 2021). It is the growing qualitative literature on spiritual struggle, as well as the grey literature, that continues to affirm the potentially traumatic nature of spiritual challenges. Gillette (2016), Smull (2000), and Fazzino (2014) all presented findings that Christian settings can have traumatizing impacts. The findings of this study are certainly congruent with these studies.
Trauma therapist Brian Peck, co-founder of the online Religious Trauma Institute and creator of the Room to Thrive Instagram account, shared that “religious trauma can result from an event your nervous system experienced as an inescapable attack within a religious context” (Room to Thrive, 2022). The trauma scholarship affirms the impact of feeling “stuck” on one’s nervous system (Heller & Heller, 2004; Levine, 1997; van der Kolk, 2014; Rothschild, 2000). When escape is experienced as impossible, the body may sense that death is imminent, and utilize a “freeze” response (Rothschild, 2000). Inescapable threats to the nervous system could involve being exposed to threatening religious messages in a setting where one felt they could not escape, such as a church service. Experiences or beliefs that felt threatening, but which also were deemed compulsory, could be experienced by the body as an inescapable threat, and be remembered in the body as traumatic. Eva’s feeling of being “frozen” in a family-obligated church event, for instance, highlights the distress of being in a psychologically unsafe environment. Eva also shared about the need to prepare for sharing her story. Her SD journey could be drawn into the present, just as trauma is stored in the body and may continue to visit long after a threatening event has passed (van der Kolk, 2014).

In addition, participants’ hesitancy to be limited by a new spiritual label and their desire to expand beyond EC’s containment is perhaps demonstrative of the traumatizing impact of being constrained (Rothschild, 2000). Now that they have left the limits of the shoreline, the threat of any further containment or proselytization may be deeply unwelcome. Wehr (2000) explored how constraining religious settings can limit spiritual development and provoke confusion about core issues, including identity and purpose. The containment of the EC structure may have limited participants’ sense of agency and authenticity, requiring instead that they conform with the EC institution.

The quantitative spiritual struggle literature affirms that spiritual distress can have a significant impact on mental health and holistic wellbeing (see for example, Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015; Exline et al., 2014; Bryant & Astin, 2008; Ellison & Lee, 2010). In addition, the growing qualitative work and grey
literature highlights negative impacts on wellbeing, including potentially traumatic experiences and trauma responses. The findings in this study add to arguments that spiritual challenges warrant deeper targeted attention in social work research, education, and practice.

**The SD Journey and the Pursuit of Self-Authorship**

Eva, Gwen, Eliza, and Anna described a process of stretching into greater expansion and closer congruity with their values. This could be understood as a pursuit of self-authorship and emergence. Transpersonal theory offers one lens through which to understand this, as it appreciates an innate draw towards spiritual growth and wholeness (Canda et al., 2020). In addition, Baxter Magolda’s (2008) longitudinal work on young adults’ development highlighted a process of repeatedly travelling through periods of confusion and despair in the “shadow lands” (p. 280) towards increasing “self-authorship” (p. 269). Further, Fowler’s (1981) individuative-reflective stage emphasizes the value of wrestling with one’s worldview in order to locate a more authentic spiritual home. And Gilligan’s (2006) feminist writing articulates the submersion of women’s bodily intuition and “inner compass” (p. 57), wherein external validation and relational harmony gradually take precedence over a girls’ autonomous voice. She argues that girls learn to outsource their intuition to external sources, and in so doing, limit their access to their holistic, bodily knowing (Gilligan, 2006). As in this thesis, processes of self-emergence or self-authorship may come forth to reclaim our submerged “inner compass” (p. 57). As individuals self-author, they define their own authentic beliefs, identities, and social connections. Participants’ journey from the shoreline to the “floating” phase appeared to serve their burgeoning self-authorship, although it came with many painful, even traumatizing wounds, and remains unfinished. This journey is also evident in the grey literature, including Sue Monk Kidd’s *Dance of the Dissident Daughter* (1996), a memoir on deconstruction from the Christian faith. Kidd writes,
There is no place so awake and alive as the edge of becoming. But more than that, birthing the kind of woman who can authentically say, ‘My soul is my own,’ and then embody it in her life, her spirituality, and her community is worth the risk and hardship” (n.p).

Kidd (1996) emphasized the worthwhile pursuit of ones’ “inner compass” (Gilligan, 2006, p. 57), even at the expense of “risk and hardship”. She articulated this from her location as a woman, highlighting the significance of re-claiming oneself as a woman within a patriarchal structure (1996). For the participants in this study, this pull to values congruence and self-authorship resulted in a loss of familiar belonging and existential security. While isolating, their hardship was in service of the pursuit of this vital self-authorship, their “edge of becoming.”

Gillette’s (2016) findings on women who have left Christian fundamentalism also validate this notion. She discovered that women experienced a “longing to know themselves” (p. 116), akin to the pull to self-authorship noted in this thesis. Although Gillette’s (2016) participants painfully confronted the inadequacy of their fundamentalist communities and faced isolation, they also had the “transformative opportunity” to “honor their authentic selves” (p. 116). In addition, Wehr (2000) described how spiritual pain can include “losing touch with one’s spiritual centre,” (p. 58) a place of grounding and “inner sense of direction” (p. 54), an experience not unlike the existential disorientation described in this thesis. The containment of EC was a limiting force on participants’ inner compass, and in order to regain touch with their “spiritual centres” they responded to the pull of the tides into more spacious identity possibilities, and more “room”.

Baxter Magolda’s (2008) self-authorship concept is helpful when considering Eva, Gwen, Eliza and Anna’s pull towards values congruence and expansion. Gillette (2016), Wehr (2000), Fowler (1981), Gilligan (2006) and others have offered further perspective on self-authorship’s connections with spiritual struggles. As conveyed by the participants, the pursuit of self-authorship may require
traversing the “shadow lands” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 280) risking familiarity, and stepping into the unknown. While these scholarly findings find resonance with this thesis, the SD journey described by participants does not culminate in neat closure or total inner congruence and authenticity. Rather, each participants’ SD journey remains nuanced, tension-filled, and ever expanding, and their identities continue to evolve.

**Implications**

**Employing a Spiritually Sensitive, Trauma-Informed Approach**

In this section, I offer consideration of implications for social work research, policy, education, and practice. This thesis has conveyed the personal significance, depth, and nuance of the SD journey, and has validated previous literature affirming its negative impact on wellbeing. While it has focused on the experiences of women between 25-35 of EC backgrounds, existential and sacred concerns plague many of us (Abu-Raiyah et al., 2015), and complex global issues such as climate change may contribute to rising existential uncertainty (Palinkas & Wong, 2020). As social workers, we are not immune from sacred and existential struggles, and the challenges we confront in social work may exacerbate “spiritual pain” (Reynolds, 2019, p. 6) among researchers, educators, and practitioners alike (Newell & MacNeil, 2010). Spiritually sensitive TIP provides one robust approach we can lean on to strengthen our practice, research, and educational engagement with spiritual challenges. This approach nurtures greater attunement to both the “warmth” and wounds of spiritual experiences.

Canda et al. (2020) asserted that a spiritually sensitive practice approach includes creating a space with opportunities to share about spiritual, religious, and cultural elements of one’s lived experience. Practitioners and educators can actively inquire about individuals’ and students’ religious and/or spiritual backgrounds, worldviews, and values, and demonstrate efforts to understand each person’s unique experience. In our agencies, we can advocate for policies that integrate spiritual and
religious questions in assessments, and further training and supervision opportunities in this area of practice. And within research, we can continue unfurling what spiritually sensitive practice looks like with diverse populations, and the nuances of its implementation.

A trauma informed practice (TIP) approach remains attuned to the potential influence of traumatic experiences on a person’s current presentation. To practice in a trauma-informed manner does not imply that we are always able to perfectly respond to matters of trauma. Rather, social workers strive to create safe environments, emphasizing safety, trust, collaboration, choice, and empowerment (Levenson, 2017; Carello & Butler, 2015). Trauma can emerge from impositions of abusive power and not being unable to leave a harmful situation or setting (Rothschild, 2000). In “Phase Three: Navigating the Storm”, this thesis highlighted participants’ experiences of abuses of power within EC settings, and experiences where they felt subjected to harmful spiritual messages without a socially viable means of escape. With this is mind, practitioners can be particularly attentive to the power dynamics present in a therapeutic relationship and take care not to impose their power over people with whom they work.

In addition, experiences of containment and suppression of self-authorship on the shoreline illuminate the importance of honouring individuals’ self-authorship and independence. Gillette’s (2016) study with women who left Protestant fundamentalism affirmed this, highlighting the vitality of fostering clients’ empowerment and honouring their resilience. The tumult of the uncertain ocean, too, calls for practitioners to offer psychological lifebuoys and grounding anchors. Educators may also employ TIP with students they support. Furthermore, in research, we can continue exploring the potential links between trauma presentations and SD, bolstering an emerging body of scholarship that has long been affirmed in grey literature (see for example, Reclamation Project, 2022). In upholding trauma-informed principles, we can aim to uplift individuals’ autonomy and values-exploration and look for opportunities to foster grounding.
In holding both a spiritually sensitive and trauma-informed stance, practitioners can hope to offer spaces of curiosity and spaciousness around tender, potentially painful spiritual conversations. In social work classrooms, educators can also practice this stance to create spiritually sensitive learning environments, which both nurture learners’ skill building and are compassionate to their personal spiritual struggles. This spacious stance can be extended to create room for conversations among workers within organizations, within social work research endeavors, and at policy tables. Such conversations can contribute to collective spiritual care in helping professions, and beyond.

**EC and Challenges in Accessing Mental Health Support**

During the interviews, several participants offered direct comments regarding mental health support and EC communities. It felt pertinent to share these insights with readers, as they provide fruitful considerations for practice. In the following section, I highlight these words and link their implications.

EC subcultures may present unique challenges regarding receiving mental health support (Lloyd, 2021a; Lloyd, 2021b). Anna noted how Christians are often encouraged to receive counselling through Christian counsellors, a reflection confirmed by the literature (Lloyd, 2021a). In addition, she worries that counsellors might dismiss spiritual concerns, be uncomfortable with spiritual conversations, or even feel “horrified” by the topic. Participants in Lee and Gubi’s (2019) study also conveyed that counsellors may not “get it” (p. 179), and that their painful experiences in the religion might be invalidated. The nuance of an SD experience within a particular faith tradition may be challenging to explain to someone from outside the subculture, a consideration echoed in Gillette’s (2016) study as well. This thesis points out the often private and taboo nature of an SD journey, and fears of invalidation from practitioners may compound this silence.
During times of struggle, Gwen sought emotional support through Christian prayer groups, which although lacking in clinical guidance, offered rich socio-emotional support. Still, a focus on spiritual support (such as prayer or pastoral advice) for one’s inner struggles can provoke further distress, as individuals may fear that their pain is divinely imposed (Lloyd, 2021a). If their pain does not subside after spiritual intervention, they may blame themselves for some spiritual inadequacy (Lloyd, 2021a). Additionally, notions that “secular” counsellors (those who do not practice as Christian counsellors) may threaten one’s faith may also prevent EC-affiliated individuals from accessing counselling (Lloyd, 2021a). Given these barriers, many individuals experiencing SD may not make it to counselling offices.

To address these challenges, the social work profession can actively work to build liaisons with faith leaders, interfaith organizations, and other spiritually-oriented services, and provide education and advocacy work with these institutions (Benes et al., 2000; Tirrito & Cascio, 2003). Inter-faith chaplains are one site of ample professional wisdom regarding spiritual challenges, and interdisciplinary collaboration and learning may be fruitful (Chaplaincy Institute, 2022). Social work educators may be well situated to create learning collaborations between faith groups and classrooms, linkages which may edify students and faith practitioners alike. Social work researchers also play a key role in exploring the challenges, possibilities, and best approaches for liaison-building and information exchange between the profession and faith institutions.

There are further barriers that practitioners can attend to when supporting those with SD journeys. Anna noted her concerns about not knowing a counsellor’s faith: “How do I find someone who is faith accepting without trying to proselytize me into some version of faith?” While any proselytization is explicitly against social work’s ethical conduct and enshrined in social work policy, individuals like Anna may remain concerned, as they strive to maintain their autonomy after departing the containment and impositions of the shoreline. In addition, Anna commented that she would not want to upset a
counsellor who may be quietly dealing with their own SD by disclosing her own struggles. One can hear the heaviness in Anna’s concerns – despite desiring support, she worries not only about invasive proselytization, but also about the emotional wellbeing of the counsellor. Evangelical Christians are often encouraged to be on constant alert around others, as we need to portray a positive image of the faith and be a good “witness” (NIV Bible, 2011, Acts 22:15) for Christ. Gwen also expressed this sentiment, noting the pressure of “having to minister” in all relationships. This doctrine may have the impact of enforcing hyper-vigilance about others’ feelings at the expense of one’s own authenticity and safety.

Practitioners can acknowledge these potential concerns up-front, and in so doing strive to cultivate a transparent, trust-focused therapeutic relationship. This may include intentional disclosure of the practitioner’s religious/spiritual worldview in service of the client’s sense of safety. I am curious about survey research inquiring about clients’ preferences and comfort regarding the faith identification (or lack thereof) of their counsellor. Qualitative inquiries into the dynamic between client and counsellor when religious/spiritual matters are a concern, may also be illuminating. Within agencies, our awareness of these concerns may guide to whom we refer clients – for instance, we can inquire further when a client reports “religious challenges” before referring them to a religious leader, as this may exacerbate anxieties.

**Practice Implications: Closing Thoughts**

This thesis has illuminated the complexities and tensions of SD. During their SD journey, participants faced the loss of community belonging and judgment from family and friends. They encountered existential insecurity, isolation, identity confusion, and a sense of purposelessness. They wrestled in isolation with the push and pull of conflicting desires – both to stay connected to their familiar faith, and to reckon with the call of self-authorship. And they struggled with traumatic
experiences within EC, and ongoing “echoes” of painful memories. Each of these complex human challenges can be sites of rich therapeutic work. Practitioners can co-create goals with each person dependent on the particularities of their SD journey.

As psychologist Diana Fosha (2021) has upheld, counselling can be in service of “undoing aloneness,” (p. 1). As SD is often an experience of private suffering, practitioners have an opportunity to gently accompany people on their path. To challenge isolation, we can bolster an individual’s relational network and encourage peer support so sufferers can connect with those who “get it” (Lee & Gubi, 2019, p. 179). We can bear witness as individuals navigate the shoreline, the tides, the isolation, the storms, and the floating, and we can honour the paradoxes of their human experience without offering easy answers. If we do attempt easy answers, those very well may be swallowed up by the power of the ocean waves, and paradox and mysterious uncertainty may surge forth instead. Instead, with attention to a spiritually sensitive, trauma-informed approach, practitioners can provide moments of grounding in the storm. SD is an experience of our own, not to be constrained or simplified, but rather to be witnessed. We can come alongside as people journey through ever-evolving values examination and exploration, of worldview shifts and integration, and as they seek belonging while pursuing self-authorship.

**Limitations of this Study**

**Identity Characteristics**

Although at the commencement of this thesis process, I was eager to examine the potential impact of identity characteristics (race, gender, class) on participants’ SD experiences, this did not emerge as a prominent element in the interviews. In keeping with an interpretivist lens (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011), I am confident that the social locations and identity intersections of each participant influenced what and how they shared during our interviews. As gender-based reflections did not
frequently emerge organically, this was not an area of focus, which may have limited the study objective of exploring the impact of identity intersections on SD.

Future research can offer more nuance regarding identity intersections. Examining the gendered experience of SD may offer meaningful insights about the influence of gender in one’s struggle, and as such, could inform interventions with people of diverse genders. Furthermore, as noted, the majority of spiritual struggle research, both quantitative and qualitative, is conducted with white individuals of Christian backgrounds. There is a paucity of understanding of the unique lived experiences of people of color within Christianity, and certainly of people of non-Christian religious backgrounds. In expanding our appreciation for the nuanced experiences of SD across identity intersections, we can broaden our capacity for understanding this important area. Highlighting experiences of SD from a variety of social locations brings voice to the multiplicities of this phenomenon, and validates the complex, socially situated nature of this often private, subjugated experience.

Researching as an Insider

My own personal experience with SD presented both a strength and a limitation in this study. I am a white, settler, cis-woman from a comfortable socio-economic upbringing, and my own lens undoubtedly influenced and at times limited my interpretations of participants’ situated SD experiences. Although I made efforts to stay close to participants’ words and not unduly impose my own biases (Smith et al., 2009), I know that this is not a perfect process. At times I found myself comparing my experiences with those of the participants and focusing on areas with which I related at the potential expense of unearthing more surprising themes. Through continuous self-reflection, I recognized some of these moments, but my own personal and socio-culturally situated experience has undoubtedly seeped into this work. It is also possible that EC subculture concepts that myself and the participants take for
granted are unfamiliar to the reader, and I may have neglected to lay adequate groundwork for the non-
EC-background reader.

Conversely, my personal insight into the experience of SD may have allowed for greater
intuition and understanding of the phenomenon. In addition, it is my hope that by disclosing that I also
have undergone SD, that participants felt greater freedom to share their story knowing that the
researcher shared corners of understanding. Still, it is also possible that participants did not feel as
comfortable with me, as we may feel more vulnerable with people with whom we share wounds. I
cannot know the full impact of my presence in our researcher-participant dyad, but it was my aim to
engage with participants with transparency, relational warmth, and consistency.

Possibilities for Future Research

Since I began exploring the spiritual struggle, spiritual distress, and disaffiliation literature in
mid-2020 for this thesis, I have witnessed a steadily increasing stream of research in this area (see for
example Exline et al., 2021; Hollier et al., 2022). This thesis has aimed to add to this ever-evolving flow
of understanding about spiritual challenges and their impacts. As this is a burgeoning research area,
there are a plethora of populations and sub-topics that future researchers can examine. In this section, I
briefly discuss two areas that participants illuminated in our conversations. Although these areas arose in
our interviews, due to time constraints, they were not explored in full detail.

The Role of Family

Each participant mentioned the role of their family in their SD process, but we did not dwell on
this feature in our time together. I remain curious about the impact of our families on our SD journey
and outcomes. Within a family systems lens, the struggles of one member of the system are seen as
embedded within a complex interplay of dynamics among each family member (Tomm et al., 2014).
This thesis has led me to ponder the role and impact of a potentially key member of the family system –
God, or the divine. While the literature on divine-attachment validates the significance of God-attachment (see for example, Sandage et al., 2015; De Roos, 2006), this area is ripe for further examination.

As of the time of writing this, I have only located one academic article examining spiritual struggles from a family systems lens (Knight et al., 2019). Given that religion can be a significant component of a family’s life (Mahoney et al., 2008; Mahoney, 2010), and the potential role of the divine in a family’s dynamics, examinations of family and SD may be significant for therapeutic outcomes, and of particular interest to those practicing from a family systems lens.

**Embodiment**

Several participants pointed to the importance of embodiment in their SD and healing journeys. Eliza in particular emphasized body-based healing modalities as “church for the body.” Additionally, Eva’s traumatic experience at a church event can be understood as a disembodied, dissociative response to a psycho-spiritually unsafe space. Although I did not unfurl this with participants, I am left with a strong felt-sense that SD implicates our holistic mind-body-spirit system. Gillette (2016) considered this in her sub-theme, “embodied self” (p. 120) in her study with women who have left Protestant fundamentalism. In her study, women described their bodies as “not their own,” (p. 94) and a key agent of shame, but following their exit, they found further space to reclaim their bodies, including embracing their sexuality.

Future research may explore individuals’ experiences of disembodiment and embodiment within their faith settings and spiritual distress journeys. Given our burgeoning understanding of the body in trauma healing (van der Kolk, 2014; McBride, 2021), research on embodiment could also be vital for therapeutic approaches with individuals carrying spiritual wounds.

~
Figure 2: A photo of me, taken by Jeremy Bissett

**Closing Reflections**

This thesis began as a figment in my own dreams as a young person traversing an SD journey. It continued to percolate within me as an emerging social worker desperate to wrap my head and heart around the realities of oppression and suffering. When I had the privilege of joining a graduate social work program, it was hard to believe that the time had come to bring this query out from the sheltered darkness of my inner life, into the “real world.”

My own SD journey, like the participants’, has continued to ebb and flow, and in embarking on this project, I confronted my own story in new ways. At times this project has tired me – I am so exhausted by the push-pull of SD, and by the pain that EC has perpetuated. On the challenging days I have asked myself, “Why did I decide to dive headfirst into this exhausting, heavy place?” On the glimmering, connective days, I have marveled at our human resilience, the power and pull of authenticity, and the raw beauty of a life filled with tensions. I still sense the embodied weightiness of
SD, but I can increasingly hold it in tandem with a more deeply nourishing, spacious, grounding, and evolving spirituality.

This project has initiated many conversations with family, friends, classmates, and truthfully, any poor soul who has dared to ask me, “What’s your thesis about?” All joking aside, these candid conversations about SD continuously deepened my commitment to this project, as I encountered the varied and pervasive impact of spiritual and religious concerns in a variety of individuals’ stories. I am grateful that this project has opened these doors.

Sinking into the phenomenological attitude, which nurtures a fresh, open, curious, present spirit, has continued to teach me (Finlay, 2011). As practitioners and researchers, we may not change the world, but we can offer something of value by merely witnessing human stories (Finlay, 2011). Now, I am hopeful that by sinking into this relational research endeavour with Eva, Gwen, Eliza, and Anna, dwelling with meanings, and sitting with my own SD experience for many months, that I have developed more curiosity, and a deeper willingness to be engaged, surprised, and transformed by lived experiences.

The participants’ rich lived experiences cannot be contained, nor were they perfectly transposed into this thesis. Instead, as IPA reminds me, I have dwelled in the interpretative space, and have only offered my diligent interpretation of participants’ interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). Eva, Gwen, Eliza and Anna and I shared moments in time together, and these moments have travelled through the filters of their situated experiences, through my own lenses, and onto these pages. Now the reader is free to engage with this writing from their own unique perspective. It is my hope that readers of all paths may find places of resonance, connection, and reflection in this work.
Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board

Have you experienced struggles, challenges or distress within evangelical Christianity?

If you relate to the above question, identify as a woman, and are between 25-40, you may be eligible for this study.

This study aims to contribute to deeper understandings of spiritual distress so we can better support individuals undergoing these experiences.

Participation would involve an online video interview, which will be recorded and securely stored.

You would be asked to share about your inner experience of spiritual distress and how this has impacted you.

Participants will receive a small honorarium.

If you or someone you know is interested in participating, please contact the researcher, Emma De Vynck (Master of Social Work student) at [email protected] or [email protected]
Appendix B: Letter of Invitation for Potential Participants

Have you experienced challenges, struggles or distress within evangelical Christianity?

My name is Emma, and I am a Master of Social Work student conducting research about these concerns. The purpose of the study is to explore experiences of spiritual distress for women of evangelical Christian backgrounds between the ages of 25-40.

I am interested in how you make sense of spiritual distress from your particular perspective. I hope to learn more about the experience of spiritual distress so we can improve awareness and approaches for helping those with spiritual distress.

If you participate, you would be asked to participate in a recorded video interview with me (Emma), where you share about your experience with spiritual distress and how it has impacted you. I would ask questions about your inner, emotional, and bodily experience of spiritual distress and its influence on your mental health.

If you are interested, please contact me directly at the email address or cellphone number provided. You do not need to share this information with the person who contacted you. I will not disclose your potential interest in the study to this individual.

By contacting me you are not agreeing to be in the study, you are solely demonstrating your interest in learning more.

If you choose to participate, you will receive a $15 Tim Hortons or Starbucks gift card for your time. This study has been approved by the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Ethics Research Board.

Thank you!

Sincerely,

Emma De Vynck
Master of Social Work Thesis Student, University of Calgary

**Supervisors:** Dr. Heather M Boynton, Faculty of Social Work and Dr. Victoria Burns, Faculty of Social Work
Appendix C: Consent Document

**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

**Researcher:** Emma De Vynck, Faculty of Social Work

**Supervisors:** Dr. Heather M Boynton, Faculty of Social Work and Dr. Victoria Burns, Faculty of Social Work

**Title of Project:**

Exploring the lived experiences of spiritual distress for women of evangelical Christian backgrounds

This consent form is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board has approved this research study.

Participation is completely voluntary, and anonymous. The only people who will have access to the interview recording and transcript will be myself and my research supervisors.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of spiritual distress for women of evangelical Christian backgrounds. I am interested in how you make sense of your spiritual distress from your unique perspective. I hope to learn more about the experience of spiritual distress so we can improve awareness and approaches for helping those with spiritual distress.

**What Will I Be Asked To Do?**

You will be asked to participate in an interview over Zoom. The interview will be approximately 1-1.5 hours in length. You can decline to answer any and all questions.
During the interview, I will ask guiding questions, but I will also follow your lead. I will ask prompting questions about your inner, emotional, and sensory experience of spiritual distress and its impact on your mental health.

The interview will record video and audio using Zoom’s recording feature. All Zoom interviews will require passwords.

Recording the interview will allow me to transcribe your words, which will aid me in completing a thorough and detailed analysis of the interview.

Once the transcript is generated, I will contact you over email so you can read the transcript and decide if there is anything you would like to remove. You will have two weeks to review the transcript. If there are areas you would like to explore further, we can set up a second interview. Following the second interview, you will once again be invited to read the transcript and remove anything you do not want included.

The last point to withdraw from the study will be two weeks following your review of your transcript. After this point, you will not be able to remove your data.

If you do decide to withdraw before this time, your information will be permanently deleted.

If you would like I will provide you with an executive summary of the final thesis and any other materials that come from the process.

The written thesis and materials will not include any identifying information, but verbatim quotes and in-depth analysis of your experience will be included.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You may decline to participate altogether, or at any point before the last point of withdrawal, with no repercussions.

**What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?**

I will collect your first name and email address for the purposes of correspondence. At the start of the interview, I will request that you select a pseudonym for yourself, or if you prefer, I will select one for you. Your pseudonym will be used in all the written works, and your given name will never be included. Please only share your pseudonym through verbal conversation with me, not through written correspondence. This is to protect your anonymity.
Should you agree to participate, you will be asked to provide the following information: gender and age bracket (25-30, 31-35, 36-40), ethnicity, educational level, religious or spiritual affiliation, and years involved with evangelical Christianity. Know that you can decline to provide this information. This information will be shared alongside your story, but no other identifying information will be shared. The recorded interview and transcript will only be accessible to me and my supervisors.

**Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?**

**Benefits:** You may value the opportunity to share your story. In addition, sharing your story will contribute to a deeper understanding of spiritual distress and can inform social workers’ and other mental health professionals’ awareness of these struggles in education, research, and practice settings. In turn, this can contribute to improving supports for those experiencing spiritual distress.

**Risks:** talking about spiritual struggles and mental health challenges can be painful. At the beginning of the interview, I will provide a list of free online supports and local mental health resources for you to access if this process causes you any distress.

As a thank you for your participation in this project, I will provide a $15 online gift card to your choice of Starbucks or Tim Hortons. If you choose to withdraw from the study once you have begun, you will still receive your gift card.

The gift card I would like is: _________________________

**My legal obligations:**

I am legally obligated to report information about harm to a child or vulnerable adult if you disclose this.

If you share that there is imminent risk of harm to yourself or another individual, including suicidal intent, I am obligated to act on this information as well.

**What Happens to the Information I Provide?**
Myself and my supervisors will be the only individuals with access to the information collected. Interviews and video recordings will be stored on an encrypted digital folder on my password protected computer.

I will analyze interviews using a method called interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This method encourages in-depth analysis of participants’ words, body language, tone and emotional responses, and looks for subtle meanings and connections within the interview, and patterns and variations with other interviewees. I will be interpreting your interview from my perspective and writing up my analysis in the written thesis. If you have further questions about this approach, please do not hesitate to inquire.

With the results of the study, I will create a written thesis, journal articles, a visual toolkit for practitioners, presentations, and podcast episodes. I will be using direct, verbatim quotes from participants’ stories in these materials.

You will be referred to by your pseudonym in all study materials. Any identifying information you share will be anonymized to protect your privacy.

Your given name will only be recorded on this consent form and on a document matching your name with your pseudonym. This document will be kept separate from the other data on its own encrypted flash drive, which will also be destroyed 7 years after the study completion. Any written notes I create during data analysis will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by me.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that

1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and

2) you agree to participate in the research project

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities.
You are free to withdraw from this research project until two weeks past your review of your transcript, which you will be alerted about periodically to allow ample time for reflection on your choice.

You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant’s First Name: (please print) _____________________________________________

Participant’s Signature: __________________________ Date: ______________

Participant’s Email Address: __________________________

Researcher’s Name: (please print) ____________________________________________

Researcher’s Signature: __________________________ Date: ______________

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

Emma De Vynck (researcher)
Faculty of Social Work

Heather Boynton (supervisor)
Faculty of Social Work

Victoria Burns (supervisor)
Faculty of Social Work

If you have any concerns about the way you’ve been treated as a participant, please contact the Research Ethics Analyst, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at 403.220.6289 or 403.220.8640; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.
Appendix D: Interview Schedule/Guide

Thank you for agreeing to participate. I want to remind you that your participation is voluntary, and you do not need to answer a question if you choose not to. You can also choose to end the interview and withdraw your participation at any time before the last opportunity of withdrawal, which is two weeks following the receipt of the transcript. You can choose to delete any portion or all of the interview content. As discussed in the consent process I will be recording this interview for the purpose of transcribing it only and then it will be deleted. Before we begin, do you have any questions for me?

As you know, I am interested in hearing about your experience with spiritual distress and its relationship with your mental health, as you experience it. I would like to hear your story of experiencing spiritual distress, and it would be helpful if you could focus on what spiritual distress is like ‘from the inside’, with a focus on the inner experience, such as the emotions, images and bodily sensations involved with spiritual distress. It is okay if things do not “sound perfect”, rather, I am hopeful you can share your experience as it resonates most for you.

1. What drew you to this study?
2. Can you tell me about your relationship to spirituality and/or religion?
3. Can you recount a story about your spiritual struggle or distress experience?
   • What imagery or language do you associate with it? What responses or reactions did you have?
   • What is it like to recount this story? What emotions, images and sensations arise?
4. What is your experience with struggling with your faith (or within your faith, or with spiritual distress)?
•Prompts: experience as a woman, experience within evangelical Christianity, experience within your church and R/S community, experience within relationships? relationship with God or divine?

5. How would you describe the impact of spiritual distress on your mental health, if any?

•What sort of language or imagery comes to mind as you consider this?

6. How has spiritual distress affected other areas of your life?

•Prompts: relationships, career, personal identity, worldview

7. What is at the core of the experience of spiritual distress for you?

8. Have you found any changes or some recovery from these experiences? If so, how?

•Prompts: What is the experience of healing from these experiences like? How do you experience this in your body? What imagery and/or language do you associate with healing from spiritual distress? What sorts of things were supportive for you? What do you wish others understood about spiritual distress and its effects? E.g., mental health providers, religious leaders, family and friends
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