

This is healthCARE too:

**Exploring Faith Journeys and Church Experience among Young Adults. A Service
Design Approach to Support Spiritual Health**

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This thesis is not theology, not psychology, not sociology —it is design-informed qualitative research situated in a faith context.

Author's note

Dear Reader,

A few days ago, someone I had recently met asked me a simple question — one I should have thought about before. "Who are you writing for?" Hmmm... Who am I writing for?

Beyond its own thesis aim, this research turned out to be a deeply personal journey as well, a journey in the midst of what Fowler calls "stages of faith". I sometimes wondered how much of me should be here, what has to be said and what does not, for ethical and positionality reasons, and for the need to use specific tools over others, and then how to organise the information around this — including the limitations of a thesis structure. Even I found myself confused about what should go where, how, and why, to keep the story coherent. Ultimately, that wasn't entirely achievable, and much of this journey isn't even in these pages.

So, who is this for? Primarily, I see it as for myself, since it represents a major milestone in my personal journey—both as a Christian and a beginner researcher—where self-discipline remains crucial. However, as one interviewed pastor noted, "we are all searching for something — you, me, and young adults alike," so I believe I am also writing for you, since you've begun reading this thesis. However, before you continue, there is something else I want to say.

While this thesis is rooted in reflections on faith, relationship with God, and religious communities, the role of spirituality and how Service Design—both as a mindset and as a method/toolset) might support young adults' spiritual health, this work is not intended to engage in religious compare, judge, or criticize any faith or denomination. I have deep respect for the humble, caring, loving, and moral contributions of people from all cultures, and I sincerely appreciate many individuals from diverse backgrounds in my life. Although the work is written within a Christian context, I hope this rootedness is not perceived as exclusionary. I hold a deep respect and sense of responsibility toward the church community, recognizing that researching in this context requires careful sensitivity. While I understand that my limitations and human imperfections can influence this work, I aim to honor the sacred identity and calling of the community I am researching within, aware of the profound meaning it holds that I may not fully grasp at this moment.

My aim in this research is not to prove one faith tradition is superior to another. Instead, I focus on exploring faith journeys within a particular Christian community and examining what a suitable foundation for designing with Christian communities could be. I hope that, in some small way, this work can contribute to future efforts aimed at human flourishing.

As Fowler (1981) writes, “liveliness and continuing growth in faith require self-examination and readiness for encounter with the faith perspectives of others.” (p. xiii). I am approaching this liveliness and growth through this initiative of faith journey mapping, which, in the words of Erik Erikson, seems like a combination of “playful seriousness and serious playfulness”(Fowler, 1981, p. xiv). Although I experienced this within the community that feels most familiar to me, faith perspectives and journeys within this community may also differ. And since faith is a “universal feature of human living, recognizably similar everywhere despite the remarkable variety of forms and contents of religious practice and belief”(Fowler, 1981, p. 14), I hope the process of this thesis, these lines and the development of this approach towards future research will be helpful to you, as you are reading it. Have you ever thought about your faith journey?

Until then, may this thesis serve as an imperfect yet honest, humble, and loving offering — an invitation to reflect, to dialogue, and to design with hearts open to both divine guidance and love for our neighbours. Given the sensitive nature of the research topic, I would like to note that some of the material may be emotionally challenging. Please engage with this text at your own pace for your well-being.

Whether you share an interest in faith, spirituality, and religion — whether you can articulate what you believe or not, whether you're active in a religious community or not, and whether you identify as spiritual and religious, spiritual but not religious, none, or have moved away—I hope that exploring this topic with curiosity and openness brings you something meaningful within these pages. Something that speaks to you, personally. To your own path.

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.”—Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)

Acknowledgements

My heart is full — so full, full of gratitude. How many times shall I mention "full" to express the intensity? In the words of a Christian song: "All my words fall short, I got nothing new/How could I express all my gratitude?/I could sing these songs, as I often do/But every song must end, and You never do [...] And I know it's not much / But I've nothing else fit for a King".

As I am writing, in this intense gratitude and joy, I remember so many things. Normally, I would want to write them all down. The problem is, they each have such a significant place in this story that forgetting one would distort the picture. I saw the care and love of God through it all — how He managed to work with my very imperfect and sinful self, which took so many forms, but the forms His grace found me through were so much bigger. How He arranged everything — from me being able to step into a Hungarian community in the midst of my fears around speaking Hungarian. It was such a healing process. Out of fear, I often did not reach out to people — specifically pastors I very much looked up to. I should not even start talking about the sudden, unexpected, mysterious, hard-to-understand moments, how things were aligning — because I understand the limitations of this thesis structure, and this is probably not the place for it. What I do want to state clearly, though, is how grateful I am to Him — to God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit — who gave me life and carried me throughout this process in ways I cannot even fully grasp yet. All my gratitude goes to Him, because I know He sustained me in the midst of hard-to-deal-with situations. He brought people around to support me. He fixed relationships I had messed up. He gave opportunities, new ways of seeing and thinking, new desires, a new attitude — a new me.

This does not mean I am not thankful for everyone involved in this process. It means I recognize Him behind my relationships. I am incredibly grateful for the endless support of my very kind supervisor, Kiwoong, whom I cannot thank enough for his support, smiles, patience, and encouragements. To my caring and loving family, who always support me no matter what, in so many forms, and whom I often take for granted — this goes especially to my grandfather, my father, my sister and nieces, my cousin and aunties. There are simply no words for this! To my dear neighbor — I could not forget about you. To my friends from different environments, who were always cheering for me and supporting me — some of them by making me long for that graduation party in Kuldiga even more, and one of them

even in the middle of their own wedding party. To all my dear friends, from literally so many church communities and cultures, praying for me and checking on me. And to everyone in the larger community who might not even know how they were participating. To everyone's prayers, genuine thoughts, support, and expressed desire to keep connected, I just have to say: God bless you!

And, of course, much appreciation goes to the pastors and young adults who made this research what it is. They did not have to show up the way they did, and yet they did — fully, vulnerably, honestly, and with such warmth. Their trust, love, care, and authenticity — *hitelesség* —made everything possible, and I did not take a single moment of it for granted. I am deeply humbled by their trust. This research carries their voices, and I hope it does them justice.

And now, dear reader, no matter where you are in your faith journey — you are on it, and I wish you spiritual health on it as well.

Finishing with the Apostle Paul's prayer from Ephesians 3:14-21:

"I kneel before the Father, from whom every family[a] in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen."

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Abbreviations

GenZ – generation Z

SD – service design

SDSI – Service Design Strategies and Innovations (Erasmus Mundus Joint Master's programme)

FBO – Faith-Based Organizations

Defining terms

Scripture/Word of God/Bible – are used interchangeably, depending on how participants expressed their thoughts. It is the sacred scriptures of Christians, comprising the Old Testament and the New Testament (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)

Church (*uppercase*) — the universal body of Christians, spanning all locations and times; also used to refer to a broader denominational body (e.g. the Reformed Church in Romania).

church (*lowercase*) — a local, organized gathering of believers in a particular place. Used throughout this study to refer to the specific congregations within which research was conducted.

congregation (*also: local church*) — the organized body of people formally registered as belonging to a particular church in a given locality, regardless of the nature or depth of their personal faith

church community — the broadest and most inclusive term for the people connected to a local church, regardless of formal membership status. Includes formal members, active participants who have not formally joined, and occasional attenders. Used when emphasizing belonging, relationships, and shared life.

church members — individuals who have formally joined a congregation.

community members — anyone participating in the life of a church community regardless of formal membership status; the inclusive counterpart to church members, used when formal belonging is not the relevant distinction.

church building — the physical space used for worship and community life (e.g. when referring to spatial aspects such as seating, layout, design). Used explicitly as a church building to distinguish it from the community or institution it houses.

This study uses the term *service* in three distinct senses, kept separate throughout:

- Service as vocation (hu: szolgálat) — the theological sense of giving oneself for others and the community, relational and non-transactional in nature (e.g. a young adult helping organize teachings and activities for children as a member of the church community – in this case the young adult is serving, and kids ministry might be the young adult’s area of service). In practice, vocational service is often organized into structured ministries or teams — and it is precisely in that organized dimension that service design mindset becomes applicable, without displacing the underlying motivation.
- Service as designed offering (hu: szolgáltatás) — the service design sense, referring to organized systems of interaction between a provider and those it serves. This study borrows its methods without importing its transactional logic into the church context (e.g. how a newcomer navigates their first months in the community).
- Church service (hu: istentisztelet) — a worship-oriented gathering open to and intended for the whole congregation, whether recurring (e.g. Sunday service) or occasional (e.g. prayer week, holidays, baptism, confirmation, marriage, funeral). When referring collectively to all such gatherings, this study uses the plural church services.

Church event — organized activities that are targeted at the audience and distinct in purpose from congregational worship, even when they may include worship elements. These are typically generational or interest-based in nature (e.g. youth camp, retreat, conference, concert, kids summer program—Bible Week). Referred to by their specific name when they appear, and collectively as church events.

Ministry gatherings — the recurring, group-specific activities that form the weekly rhythm of community life, each serving a particular group or function within the church (e.g. youth group, bible study, kids religious class, choir rehearsal). These are distinct from church services in that they are not congregation-wide or primarily worship-oriented (within a liturgy), and distinct from church events in that they are recurring rather than occasional.

denomination – a religious organization whose congregations are united in their adherence to its beliefs and practices (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) Examples of Christian denominations: Baptist, Catholic, Orthodox, Pentecostal, Reformed. This study is conducted within the Reformed denomination, specifically the Reformed Church in Romania.

Spiritual journey, spiritual growth, spiritual transformation, spiritual health — used throughout this study in their English sense. In Hungarian, these concepts are not expressed using the word *spirituális* (spiritual) but through the word *lélek* (soul), which carries a different connotation for Hungarians. The corresponding Hungarian terms are:

- spiritual journey — lelki út (the journey of the soul)
- spiritual growth — lelki növekedés (growth of the soul)
- spiritual transformation — lelki formálódás (transformation of the soul)
- spiritual health — lelki egészség (health of the soul)

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Research motivation

The question “Are you religious?” is one I have received many times as a simple YES/NO question, yet I have never found it easy to answer it that way. I was often unsure about what people actually wanted to know by asking this question. Over the years, I observed that being religious often meant tradition — people following religious practices because they inherited them, not necessarily because of personal faith, conviction, or decision. It did not always mean actively living out Christian faith, but rather holding on to practices whose deeper meaning may not be fully understood. Within Christianity, this tension often becomes visible in denominational practices. These differences raise further questions for me: Is my faith formed deeply enough that I can confidently answer the question of being religious? I believe questioning them becomes part of the process of understanding what faith means personally, beyond inherited forms or external labels.

This raises the question of what people really mean when they ask such a brief question. Is the question about practising a religious tradition? Or is it about faith — about meaning, belief, and a personal relationship with God? In my opinion, if it is the latter, then the question cannot be answered quickly, as it carries a different depth and responsibility. The same logic might follow when someone asks, “Are you spiritual?” - a question that may hold similar weight for anyone whose belief is rooted not merely in tradition, but in a personal relationship with the divine.

If the question is about faith, then what is it about? If not related to a specific religion, does answering “yes, I am religious” simply mean that I grew up in a certain cultural or family context, and I am actively preserving “traditions” out of respect for previous generations? At what point does this relate to my personal faith? And does identifying as Catholic, Orthodox, Reformed, Lutheran, Baptist, Pentecostal, or otherwise necessarily give meaning to

one's spirituality and/or faith? These categories may sound similar, yet they are not the same in meaning or lived reality. The question can be turned in the other direction too. What if I answer "no" to the question of being religious? Does that imply a rejection of faith, or merely a distancing from institutional and traditional forms of religion? This leads to further questions. Can one live out faith without being religious? Can one be spiritual without being religious, or religious without being spiritual? And where does growth, development, and formation fit — is that a matter of spirituality, of soul, of faith, or of something else entirely?

I believe these questions do not cancel faith; they shape it and create meaning. Asking them is part of the process of understanding what faith means personally, beyond inherited forms and external labels. Yet they also point to something larger than personal biography. The ambiguity they reveal is not only a feature of everyday conversation: it is present in academic research, in survey instruments, in pastoral practice, and in the ways institutions think about the young adults in their communities. My motivation for exploring these terms further does not lie in necessarily understanding how we use them in everyday language, but rather in their content implications on health, young adults, and the church. As someone told me in an academic setting in the Baltics, they never talk about faith and religion because there are no spaces where they can discuss them. In schools and public spaces, it has become a taboo topic. Is this affecting our health in the end? Whenever religious communities are deliberately excluded from design research—such as an instance I experienced in an academic setting (not specified for privacy reasons)—I question why this is even happening.

It is obvious that the terms religious, spiritual, and faith carry multiple layers of meaning that are frequently conflated — and the consequences of that conflation do not appear to be only semantic. They shape how questions are asked, how people are understood, and how communities respond to those in their midst, who are navigating their own answers.

I consider myself a curious individual, shaped by diverse experiences across eight Christian denominations in six countries and on two continents, each of varying length and intensity. My journey has included pivotal moments I perceived as "saving". Over the years, I have developed an increasing interest in conducting research within a Christian context. This interest was sparked in a more practical, tangible way by three key moments (though it is, in reality, the result of a very long journey): first, when I encountered a pastor from a Reformed Church in Romania on a podcast led by Baptist speakers; second, when, in Latvia, a

classmate in the SDSI programme suggested researching how faith-related ideas are communicated and received, likening the process to the telephone game, and later noticed this need in another setting in Estonia; and third, when I recognised the significant spiritual growth I experienced after a personal decision, which clearly shaped my transformation.

1.2. Research Background and Rationale

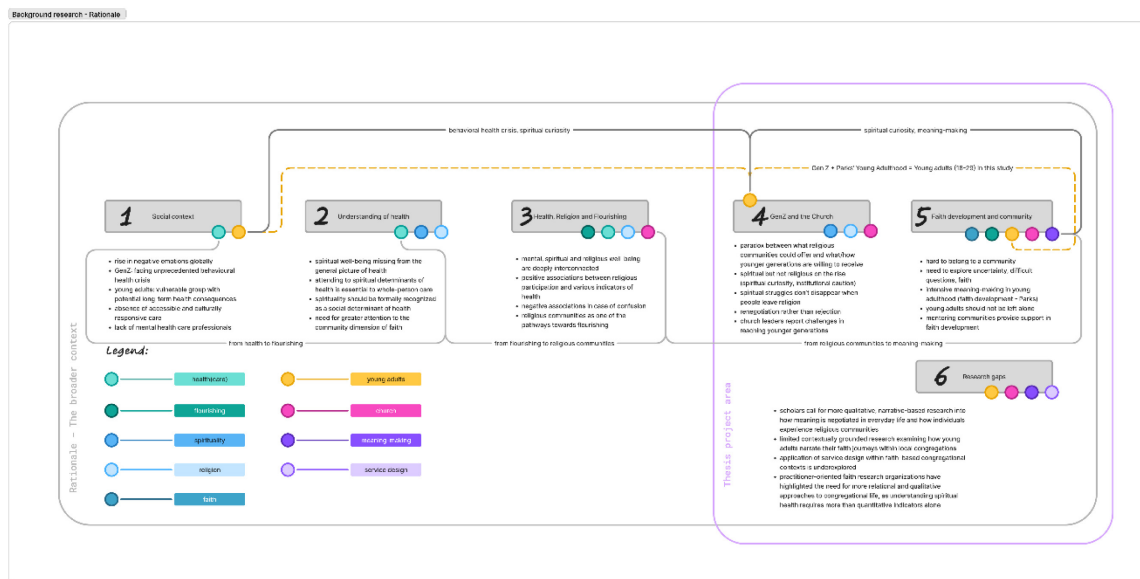


Fig. 1. Background rationale: from health to meaning-making

This sub-chapter lays the contextual foundation for the present study through five interconnected themes, the flow of which is illustrated in Figure 1.1. It begins with the broader social context — the global mental health crisis and its particular weight on a specific generation — and moves towards an expanded understanding of health that includes spiritual well-being and human flourishing. It then examines the relationship between health, religion and flourishing, before zooming in on the specific spiritual landscape of Generation Z (often combined with younger Millennials, depending on the source), a generation caught in tension between genuine curiosity and institutional disengagement. The chapter concludes with an exploration of faith development theory, positioning young adulthood as a critical stage of meaning-making that calls for relational accompaniment. Together, these threads build the rationale for a study that asks not whether religious communities matter for young adult

well-being — the evidence suggests they do — but how they might more intentionally accompany the meaning-making journey this generation is already quietly pursuing.

1.2.1. Social context

The clear rise in negative emotions such as sadness, stress, worry and loneliness over a decade reflects a significant global shift in well-being (John F. Helliwell et al., 2025). Europe is no different, with nearly half of its population reporting emotional or psychological challenges in recent years (Flash Eurobarometer 530 Health, 2023). This trend is particularly pronounced among Gen Z, who consume news more than other content globally, with 6 in 10 feeling overwhelmed by current events (Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health, 2025). This can be problematic in a growing disconnect between media coverage and the lived realities of much of the world's population (Dritan, 2022).

In the United States, Gen Z reports the lowest levels of positive outlook and the highest prevalence of mental illness compared to other generations (McKinsey&Company, 2024). In 2024, Barna Group confirmed these findings: among 2001 Gen Z participants, 39% consistently felt uncertain about the future, the same percentage felt anxious about important decisions, and 38% were afraid of failure. They were also less likely than older generations to report never feeling lonely, isolated, anxious about decisions, or overwhelmed with responsibilities, among other emotions (Barna Group, 2024). Zooming into Gen Z, the UNICEF Perceptions of Youth Mental Health Report (Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health, 2025), drawing on a sample of 5,567 Gen Z respondents across seven countries, found that young adult Gen Z (18–25) reported higher rates of mental health need (52%) than their teenage counterparts (29%) — yet paradoxically, young adults were considerably less likely to seek that help. This pattern is further compounded among young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, for whom cultural stigma and structural barriers reduce access to support even further (Rickwood et al., 2007). Because young adults experience major life changes and are more prone to risk-taking behaviors, they are widely recognized as a vulnerable group with potential long-term health consequences(Higley, 2019).

Notably, despite high levels of familiarity with mental health discourse, only half of respondents reported knowing where to find mental health resources (Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health, 2025), suggesting that awareness alone, in the absence of accessible and

culturally responsive care, is insufficient to translate knowledge into help-seeking behavior through self-care or community support. Early intervention is increasingly recognized as central to mental health, yet significant gaps in access to care remain. Recent reports indicate that a substantial proportion of individuals who require mental health support do not receive it, underscoring the importance of non-clinical, relational forms of care that operate upstream of crisis (The Faith & Media Initiative, 2023).

In the midst of societal influences and their specific needs in mental health, Gen Z also presents characteristics which can fill any researcher with hope for the future, as the opportunities this generation is bringing are enormous. Despite all the pressure mentioned in the global research, Gen Z remain hopeful and want to contribute to shaping something better for our future, even though young adults are not as excited as teens about the future (Global Coalition for Youth Mental Health, 2025). This hopefulness is concretely directed. Among their top concerns, Gen Z prioritizes seeing true and lasting social change, ending human trafficking, addressing poverty, supporting the homeless, and improving access to mental health care and healthcare more broadly (Barna Group, 2024).

1.2.2. Understanding of health

According to the World Health Organization, *health* is simply “a state of complete physical, mental, and social *wellbeing* and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”(World Health Organization, 1946). This definition underscores a holistic understanding of well-being, but several scholars have argued that it still omits a crucial dimension: spiritual well-being (Chirico F, 2016; Koenig, 2012; Larson, 1996; Vader, 2006; VanderWeele et al., 2021; Wüthrich-Grossenbacher, 2024).

Although spirituality has long been woven into the fabric of health care, the rise of technology in the twentieth century gradually displaced it from mainstream medicine — yet a growing body of scholarship now recognizes that mind, body, social environment, and spiritual life are inseparably intertwined, and that attending to spiritual determinants of health is not peripheral but essential to truly whole-person care (Koenig, 2014; Long et al., 2024; Puchalski et al., 2014). Recently, an exceptionally diverse team of researchers — spanning epidemiologists, clinical oncologists, public health policy makers, and pioneer advocates of

spiritual care in medicine — argued that spirituality should be formally recognized as a social determinant of health alongside established factors such as income, housing, and education (Long et al., 2024), especially now that recent research also calls for greater attention to the community dimension of faith and its role in shaping both individual and collective well-being (Long et al., 2025).

1.2.3. Health, Religion and Flourishing

Mental health is neither addressed nor lived in isolation. Scholars emphasize that mental, spiritual, and religious well-being are deeply interconnected (Cook, 2020).

Although unhealthy ways of relating to religion can be associated with negative emotions, research consistently shows that religious participation is also connected to several positive aspects of health.. Scholars have identified associations with: greater longevity (Hummer et al., 1999; Li, Stampfer, et al., 2016; Strawbridge et al., 2001); lower mortality, suicide rates, and better cancer survival rates (Chida et al., 2009; Koenig et al., 2012; VanderWeele et al., 2016); improved mental health, reduced depression and anxiety (Balbuena et al., 2013; Li, Okereke, et al., 2016; Mueller et al., 2001); greater meaning in life (Krause & Hayward, 2012; Upenieks, 2022); increased life satisfaction (Lim & Putnam, 2010); prosocial behaviour (Shariff et al., 2016), generosity, civic engagement, forgiveness, trust and gratitude (Lambert et al., 2009, 2010, 2012).

Since there are billions of people worldwide embracing the forces of religion and spirituality, with 75.8% of the world's people reporting a religious affiliation as of 2020 (Conrad Hackett et al., 2025), it is self-evident that these two also influence the society, the experiences, behaviours and health of the population (Long et al., 2025; Oman, 2018). Consequently, any engagement with Gen Z's mental health must also attend to their spiritual and religious landscape. Moving from well-being to flourishing helps us attend to these needs, as we proceed with the current background rationale.

Though both terms are broad, well-being focuses more on the individual, whereas flourishing includes the surrounding context. So, if someone is doing well but lives in a corrupt or deprived environment, we might say they've achieved well-being—but not full flourishing (VanderWeele et al., 2023). Existing theoretical models situate spirituality and/or religion within broader systems that shape overall human flourishing (Koenig, 2012; Vanderweele,

2017). For example, in his flourishing framework, VanderWeele (2017) defines flourishing as a “state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good”. Within his framework, religious community is one of the four key pathways — alongside family, work, and education — through which individuals may attain flourishing across five interconnected domains: happiness and life satisfaction, physical and mental health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, and close social relationships.

While the specific health-generating mechanisms of spiritual community participation are not yet fully understood in academic research (Long et al., 2024), attending services and engaging in shared religious practices have been found to predict positive health outcomes more strongly than private spirituality or religious identity alone (Musick et al., 2004; VanderWeele et al., 2017). Spiritual support received within church settings has been shown to have a stronger effect on well-being than general emotional support from non-religious relationships (Krause & David Hayward, 2014). Yet when zooming into the spiritual and religious landscape of Gen Z, a paradox is revealed between what religious communities could offer and what younger generations are currently willing to receive as meaningful and relevant to their lives.

1.2.4. Gen Z and the church

Although Christianity remain the world’s largest religious group, followed by Islam, religious disaffiliation now constitutes the third-largest group (Conrad Hackett et al., 2025). This is sometimes expressed in the literature with different nuances, such as "spiritual but not religious" or "nones," to mention a couple. However, Mercadante (2020) argues that spiritual struggles do not disappear when people leave religion.

Spiritually, Gen Z is neither closed nor settled. In the words of Harold G. Koenig,

“Young people are born with spiritual needs, which rapidly increase during adolescence and young adulthood. Many young people today, however, don’t know how to meet those needs. Without guidance from family, a church community, or the educational system, they often try to meet those needs in the wrong places – alcohol, drugs, sex, money, etc., and end up losing themselves.” –(The Faith & Media Initiative, 2023).

Human suffering and global conflict are among the top issues that raise spiritual doubts for 18 to 35-year-olds, and yet rather than turning away entirely, many are actively looking for answers — making this a generation defined not by apathy but by unresolved searching (*Key Findings – The Connected Generation*, n.d.). They are comfortable discussing their beliefs with people who think differently, open to spiritual exploration, and yet increasingly avoidant of institutional religion as they question inherited frameworks and search for meaning on their own terms (Bauer, 2024). Importantly, their moral code is shifting away from doctrinal allegiance toward embodied practice — they care less about which religion teaches something and more about whether it is actually being lived out, with behavior mattering more to them than belief systems alone. Significantly, 73 percent of Gen Z report belief in God or a higher power, and Christian young adults in particular express interest in prayer, caring for the poor and marginalized, helping others form healthy relationships, and guiding people toward a deeper knowledge of God's ways — a spirituality that points not to tradition for its own sake, but to something more relational, participatory, and justice-oriented (Barna Group, 2024).

However, for many years now, “church leaders have reported significant obstacles to reaching younger generations,” said David Kinnaman, CEO of Barna Group (Barna Group, 2026). This statement is supported in Europe as well (Ablonzy, 2020; The Youthscape Centre for Research, 2016, 2021). While research suggests that sometimes non-mainline churches tend to experience stronger engagement growth among younger generations than historic denominations (Barna Group, 2026; Kiss et al., 2022), mainline churches are also experiencing incredible growth in some countries (Ataman & Lamb, 2025) and they are also more likely to volunteer for social change (Guo et al., 2013). There is no one rule fits all. Although religion often functions not only as personal belief but also as a marker of cultural and ethnic identity (eg. Transylvanian Hungarians maintain higher levels of religious commitment than their counterparts in Hungary - Kiss et al., 2022), in this generational landscape no church can assume that even ethnical identity alone will continue to sustain a specific denominational belonging among young adults.

This might not even be the point, as the patterns suggest not a rejection of faith, but rather a disengagement in stagnation or a renegotiation of how young adults engage with religious communities. Rather than returning to religion in traditional or habitual ways, many appear to be exploring faith selectively, cautiously, and in relation to their lived experiences.

1.2.5. Faith development and mentoring communities

Some church leaders appear to acknowledge that young adults are in a phase of intense identity searching, and this generation is not lost to faith but rather lost to institutional visibility, with many remaining spiritually alive yet unable to find a community where they genuinely belong. What they need, a 2019 conference on congregational pedagogy concluded, is not programmes or pressure, but spacious communities where they are free to be uncertain, ask difficult questions, and explore faith without being told what to believe (Somogyi, 2019). This reflects what Parks (2011) identifies as a distinct and critical stage of faith development in young adulthood — a period of intensive meaning-making marked by fundamental questions, forming purpose, and imagining worthy dreams.

Of all five domains mentioned before in VanderWeele's (2017) flourishing framework, meaning and purpose seem to be particularly central, and Parks captures why with striking clarity:

We human beings, are unable to survive, and certainly cannot thrive, unless we can make meaning. If life is perceived as random, fragmented, chaotic – meaningless – we suffer confusion, distress, stagnation, and finally despair. The meaning we make orients our posture in the world and determines our sense of self and purpose. We need to be able to make some sort of sense out of things. We seek pattern, order, coherence, and relation in the dynamic and disparate elements of our experience (Parks, 2011, p. 9)

This process, just like mental health, should not happen in isolation: mentoring communities are essential rather than peripheral to faith development, providing both stability and space for exploration (Love, 2002). This provides a strong rationale for understanding religious communities as spaces where young adults — including those not currently attending church — may find support on their journey of meaning-making and opportunities for renewed faith engagement, which then, based on everything that has been mentioned before, shall contribute to an improved mental health of this generation. The question is now: How are young adults experiencing this journey around religious communities?

1.2.6. Background research conclusion

The discussion above has traced a complex and layered picture, moving from the global mental health crisis and its particular weight on young adults, through the interconnected dimensions of spiritual well-being, human flourishing, and the role of religious participation and communities in supporting both. What has emerged is not a simple argument for religion as a solution to mental health challenges, but something more nuanced: a case for attending carefully to the relational and meaning-making dimensions of human life that clinical and institutional frameworks too often overlook.

Several threads converge here. Spirituality is increasingly recognised as a social determinant of health (Long et al., 2024), shaping outcomes across multiple domains of human flourishing. Of all five domains in VanderWeele's framework (2017), meaning and purpose stands out as most urgent for this generation, and as Parks reminds us, without the capacity to make meaning, human beings do not merely struggle: they despair (Parks, 2011). Religious community participation offers something that private spirituality or general social support cannot fully replicate — yet the mechanisms through which these benefits are generated remain largely unexplored (Long et al., 2024).

The picture then is complicated by a generation in active renegotiation, in search for identity, that is spiritually curious yet institutionally disengaged — neither simply secular nor traditionally religious — actively renegotiating inherited faith at a moment when, globally, the "spiritual but not religious" category has become the third largest worldview group after Christianity and Islam (Conrad Hackett et al., 2025). Yet this renegotiation is unfolding in a cultural moment where faith and religion have become more and more marginalized in media coverage, and reduced to controversy rather than treated as a living dimension of human experience (Dritan, 2022).

The patterns described throughout this chapter do not suggest a rejection of faith but rather what Parks identifies as a critical stage of young adult faith development, which calls for a mentoring community willing to accompany uncertainty with attentive presence. This thesis therefore proposes that before mental health support is addressed as a clinical or institutional issue, it would be understood first as a relational one. Drawing on Simone Weil's insight that

attention taken to its highest degree is the same thing as prayer, it frames mentoring within religious community as a form of care grounded in attentive presence — a preventive practice rather than a remedial one. However, there are many unknowns in achieving this. How do young adults narrate their faith journeys, how is community experienced within those journeys, and how might that community be more intentionally designed to accompany the meaning-making process this generation is already quietly pursuing in isolation?

While keeping this in mind, it should also be noted that, before moving to the next section, the terms faith, spirituality, and religion have at times been used interchangeably throughout this chapter, reflecting how they appear across the diverse sources consulted. This is an acknowledged complexity and the conceptual distinctions between these terms, as well as the specific use of the phrase *faith journey*, will be addressed more precisely in the next chapter, Literature Review.

1.3.Problem statement

Young adults represent a vulnerable group facing an unprecedented health crisis with potential long-term consequences — yet accessible, culturally responsive care often remains out of reach for many. Attending to spiritual determinants of health is essential to whole-person care, but spiritual well-being is still missing from the general picture of health, and the community dimension of faith deserves greater attention.

Religious communities are one pathway to flourishing, and the associations between religious participation and health are numerous and positive. Yet for a generation that is spiritually open, but resistant towards religious institutions, this connection can become problematic. Spiritual struggles do not disappear when people leave religion, and young adulthood is an intensive season of meaning-making — meaning young adults should not be left alone in this faith development process. Churches are one of the mentoring communities that can provide this support.

However, churches largely lack practical tools to move beyond attendance metrics toward a genuine understanding of the lived experiences of their young adult congregants (J. Jensen, 2025). Service design offers promising approaches for generating insights from lived experience, yet its application within faith-based settings remains largely unexplored.

This study therefore seeks to situate itself in the gap at the intersection of healthcare, religious communities, faith development, and design practice — by examining how Hungarian young adults within the Reformed Church in Romania narrate their faith journeys, how the religious community shapes their meaning-making process, and how a service design mindset and specific methods might generate insights to help faith communities become more intentionally responsive to the young adults in their midst, for the benefit of their spiritual health.

1.4. Research aim and research questions

The aim of this study is to propose a way to interpret and explore how young adults (18–29) within the (Hungarian) Reformed Church in Romania narrate their faith journeys, and how church-based support is experienced within these journeys. Using service design as a generative mindset, the research maps key relational and organizational touchpoints, identifies needs, patterns, and turning points, and facilitates the generation of contextually (faith-based) grounded design insights. This study does not aim to evaluate Christian doctrine or denominational theology.

Fig.2 illustrates the target audience in a bounded faith-based context, shows how the aim connects to this target via the developmental theory mentioned earlier and to be expanded in the Literature Review (Chapter 2), and also shows the thesis’s disciplinary anchor and its qualitative methodology, which will be discussed further in the Research Design (Chapter 3).

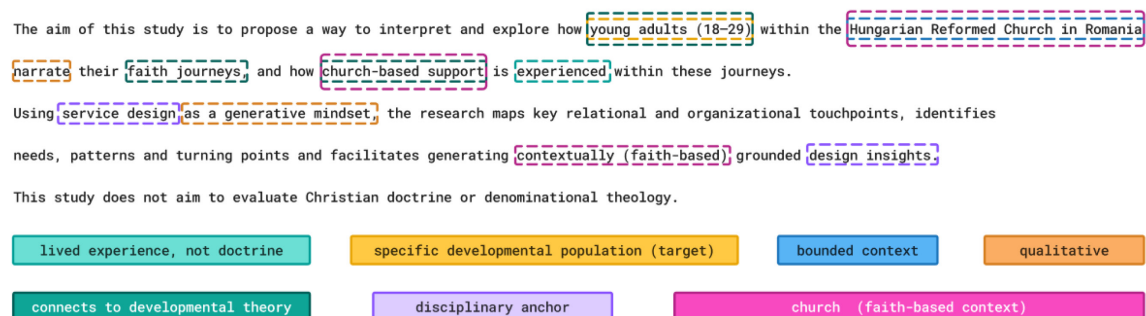


Fig. 2. Research aim and its different lenses

Therefore, this research has 3 main objectives:

- Objective 1 (exploratory - core phenomenon): To explore how young adults experience and narrate their faith journeys within congregations of the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania and to identify church-related touchpoints that shape these experiences.
- Objective 2 (methodological - design lens): To apply service design as a method and mindset for structuring, interpreting, and synthesizing lived experiences within faith-based contexts.
- Objective 3 (dialogical): To propose a tool that facilitates dialogue between young adults' lived experiences and church leadership perspectives on faith development, in order to reflect on how congregational support may be strengthened.

Research questions guiding the current project to achieve its objectives are:

1. How do young adults (18–29) within the Hungarian Reformed Church in Romania narrate their faith journeys, and how is the church experienced within these journeys?
Sub-research questions:
 - How do young adults narrate their faith journeys over time, and what patterns of meaning-making, turning points, and relational influences emerge?
 - How is church experienced within these journeys, and which church-related touchpoints are perceived as supportive or hindering?
2. How can service design methods contribute to generating insights into young adults' lived faith experiences and facilitate reflection within faith-based contexts?
3. How can insights from this study inform contextually appropriate ways of strengthening support for young adults within congregational life?
Sub-research question:
 - How do young adults and church leaders understand and describe key concepts such as faith, religion, spirituality, faith/spiritual journey, spiritual health, community, and mentoring?
 - How do church leaders perceive and conceptualize support for young adults, and how do their perspectives relate to young adults' narrated experiences?

The objective and research questions are presented in Fig. 3 and included in the Appendix, together with the aim of the thesis.

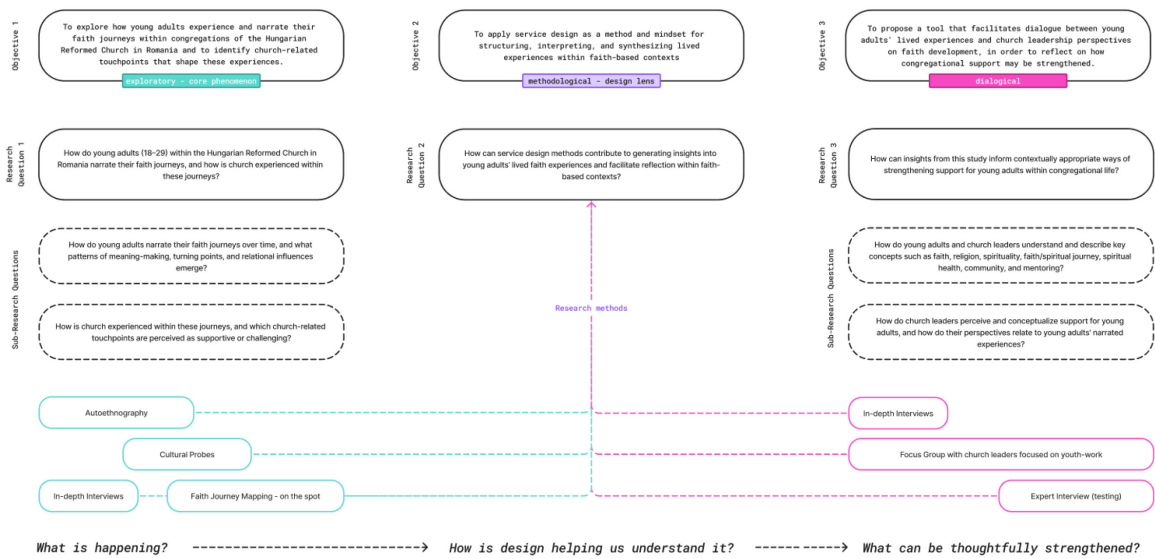


Fig. 3. Research objectives and questions, connected to research methods

1.5. Scope and delimitations

This study is an embedded single-case study situated within one minority group (Hungarian), one denomination (Reformed Church), one country (Romania), and one region (Királyhágómelléki Egyházkerület). It focuses on young adults aged 18–29 and it hopes to facilitate dialogue between young adults' lived experiences and church leadership perspectives on faith development, to reflect on how congregational support may be strengthened.

The study is conducted in Hungarian language. Unless otherwise indicated, translations of Hungarian terms and interview transcriptions throughout this study are my own. Direct translations are used when established English equivalents are absent or imprecise, particularly for church-specific terminology and participant quotes. When direct translation is not possible, the closest synonym is used depending on context. For instance, there is no direct translation for the Hungarian word *hiteles* — either *authentic* or *trustworthy* will be used depending on context, but in reality the term is more nuanced and cannot be captured by a single English word. *Hiteles* encompasses genuineness, vulnerability, trustworthiness, and the alignment between one's words, actions, and inner convictions— someone who does not perform a role but shows up as they truly are. *Hiteles* is not self-proclaimed but is rather a characteristic one can strive for. A *hiteles* person is one whose integrity is felt and recognized by others, not perfect, but is perceived as genuinely real.

The primary analytical focus is on:

- Lived experiences of faith and community
- Church-related touchpoints experienced as supportive or hindering
- Alignment or misalignment between young adults and leadership perspectives
- Translation of findings into design-informed recommendations

This study intentionally limits its scope in several ways:

- It focuses on young adults from up to 3 local congregations in Romania and does not aim to produce generalisable findings across the Reformed Church worldwide
- It does not assess theological doctrine, denominational theology, or liturgical correctness
- It does not quantitatively measure spiritual maturity, religiosity, or flourishing
- It does not conduct longitudinal evaluations of implemented design interventions
- It does not aim to produce a universal model of spiritual development
- It focuses specifically on young adults (18–29) and excludes adolescents, older adults, and intergenerational comparisons as primary units of analysis

The purpose is depth of contextual understanding.

1.6. Positionality and Reflexivity

The pot carries its maker's thoughts, feelings, and spirit. To overlook this fact is to miss a crucial truth, whether in clay, story, or science. —Susan Krieger (1991, p. 89)

This thesis may likewise be understood as a “pot,” shaped by its maker. However, its maker has some serious limitations. It is important to note that I do not see myself as the autonomous author of value in this work. I come to this research as an aspiring service designer, a researcher, and a person of Christian faith — and I believe all three are inseparable in the work that follows. My positionality is shaped by my academic background in service design, but equally by a personal and chosen relationship with God that has profoundly transformed how I see people, responsibility, and the act of service itself.

Every user interview, every touchpoint, every design decision carries moral weight. This research, therefore, requires ongoing self-examination — a willingness to pause and honestly reflect on my own attitudes, assumptions, and actions throughout the process. However sincere my intention to “protecting and doing no harm to those involved” (Chang, 2022, p. 61), I am aware that I — my blind spots, my cultural background, my imperfect understanding and character — can shape this work in ways I do not fully control. Acknowledging this was an important starting point, one I had to remind myself of many times, especially when first trying to write a thesis in this context— in the moments when my limited vocabulary, abilities, and understanding, the simple imperfection of being human, felt like reasons this work should not be written at all.

I recognized early in this process that entering a faith/religious community as a researcher carries a particular sensitivity. The sacred is not a variable I considered measurable. Out of respect for the community and honesty about my own limits, I found it important to consider a practical-theology lens when setting the limitations and future implications of this work, as someone who is not a theologian and does not want to reduce what is holy to what is seen as merely useful on the spot. Therefore, taking into consideration its discovery character (service design in a church context), this research stops in the first diamond of the double diamond framework (more information about this in subchapters 3.2. and 3.5.)

On an even more tangible note, although I am not part of the target group (being 33 at the time of writing), I am a member of the Reformed Church in Romania, and I believe this insider position provides contextual familiarity, relational trust, and cultural literacy, which support access and nuanced interpretation. At the same time, I recognize that it introduces potential bias, including shared assumptions, emotional investment, and pre-existing perspectives on church practices. I do not approach this research from a position that seeks to determine theological or doctrinal ‘rightness’. Nor do I assume that the Reformed Church in Romania offers a superior model of faith and spirituality. However, as a member of the Christian faith community, I acknowledge that personal beliefs and experiences influence several aspects of this study, including my approach to reflexivity, the community under study, the framing of research questions, the interpretation of narratives, and interactions with participants. It is an inevitable presence of subjectivity in qualitative research (Chang, 2022).

Reflexivity is widely recognised as a central component of qualitative research, particularly in insider contexts where the researcher shares lived experience with participants (2002 a) and Finlay (2002 b) supports the idea that reflexivity can serve as a methodological resource, enabling researchers to critically examine how their position, presence, and perspective shape the research process. It promotes deeper understanding by emphasizing attention to personal reactions and interpersonal dynamics, helps reveal implicit assumptions and unconscious biases, and enhances the study's transparency and integrity by openly sharing methodological decisions for critical review. That's why I believe it's important to honestly mention how this study originated at some point during the writing process (see the story of this thesis)

In addition to qualitative research traditions, practical theology also emphasizes the epistemic significance of lived experience. Graham, Walton, and Ward (2019) describe methods that “turn life into text” as generating “living human documents” through which experience becomes available for critical and dialogical reflection. Drawing on this understanding, I began the study with a self-reflective exercise before data collection.

For short, using Figma as a visual design tool, I created a longitudinal representation of my own faith journey (which I called autoethnography at the time) across more than twenty five years, tracing experiences outside or in different church communities across different denominations in Romania, Hungary, Latvia, Estonia, Finland and the U.S.A., identifying key influences, tensions, transitions, and relational dynamics that had shaped my own development. This visual mapping functioned as a form of “turning-life-into-text” (Graham et al., 2019): it externalized lived experience into a structured representation that could be examined analytically. The process enabled critical distance from my own narrative, allowing me to recognize personal assumptions that might otherwise have influenced how I designed this study and interpreted participants' stories.

The purpose of this exercise was not to generate primary research data, nor to position my story alongside those of young adult participants. Rather, it served as a preparatory reflexive calibration, months before this specific research took place. By examining my own formation within church communities prior to interviewing participants, I sought to differentiate my narrative from theirs and to approach their accounts with heightened methodological awareness. This exercise also influenced methodological choices, particularly the

incorporation of cultural probes and the mindset behind journey mapping within interviews as a way of visually structuring developmental narratives. The methodological implications of this decision are discussed further in Chapter 3.

I consider reflexivity as a continuous process of awareness and critical engagement with how knowledge is generated within this insider research context, while staying ethical. It was integral to my thesis from its inception to completion.

1.7. Ethical considerations

The previously presented reflexive attitude also aligns with my ethical orientation. I write from a moral horizon shaped by the Christian understanding that love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable (Mark 12:30–31) — yet I am aware that this divine dimension exceeds what I, as an imperfect person, can fully grasp or express. Love, understood not as sentiment but as genuine commitment to the good of the other (1 Corinthians 13), becomes both an ethical principle and a research posture I hope never to lose sight of. What I cannot secure through my own competence, I entrust to a love greater than my own.

This ethical orientation grows out of a personal and chosen relationship with God — one that transformed how I see people, responsibility, and the work of design itself. Having experienced what it means to be loved without condition, I find I cannot approach the people in this research any other way. The personal story behind this relationship — how it formed, how it has been experienced, and what it has produced in my life — will not be part of this thesis. I consider it too significant to compress, and too personal to do justice to within the scope of this work. In my view, that testimony deserves its own space — perhaps a separate autoethnography — where it can be told fully and honestly, without the constraints of a thesis format that may not have been designed to hold it.

The primary goal of this study is: “protecting and doing no harm to those involved” (Chang, 2022, p. 61). I believe that, although I am pursuing this to the best of my ability, there are still limitations I cannot fully control, as I have expressed before. Ethical considerations are therefore extremely important, as my research involves human participants in multiple ways — directly as interview participants, indirectly as people mentioned within participants' narratives, and as future participants in potential next phases of this work. This sense of responsibility does not end with this study. I am aware that its outcomes may continue to develop,

and I feel accountable not only to those who participated here, but also to those I may collaborate with in the future — people I might have or might have not yet met.

It is known that in autoethnography, it is highly recommended to work from a relational ethics of care, caring for self and others as we write stories that involve not only ourselves, the autoethnographers, but are also intimating others (Adams et al., 2022). I see this relational ethics of care in other narrative forms as well, as the young adult participants might also intimate others throughout their journeys. Just like in autoethnography, any personal story can involve others because these experiences don't happen in a vacuum. It's important to protect the people involved, especially since they usually haven't agreed to be part of such stories without their prior consent (Chang, 2022).

For young adults and church leaders, who were direct participants in my study, participation was entirely voluntary. All participants received written and verbal information outlining the purpose of the study, what participation involved, data collection procedures, and their rights as participants. Written informed consent was obtained before participation.

Participants were informed that they may withdraw from the study at any time prior to data analysis without consequence and may also decline to answer any question. Recruitment is conducted independently of pastoral authority, and participation has no impact on church membership or involvement.

Interviews were audio recorded with consent, transcribed at first re-listening for analysis and only insights or direct quotes are being translated to English. Pseudonyms are used in all written materials, and identifying details are removed to ensure confidentiality. Audio files and transcripts are stored on my password-protected laptop. Any photographs taken during this research document materials rather than identifiable individuals.

Given that discussions of faith may evoke emotional sensitivity (doubt, belonging, spiritual struggle), participants are reminded that they may pause or discontinue the interview at any point. The study does not aim to provide counselling or therapeutic intervention, although the discussions might have that effect. Should distress arise, participants are encouraged to seek appropriate pastoral or professional support, and I will help them find the most suitable option.

Through these measures, the study seeks to uphold principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for participant well-being. Beyond individual participants, I also hold a deep sense of responsibility toward the church community itself. Entering such a community as a researcher requires particular sensitivity. I have tried to honor to the best of my knowledge not only its trust but also the sacred identity (part of the holy, apostolic church of Jesus Christ) and calling that defines it (proclaim the Word of God, serve through love, and preserve the unity and peace of its members) — (A Romániai Református Egyház Törvénytára, 2018)— aware that the community I am entering carries a depth of meaning and identity that I might not be able to fully capture at this moment. In case questions might arise from within the community’s own theological needs or self-understanding, this study might not be able to answer without a lens of practical theology.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

As this research seeks to propose a way to interpret and explore how young adults narrate their own faith journeys and how religious communities function as mentoring environments in the process of faith development, this Literature Review begins by opening discussion around key terms — *faith, spirituality, religion*— as these concepts are often used interchangeably in both popular and academic discourse, yet carry distinct meanings that shape how research in this field is framed. The rationale for using *faith journeys* as a working concept will hopefully become clear, as it is important to justify the use of the term ‘faith journey’ rather than ‘spiritual’ or ‘religious’ journey. Another key term is *young adulthood*, as generational labels are not scientifically defined categories and can easily lead to stereotypes and oversimplification. From there, the review turns to the theoretical foundations that inform this study and its contextual information, including faith development theory, young adults and the Reformed Church, service design in faith contexts, and autoethnography as a starting point. Together, these frameworks show how this study approaches, interprets, and situates the faith experiences of young adults, before discovering the meanings participants attribute to the process, as “a shared understanding cannot be assumed” (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2005).

2.1. Why faith journeys

Just as I interpret faith, religion and spirituality differently in everyday life, academic literature also reflects multiple, sometimes conflicting understandings, especially as religion and spirituality—sometimes faith included—are used interchangeably (Koenig, 2012; Love, 2001; Newman, 2004; Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020). This is particularly visible, as scholarly interest in spirituality and religion has grown substantially since the late twentieth century, and this expansion is particularly pronounced within health-related disciplines, including psychology and psychiatry (Edward B. Davis et al., 2023; Koenig, 2009), nursing and palliative care/oncology (Paul Victor & Treschuk, 2020; Puchalski et al., 2019; Vermandere et al., 2012), public health (Kruizinga et al., 2018; Long et al., 2024; Oman, 2018), but also in developmental studies of different kinds (Hardy & Nelson, 2021; Love, 2001; Lunn, 2009; Newman, 2004).

The three terms at the heart of this section — faith, spirituality, and religion — are not used interchangeably only across academic disciplines and everyday discourse, but also in large-scale survey research (e.g., Pew Research Center, Gallup). This is not incidental; it reflects genuine conceptual overlap and disciplinary variation in how these constructs are prioritised and defined. Scholars have explicitly flagged this as a problem requiring careful navigation (Koenig et al., 2023). This section works through each term in turn, with the aim of explaining why *faith journey* is adopted as the organizing concept of the present study, when looking into young adults’ lived experiences

2.1.1. Spirituality – a broad and contested construct

Of the three terms, *spirituality* is the most expansive and the least uniformly defined. There is no one widely accepted definition of spirituality (Alper et al., 2023). Across decades of scholarship, its meaning has shifted considerably depending on disciplinary context, and definitions range from the explicitly theological to the broadly humanistic.

Historically, the term ‘spirituality’ originates from Latin and Greek roots related to “spirit” (pneuma) and was used in early Christian texts. Originally, a spiritual person was understood as someone guided by or living under the influence of the Spirit of God, reflecting a particular attitude toward life rather than a distinction between body and soul. It became closely associated with deeply religious individuals whose lives were centered on religious faith (Sheldrake, 2013). However, this has changed over the past decades.

Several influential definitions center spirituality on the search for meaning and purpose. Puchalski and colleagues (2014) describe it as the “individuals’ search for meaning and purpose; it includes connectedness to others, self, nature, and the significant or sacred; and it embraces secular and philosophical, as well as religious and cultural, beliefs and practices” alike. An earlier report cited in the same article defines spirituality as “an individual’s search for ultimate meaning through participation in religion and/or belief in God, family, naturalism, rationalism, humanism, and the arts”, a definition inclusive to encompass any value-laden human pursuit. The International Consensus Conference on Spiritual Care in Health Care similarly defines spirituality as “the way individuals seek ultimate meaning, purpose, connection, value, or transcendence.” While organised religion may be one expression of this, the concept extends to any form of ultimate meaning-making — whether through

relationships, community belonging, or connection to the natural world (Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, 2022). Parks (2011) suggests that the contemporary turn toward spiritual language reflects a deep longing to speak of deeper dimensions of human experiences— meaning, transcendence, wholeness, moral purpose, and what traditions across cultures have variously named as spirit, breath, personal openness to awe, depth and what she calls "the apprehension of the animating essence at the core of life" and "one's lived relationship with Mystery" (p. 23). Drawing on Parker Palmer, Parks (2011) adds that this turn toward spiritual language arises from a hunger for authenticity — for correspondence between inner and outer life (p. 23).

Other scholars foreground the experiential and psychological dimensions of spirituality. MacDonald and colleagues (2015) define it as a natural aspect of human functioning related to a special class of non-ordinary experiences, along with the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours that accompany them. These experiences are characterised by altered states of consciousness that reshape the functions of self and personality and transform how individuals perceive themselves, others, and reality. Newman (2004) offers a complementary account, describing spirituality not as a search but as a state of being — a life guided by the spirit of one's faith, expressed through meditation, prayer, or conscious ethical choices according to how individuals sense the Spirit leading them.

From a distinctly Christian theological standpoint, Wainwright (1987) describes spirituality as existence before God and amid the created world — a praying and living in Jesus Christ, in which the human spirit is grasped, sustained, and transformed by the Holy Spirit, and in which believers seek a communion that arrives as a gift rather than achievement (as in Newman, 2004). Paul Victor and Treschuk (2020) observe that spirituality can be expressed through involvement in different religious practices, suggesting a fluid relationship between personal spiritual experience and communal religious life.

A more conceptually precise definition is offered by Koenig and colleagues (2023), who define spirituality as a “set of individual beliefs, practices, and ways of being that are intended to assist in attaining union with, or experience of, the divine or transcendent”. While they acknowledge overlap with religion — both involve engagement with the transcendent — they distinguish spirituality as more individually oriented, in contrast to religion's grounding in communal beliefs, rituals, and practices. Importantly, Koenig and colleagues caution

against conflating spirituality with its potential outcomes, such as meaning, purpose, inner peace, or moral behavior, arguing that such processes are more accurately understood as part of faith development rather than of spirituality per se (Newman, 2004).

This last point is significant. Over the past two to three decades, spirituality has expanded so broadly in academic and secular discourse — particularly as it has travelled through largely secular fields — that it has begun to absorb indicators of general psychological well-being and mental health. When spirituality is defined simply as a high level of flourishing, the construct risks becoming tautological, and its explanatory value diminishes. How to measure spirituality, which has become increasingly diffuse and self-defined, remains an open question in the field (Koenig et al., 2023; Koenig & Carey, 2025).

Research highlights the complexity of spirituality even across individuals from the same culture (eg. USA). According to a Pew Research Center report (2023), some people define spirituality in terms of organized religion, including belief in God or elements of Christian theology, while others explicitly distinguish it from religious affiliation. Many respondents describe spirituality more broadly as a belief in a higher power or in unseen or otherworldly realities. Additionally, spirituality is often associated with experiences of connection—whether to God, nature, or the self—as well as with personal qualities such as inner peace, meaning, purpose, and moral guidance. In the same report, we can see that while many individuals identify as spiritual (70% from an unweighted sample size of 11,201), a large proportion also consider themselves religious, and nearly half of U.S. adults describe themselves as both (48%). At the same time, a notable minority identify as spiritual but not religious (22%). Spirituality has evolved into “a much broader construct that has expanded to include those who are religious, not religious, and even those who do not acknowledge they are spiritual (i.e., everyone)” (Koenig et al., 2023, p. 14).

For the purposes of the present study, this breadth is also a practical limitation. In the Hungarian context, spirituality does not carry the same cultural currency as it does in English-language scholarship. Direct equivalents are not in common use; related expressions tend to cluster around the word *lélek* (soul) — such as *lelki egészség* (health of the soul) or *lelki növekedés* (growth of the soul) — reflecting a conceptual tradition that does not map cleanly onto the English-language construct. This, combined with the conceptual concerns outlined

above, means that spirituality, while acknowledged as relevant background, is not adopted as the organizing concept of this study.

2.1.2. Religion – communal, measurable, and culturally situated

Compared to spirituality, religion is a more bounded and measurable construct, with greater consensus around its core features (Koenig et al., 2023). Koenig and colleagues define it as “*the phenomenon wherein a system of beliefs and practices unites adherents into a community with a shared vision for attaining union with, or the experience of, the divine or transcendent.*” This definition has both a horizontal dimension — constituted by a community of adherents — and a vertical one, in which individuals within that community seek encounter (Rickwood et al., 2007). Even similarly describes religion as a “shared system of beliefs, principles, or doctrines related to belief in and worship of a supernatural power regarded as creator(s) and governor(s) of the universe”, while Newman (2004) emphasizes the behavioral dimension, defining it as a state of doing that encompasses beliefs and practices honoring one god or a central source of power and value.

Paul Victor and Treschuk (2020) offer a useful clarification of the relationship between religion and spirituality: where spirituality involves personal experience and the transformation of the heart, religion involves the codification and conceptualization of that experience. This coding may include church involvement, prayer, fasting, meditation, religious activities, rituals, and the use of rules and practices to preserve a person's soul. Religion, in other words, gives communal form and structure to what spirituality names as personal and interior.

Gschwandtner (2021) extends this distinction further, describing religion as something people do together — a shared expression of spiritual openness through communal symbols, stories, rituals, and practices — that can exist even when personal belief or commitment is weak or absent. This points to an important feature of religion as a construct: it is observable and, to a considerable extent, measurable through dimensions such as public and private religious practice, religious support, religious experience, and community involvement (Koenig et al., 2023)

Despite these analytical advantages, the term religion carries limitations for the present qualitative study, conducted within a Reformed Church community where young adults represent the generation least present in religious practice. Using the language of *religious journey*

risks distancing participants who are intermittently engaged or who carry moral injuries related to their experience of institutional church life. More broadly, it risks being interpreted as referring primarily to participation in organized institutional practices, often shaped by tradition or social expectations, rather than reflecting a personal, internalized experience. That said, religion and religious community remain methodologically significant: the study is conducted within a specific institutional and communal context, and participants' relationships with that context, whether close, ambivalent, or fractured, are part of what is being explored. For this reason, religion is not adopted as the organizing concept, but it is not set aside either.

2.1.3. Faith – the foundational construct

Faith, alongside spirituality, and/or religion, is part of an individual's belief and value system and can influence the experiences, behaviors, and health of the population (Oman, 2018), a person's knowledge, attitude, and practices in public administration (Ongaro & Tantardini, 2024), public service motivation (Perry et al., 2008), ethical behaviour, community engagement (Weaver & Agle, 2002). You name it. Basically, as Koenings expresses: "Faith affects everything – work, relationships, family life, happiness, your physical health, longevity, and perhaps even the afterlife, if there is one." (The Faith & Media Initiative, 2023)

James Fowler, one of the most influential theorists of faith development, presents a deliberately broad understanding of faith. Prior to any specifically religious or irreligious commitment, Fowler argues that human beings are already engaged with issues of faith — concerned with how to put their lives together and with what will make life worth living (Fowler, 1981, as cited in Newman, 2004). In each of the major religious traditions presented by him, "faith involves an alignment of the will, a resting of the heart, in accordance with a vision of transcendent value and power, one's ultimate concern", is a "orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one's hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions" (Fowler, 1981, p. 14).

Of the three terms (faith, spirituality and religion), faith appears to be the most fundamental to define, as it is a "human universal" (Fowler, 1981). In Fowler's words:

We are endowed at birth with nascent capacities for faith. How these capacities are activated and grow depends to a large extent on how we are welcomed into the world and what kinds of environments we grow in. Faith is interactive and social; it requires

community, language, ritual and nurture. Faith is also shaped by initiatives from beyond us and other people, initiatives of spirit and grace. How these latter initiatives are recognized and imaged, or unperceived and ignored, powerfully affects the shape of faith in our lives (Fowler, 1981, p. xiii).

As Hellwig (1990) observes (Newman, 2004), faith ranges from a general religious attitude on the one hand to personal acceptance of a specific set of beliefs on the other. Gschwandtner (2021) offers a complementary framing, describing faith as a person's concrete commitment or identification with certain beliefs or convictions, while noting as well that this commitment can exist both inside and outside religious institutions — a person may hold deep faith without participating in organised religion, just as a person may participate in religion without deep personal faith. Problems arise, she suggests, when faith becomes detached from spiritual openness and loses its orientation toward transformation. As Fowler expresses it, faith “has to do with the making, maintenance, and transformation of human meaning”(Fowler, 1986b, p 15 as cited in Newman, 2004).

Newman's conceptual model provides a particularly useful framework for integrating these accounts. In his model, both spirituality and religion require faith as their foundation. Newman acknowledges that people can engage in spiritual practices or religious activities without having clearly reflected on their faith; in some cases, the ways individuals make sense of their lives remain largely unexamined, such that their spiritual or religious actions go beyond what they are able to articulate. Someone might say, for instance, 'I'm not religious, but I'm a good person,' without having reflected on what shapes their understanding of goodness or why they see themselves that way (Newman, 2004).

Fig. 4 presents Newman's conceptual model, which distinguishes faith, spirituality, and religion while showing how they relate within an integrated framework. Faith serves as the foundational internal orientation; spirituality and religion are depicted as continuums along which individuals move over time, reflecting shifts in experience, context, and commitment. At various times, one dimension may be more prominent than the other, though each can inform and strengthen the other. The directional arrows illustrate that spirituality and religion may develop in alignment — mutually reinforcing growth — or diverge when religious practices do not support spiritual experience. The model's simplicity helps illustrate that, while the three terms are distinct, they remain deeply interconnected. (Newman, 2004).

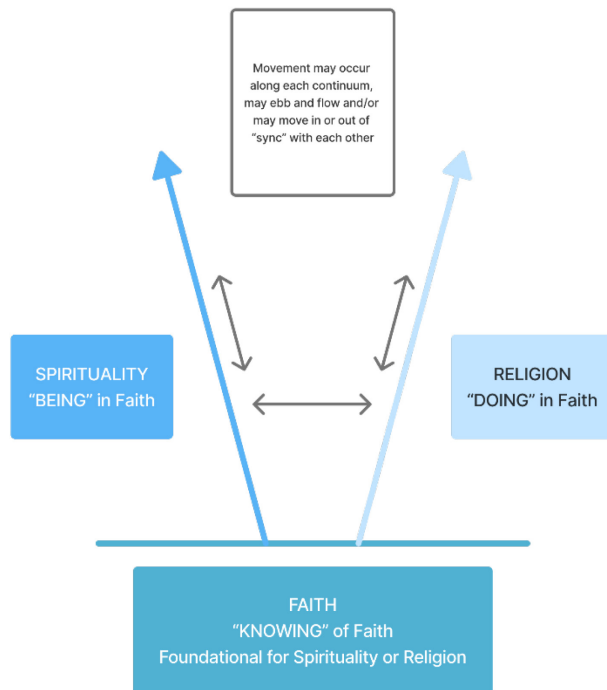


Fig. 4. Newman’s Model for understanding the differences between faith, spirituality and religion

Source: Newman, 2004

2.1.4. Faith Journeys – the working concept

The preceding discussion has established that faith, spirituality, and religion, while related, are conceptually distinct, and that their conflation in both academic and public discourse creates significant interpretive problems. In the present study, acknowledging the variety of possible perspectives and journeys, this conceptual work leads to the adoption of the faith journey as the organizing concept — and its Hungarian equivalent, *hitút* — for three interconnected reasons.

The first is conceptual. As the preceding sections have shown, faith is the more foundational construct: spirituality and religion are expressions of it, not substitutes for it. When the primary focus of inquiry is how individuals construct meaning in their lives, how they narrate their experiences in relation to belief and community, and how their commitments develop and shift over time, the appropriate conceptual frame is faith development, not spiritual

development (Newman, 2004). The concept of a faith journey, therefore, captures this developmental, narrative, and meaning-making orientation directly.

The second reason is cultural and linguistic. Jensen (2021) has emphasized the importance of taking linguistic and cultural context into account when selecting terms for use in developmental research, and this consideration is especially relevant here. In the Hungarian context, and particularly within Christian discourse, the word *spiritualitás* exists but lacks the cultural resonance and embeddedness of indigenous religious vocabulary. Concepts such as spiritual development or spiritual health are more naturally rendered through soul-related language — for example, *lelki egészség* (health of the soul), *lelki fejlődés* (development of the soul), or *lelki növekedés* (growth of the soul). Using spirituality as an organizing term for a study of Hungarian participants would therefore risk imposing a framework that is culturally alien to the people whose experiences are being explored. The term *hitút* (faith journey), by contrast, may offer a more intelligible, resonant, and grounded entry point into participants' own religious and cultural vocabulary (Wen et al., 2025). Whether this term functions as the most natural frame for participants will itself be verified during the interview process.

The third reason is methodological. The present study focuses on lived experience, narration, and personal meaning-making. These are precisely the dimensions that the faith journey concept captures — not institutional affiliation, not measurable religious behavior, not generalized wellbeing, but the personal and often complex process by which individuals make sense of their lives in relation to belief, community, and the transcendent. The faith journey concept appears to be an appropriate lens for a qualitative study of this kind.

2.2. Faith Development Theory: Young Adulthood, Community, Mentoring

In Newman's words: 'With faith as a foundation, spirituality and religion can be seen as by-products, those things or ways of life which allow an individual to live out his or her faith' (Newman, 2004). In Newman's framework, spirituality represents a state of being in faith, while religion represents a state of doing in faith (Fig 4). When discussing about meaning making, it should be identified as faith development rather than spiritual development, as the latter refers more precisely to growth in the realm of being in faith (Newman, 2004). This framing aligns with Fowler's position that faith development — understood as the “developmental process of finding and making meaning as a human activity” (Nipkow, Schweitzer, &

Fowler, 1991, as cited in Newman, 2004)— is more accurate than spiritual development when the focus of inquiry is meaning-making systems (Newman, 2004). Parks (2011) and Fowler (1981) explicitly framed their work with faith development theory.

The theoretical foundation for examining faith development in this study draws primarily on the work of Sharon Daloz Parks, as presented also by Love (2001). Parks is a theologian who has worked in different roles, grounding her work in both the psychosocial and cognitive-structural traditions of student development theory, with an emphasis on the interrelatedness of cognitive development, affective states, and interpersonal, social, and cultural influences (Love, 2001). At its core, Parks understands faith as the process through which individuals make meaning of their lives — asking fundamental questions about purpose, belonging, and what matters most. Unlike traditional cognitive development theories, which focus primarily on how people think and reason, Parks's notion of faith engages the broadest and most personally significant dimensions of human experience. She further describes faith as both transcendent and immanent: it reaches toward something larger than the individual that cannot be fully known or explained, while simultaneously being expressed through the concrete, everyday experiences of each person's life (Love, 2001).

I find Parks's framework particularly well-suited to this study for several reasons, two of which have been articulated by Love (2001). First, her work builds on Fowler's (1981) foundational theory of faith development (, extending it by proposing an intermediate stage between adolescence and adulthood — what she terms *young adulthood* — thereby more precisely capturing a developmental period that other theorists had largely subsumed within broader stage transitions. Second, she situates her framework in dialogue with major theorists of cognitive and moral development, including Piaget, Perry, Kegan, Erikson, Kohlberg, and Gilligan, lending it strong grounding in established developmental theory. Notably, her framework is applicable to both religious and non-religious contexts, making it well suited to a study that seeks to understand faith development without presupposing a particular theological stance among participants, although with varying personal perspectives and levels of commitment. Additionally, Parks's specific attention to young adulthood as a distinctive and generative period of meaning-making is directly relevant to the present study's focus on young adults — a demographic within the Reformed tradition that faces its own challenges. Finally, her concept of the mentoring community, which she identifies as the *form of community* most conducive to young adult faith development, provides a particularly generative

lens for evaluating how the church is experienced by young adults in this study. This will be developed in greater depth below.

In the revised edition of her major work, Parks (2011) argues that the period of young adulthood — broadly conceived as the years between late adolescence and the mid-thirties — constitutes a critical and often underrecognized window of meaning-making. Rather than treating this period as merely transitional, Parks identifies it as generative, characterized by: a willingness to engage seriously with ultimate questions without yet having arrived at settled answers. While adolescence brings the realization of the self as a self, it is in young adulthood that one takes ownership, authority, and responsibility for shaping one's own ongoing development.

Parks identifies two elements at play here — critical self-awareness itself, and the willingness and motivation to respond to that awareness by actively shaping one's development. This second element is not guaranteed. As Love (2002) notes, citing Helminiak (1987), many people never completely transcend this stage — remaining self-aware yet choosing not to continue developing, such that "spiritual growth has been stifled and one may well have settled for a lifetime of spiritual mediocrity" (Helminiak, 1987, p. 84, as cited Love, 2002). Therefore, reaching young adulthood does not guarantee that a person will move toward a more mature, self-owned faith. Some people pass through this window and grow deeply. Others get stuck, pull back, or simply never engage with the questions. Their growth is deeply influenced by whether they are recognized, challenged, and inspired, and by how their questions and aspirations are nurtured.

Parks organizes her framework around three analytically distinct but interrelated dimensions: the forms of knowing, the forms of dependence, and the forms of community. As Love (2001) helpfully summarizes, these correspond respectively to the cognitive, affective, and social dimensions of faith development. Together, the three forms describe the conditions under which young adult faith develops, stagnates, or is transformed, and Parks argues that movement in one form tends to reflect and catalyze movement in the others. They are not discrete stages but overlapping and mutually reinforcing trajectories through which meaning-making develops.

The forms of knowing describe how young adults relate to truth and construct understanding, which reflect the cognitive dimension of faith development and concern the relationship of

self to authority and knowledge (Love, 2001). Parks presents a movement from authority-bound knowing — in which truth is received uncritically from external sources — through a period of unqualified relativism, toward what she calls a tested or convictional commitment: a posture that holds genuine conviction while remaining open to complexity and doubt.

The forms of dependence capture the affective and interpersonal dimensions (Love, 2001). These forms concern the relational structures through which young adults anchor their identity and seek guidance, tracing a movement from dependence on external authorities toward a mature interdependence in which relationships are chosen rather than simply inherited. Central to both transitions is the experience Parks calls the “shipwreck” of meaning — a moment of crisis in which a previously sufficient worldview breaks down — which she re-frames as a “potential gift” and a necessary condition for deeper growth (Parks, 2011).

The forms of community constitute the third and, for the purposes of this study, the most directly relevant dimension of Parks' framework. These forms address the social and cultural contexts that cognitive development theories have frequently neglected (Love, 2001). Parks argues that faith development does not occur in isolation but is profoundly shaped by the quality of the communities in which young adults are embedded. She distinguishes between conventional communities, which tend toward homogeneity and the suppression of questioning; diffuse or fragmented social environments, which offer belonging without depth; and what she terms mentoring communities — environments characterized by hospitality to big questions, genuine diversity of perspective, the presence of wise and caring guides, and a shared commitment to something that transcends the group itself. Parks describes the mentoring community as a kind of “hearth” — a space of warmth, safety, and serious engagement — and argues that such communities are indispensable conditions for the full development of young adult faith. The absence of such communities, she suggests, leaves young adults developmentally vulnerable, particularly in contexts of rapid social change or religious transition.

Parks also gives significant attention to the figure of the mentor — an individual who embodies the qualities of the mentoring community in personal form, offering both challenge and support, holding the young adult's questions seriously without providing premature answers. In Parks' account, the mentor is not primarily a teacher or authority figure but a

companion in the meaning-making process. She describes it as a community that “offers hospitality to the potential of the emerging adult self, poses challenging questions, and provides access to worthy dreams of self and world” (Parks, 2011, p. 121). In his most recent book, Siba Balázs (2025), outlines four turning points of change: the awakening (*a felébredés*), the setting out (*az elindulás*), the confrontation (*a szembenézés*), and the rising above (*a felülemelkedés*). He notes that at each turning point, individuals make decisions independently. However, until reaching the third stage, perseverance, companionship, allies, and support are essential throughout the journey.

Parks insists that individual mentors alone are insufficient; it is the combination of a mentor's challenge and encouragement, "grounded in belonging to a compatible social group," that carries genuine transforming power for the young adult (Parks, 2011, p. 121). She elaborates that even critical, cognitive awareness on its own is typically not enough to precipitate significant transformation of self, world, and faith. Rather, it is the convergence of the young adult's developmental openness, the presence of a mentoring figure, and genuine communal belonging that together ignite what Parks describes as "the transforming power of the emerging adult era" (Parks, 2011, p. 121). This has direct implications on how congregations understand their role: investing in programs alone, without attending to the quality of belonging young adults actually experience through pastoral or other relationships, may fall short of what genuine faith development requires. Other authors argue that research on Christian communities typically focuses on two things — individual faith and congregational health — but misses a third, crucial dimension: the community (Long et al., 2025). Therefore, particular attention will be drawn to this specific form when analysing young adults' shared journeys.

Therefore, what happens to young adults' faith development is highly influenced by the conditions as well — the community, the mentors, the environment across educational, social, political, religious, and familial contexts — that either support or hinder that development. This makes young adulthood not merely a transitional phase but the most decisive window in the trajectory of faith development, underscoring the particular urgency of attending to young adults well within a religious community. As Parks (2011, p. 19) observes, mentoring has weakened in modern society and is often replaced by impersonal professionalism; restoring it as a vital social practice can strengthen institutions, bridge generational divides, and support the promise of emerging adult lives.

Before proceeding, a brief comment on how we transitioned from generational levels to a specific target group. While generational labels serve as a useful shorthand in research, they are not scientifically defined categories and can easily lead to stereotypes and oversimplification (Dimock, 2023). This is evident in the lack of consensus around the very age boundaries used to define Gen Z. Pew Research Center (Parker, 2023) mentions that generational categories are catchy but often analytically weak. Therefore, they are now committing to more rigorous, honest framing — even if that means producing less of the generational content that tends to go viral. McKinsey & Company defines the generation as those born between 1996 and 2010 (McKinsey&Company, 2024). Barna Group, by contrast, often places the Gen Z label on those aged 13-18, 13-24, or 13-26 (with Millennials aged 27 – 41). There is no clear distinction between what makes GenZ and Millennials different when it comes to faith, religion and spirituality.

Given the overlap between Park’s young-adult age group and the generational challenges, my study focuses on the lived experience of young adults aged 18-29 within a specific ecclesial and cultural context rather than on generational characteristics as such.

2.3. Young adults and the Reformed Church

This study is situated within the Reformed Church in Romania, which is inherently a minority church operating within a Romanian-majority society and conducting all congregational life in Hungarian, including services, worship, community activities and internal administration. Although mixed marriages (Hungarian-Romanian) are possible, denominational and ethnic identity remain deeply intertwined. Within Romania, referring to the denomination as Hungarian Reformed is not necessary — the Hungarian identity is so inherent to its existence that naming it explicitly is redundant, reflecting also how members themselves refer to it: simply as the Reformed Church or congregation. Therefore, while the full name was used in the study's aim to establish the minority context clearly, throughout the rest of this thesis, the Reformed Church is used without “Hungarian”.

The Reformed Church in Romania is part of the holy, apostolic Church of Jesus Christ, where the Church is the body of Christ and it stands in synodal unity with all Hungarian-speaking Reformed churches worldwide. Its institutional tasks include preaching, the administration of sacraments, Christian education, pastoral care, mission, and the practice of serving love

(szolgáló szeretet) — reflecting the centrality of vocation and service within its ecclesial identity (A Romániai Református Egyház Törvénytára, 2018). In terms of organizational structure, it is organized into four levels. The foundational unit is the local congregation (*egyházközség*), an organized body of believers in a defined area. Several congregations together form a mid-level church body (*egyházmegye*), and several of these form a church district (*egyházkerület*). The highest level is the national synod (*zsinat*), which governs the Reformed Church in Romania as a whole (A Romániai Református Egyház Törvénytára, 2018). This study is situated within one of the two church districts in Romania, drawing on young adults from three different local congregations and church leaders from three mid-level church bodies (*egyházmegyék*) within that district.

When it comes to youth work, it is important to note that the Reformed Church in Romania has institutionalized support for youth work and faith formation at both the mid-level and district levels of its organizational structure. At the mid-level (*egyházmegye*), a youth coordinator (*ifjúsági előadó*) is elected from among ordained pastors, tasked with supporting the organization of youth groups across congregations, providing professional guidance, overseeing their confessional faithfulness, and facilitating their connection to the wider congregation. This role also includes support for camps, conferences, and youth programs/events (A Romániai Református Egyház Törvénytára, 2018, §85). At the district level (*egyházkerület*), two parallel roles exist: a catechetical coordinator (*katekétikai előadó*), responsible for overseeing and directing faith education across the district, and a district-level youth coordinator (*ifjúsági előadó*), responsible for supporting youth associations and groups, maintaining connections with mid-level youth coordinators, and promoting youth activity across the district (A Romániai Református Egyház Törvénytára, 2018, §123-124). Together, these roles reflect an institutional commitment to youth ministry and faith formation at the organizational levels above the local congregation.

However, non-mainline churches tend to experience stronger engagement growth among younger generations than historic denominations, which is reflected in Romania as well, in the demographic vitality of Pentecostal communities compared to the aging Reformed Church. (Kiss et al., 2022). Although comprehensive and publicly available data on congregational life is limited and it is difficult to build a full statistical picture from external sources, it has been confirmed by one district (*egyházkerület*) that attendance across Reformed congregations in Romania has been declining, driven by broader demographic shifts — a

shrinking Hungarian-speaking population and a decreasing number of people identifying as Reformed — compounded by the lasting impact of COVID-19, which disrupted attendance patterns that have not fully recovered. According to the most recent census (2021), just over 200,000 people identified as Reformed in this particular district, of whom approximately 75% maintain some connection to the church. Yet on an average Sunday morning, only 14% of registered members attend worship.

Even in this landscape, there are signs of hope for youth work. In December 2024, the Királyhágómelléki Reformed Church District officially declared 2025 the Year of Youth Service. The initiative aimed to go beyond youth work specifically — *"az ifjúsági munkán túl az egyházi szolgálatok minden módját fiatalos lendülettel szeretnénk megtölteni"* ("beyond youth work, we want to fill every form of church ministry with a youthful drive"), guided by the motto *"Kreativitás és lendület a misszióban!"* (Creativity and momentum in mission). A central role was given to KRISZ, the district's youth association, with the explicit goal of reaching not only those already connected but also *"a még helyüket kereső fiatalokat"* ("young people still searching for their place"). The initiative carried an explicit intergenerational dimension, aiming to strengthen collaboration between generations — including the involvement of younger elders (*presbiterek*) in congregational leadership.

Although the results of such initiatives are not yet visible to the public, it is worth noting that the initiative does not define the youth by age, nor does it distinguish between younger adolescents and young adults as distinct groups with distinct needs and experiences. This ambiguity points to a gap that this study seeks to address — focusing specifically on young adults aged 18–29, a group at a critical developmental stage with specific needs for congregational life. Furthermore, no centralized or publicly available information exists about which groups operate within individual congregations, whether young adulthood as a life stage is specifically covered, or how it is addressed in practice. In this sense, this thesis responds directly to the call for continued youth involvement, offering insights grounded in young adults' own narrated experiences and the perspectives of church leaders active in youth work, which may inform how such engagement is sustained beyond a thematic year.

When looking across communications coming from the neighbour country — within the Hungarian Reformed context — the challenge of reaching young adults is deeply pastoral. A 2019 practitioner conference on congregational pedagogy identified young adults —

broadly defined as those aged 18 to 30 who are not yet parents — as one of the most urgent missional priorities for historic churches, noting that every major life transition represents a risk point for losing connection with a congregation (Somogyi, 2019). Pastors observed that this generation is not lost to faith but lost to institutional visibility — many remain spiritually alive yet unable to find a community where they genuinely belong. What they need, the conference concluded, is spacious communities where they are free to be uncertain, ask difficult questions, and explore faith without being told what to believe. The task for the church is therefore not to mourn their absence but to understand, accompany, and meet them where they are — recognizing that reaching this generation requires the church to offer something genuinely different from what it has historically provided (Somogyi, 2019).

Although information about lived experiences related to faith, religion, and spirituality, directly from Hungarian Reformed young adults (in qualitative or quantitative form), is very limited, several converging trends justify this study's focus on young adult engagement within the Reformed Church in Romania. First, the broader pattern of concern about youth engagement in mainline churches globally, noting that data from Hungary offer a particularly relevant comparison. Ipsos (Chris Jackson, 2023) found that while church attendance in Hungary is among the lowest in Europe at 11%, Gen Z shows a 9% increase in Protestant and Evangelical identification compared to Boomers — a striking counter-cultural trend. Second, because young people from ethnic minority groups have a harder time asking for external support in case of mental health needs. Third, while Romania ranks as the most religious country in Europe (INSCOP Research, 2025; Jonathan Evans & Chris Baronavski, 2018), it remains understudied in terms of generational church engagement, representing a clear gap in the literature. Fourth, the Ipsos finding that "in countries where religious practice is low, young people tend to have higher engagement" makes the Reformed Church in Romania a compelling case, situated within a highly religious national context (1st in Europe), yet tied to a cultural minority with links to a more secularised neighbor (*Reformed Church in Romania* | *World Council of Churches*, n.d.)

2.5. Service Design in Faith Context

Similar to many contemporary design fields, service design originates from the tradition of industrial design (Polaine et al., 2013). In a Harvard Business Review article, *Designing Services that Deliver* (1982), Lynn Shostack introduced the term “service design” (Gibbons,

2019). Moving from designing products towards the need to design services, today the mindset is shifting from being highly transactional towards being more experiential (Mukhopadhyay & Ray, 2025). This creates opportunity for a full or partial application into a church setting.

If “applying the same mindset to designing a service as to the design of a product can lead to customer-hostile rather than user-friendly results”(Polaine et al., 2013, p. 19), how would it be any different to apply a design mindset in a Christian context, where “The Church is the body of Christ,” meaning Jesus Christ is the head of the Reformed Church in Romania, and where the proclamation of the Word of God, the administration of the sacraments (baptism, the Lord's Supper), church discipline, education, mission, and the practice of serving love are rooted in the Holy Scripture, all for the preservation of the unity of faith and peace among its believers (A Romániai Református Egyház Törvénytára, 2018)?

This excerpt from a service design book clearly illustrates our current stage in service innovation:

In the 20th century, the design profession made a huge contribution to the improvement of the standard of living in the developed world. Today, however, this standard of living has reached its natural plateau. We are saturated with material wealth, and our consumption of products is threatening our very existence rather than being a resource for good living. (Polaine et al., 2013, p. 18)

In the same book, it is noted that one of the greatest challenges for developed societies today is maintaining good health, which, as seen in the previous sections, is closely linked to faith, religion, and spirituality, as part of the meaning-making process. Therefore, adopting a service design approach in this context, although challenging and complex, it can create great value for all humanity.

A growing body of literature demonstrates that service design methods can be applied in contexts that are not primarily commercial (eg. healthcare, education, public sector innovation and governance, social change). However, there has been notably limited application of service design specifically in religious contexts, other than related to digital optimization strategies in faith-based contexts, which most of the time do not include design interventions,

such as journey mapping (Chen & Tang, 2025) and do not focus on relationships with fellow Christians and God (Van der Merwe, 2013).

At its core, service design is concerned with the totality of an experience: not merely individual touchpoints or isolated transactions, but the full arc of a person's journey through a system over time. Its foundational principles, as articulated by Stickdorn et al. (2018), include being: human-centred (grounding design decisions in the real experiences of the people involved); collaborative (involving various stakeholders with different backgrounds and functions in the design process, not only experts); iterative (being exploratory, adaptive and experimental towards implementation); sequential (visualizing the sequence of interrelated actions, rather than static events); real (researching in reality and making the intangible experiences visible and communicable); and holistic (attending to the entire ecosystem in which an experience occurs, including backstage processes and systemic conditions) (pp. 22–35). These principles distinguish service design from both traditional management consulting, which tends to be output-focused and expert-driven, and from ethnographic research alone, which describes lived experience without necessarily moving toward intervention.

Stickdorn et al. (2018) describe service design through five lenses: as a mindset, a process, a toolset, a cross-disciplinary language, and a management approach. This study draws on three of these. Most directly, it borrows from service design as a toolset — specifically the idea behind a journey map, deployed not for service improvement but as a generative instrument for making lived experience visible. It also draws on service design as a cross-disciplinary language: the faith journey map functions here as what Stickdorn et al. call a "boundary object" — a shared surface that allows the researcher and participants to work together without either having to fully inhabit the other's framework, which later can be used by leaders' perspective as well. Finally, the study partially adopts the service design mindset — its pragmatic, co-creative, and research-driven orientation — while setting aside the business relevance that mindset typically serves, replacing it with community specific relevance. The remaining two views — service design as a process and as a management approach — presuppose an organisational improvement agenda that lies outside this study's scope.

Central to this study's use of service design tools is the function the journey map serves as a shared artefact across different communities of knowing. Stickdorn et al. (2018) describe how tools like the journey map act as objects that people from different backgrounds can

look at together, each extracting what is meaningful from their own perspective. This quality — of being structured enough to be recognisable across different worlds of meaning, yet open enough to be interpreted from within each — is what makes the journey map not merely a data collection instrument but a genuinely collaborative tool for surfacing the complexity of faith experience in a community context. Service design tools for structured empathy make the invisible visible; they give leaders something to look at together, something that can prompt honest conversation and recalibrate institutional assumptions.

Journey mapping, in this reframed application, is not a tool for improving a consumer experience. It is a tool for making visible what Fowler (1981) called the "stages of faith" — the movements and transitions, the doubts and discoveries, the crises and consolidations that constitute the arc of a young adult's faith development. Fowler's stage theory, developed within a constructivist-developmental framework, offers a rich vocabulary for describing the qualitative transformations in faith structures that young adults undergo. Service design's journey mapping gives that vocabulary a spatial and temporal form: it can show, visually and accessibly, where young adults are in their journey, what moments were formative or disruptive, and where the church (in its different forms) was present, absent, helpful, or constraining.

Polaine et al. (2013, p. 36) argue that individuals do not simply “use” professionals or consume services, but rather engage in relationships with service providers, co-producing the service experience. Consequently, there should be a focus on designing for relationships and experiences that develop over time, rather than emphasizing isolated moments of consumption, which in terms of core service values could be expressed in a genuine, accessible and responsive type of care. I believe this is where this research stands, as is intended to: support understanding of relationship needs within church settings, facilitate the formation of meaningful relationship, and provide opportunities for experiences that accommodate the possibility of divine presence, allowing such relationships to develop in a personal and individualized manner.

However, as it has been mentioned in a case study of Taoist Temple Service (Chen & Tang, 2025), any effort to bring about change should start with a deep understanding of the cultural context — and I would add, the religious context as well. Beyond that, it is equally important to be aware of our own position in relation to any context we choose to research. How to

navigate such contexts in a service design project will be discussed in the next section, as this thesis heavily builds on my positionality and the need for reflexivity.

At the same time, this study recognizes the relevance of practical theology — an academic discipline that moves between theological reflection and the empirical study of lived practice, described as “the border traffic between ecclesiastical and cultural practices” (Barnard, 2022). The present study, however, is not a work of practical theology. It does not evaluate Christian doctrine, assess the theological adequacy of the community's practices, or make normative claims about what faithful support of young adults should look like. The significance of practical theology as an ethical horizon lies in the fact that its questions are internal to the community. When the Reformed community in Romania asks itself whether its structures adequately support young adults in their faith development, it is asking a theological question about faithful practice and communal responsibility. This study does not answer that question — but it provides the empirical texture, the touchpoints, gaps, turning points, and patterns of need, from which such a question can be asked with greater precision.

2.4. Autoethnography

My research motivation shaped my research area. A different thesis topic evolved, and my autoethnography entered that research process, as an approach I took to engage with it reflexively. As researchers express it, “I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 737). This is exactly what activated it. At some point, I realized healing is needed before entering any other research topic in such a sensitive and sacred field of study. It was an “emotional call”, not yet working in tandem with any “systemic sociological introspection” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). That came later.

Autoethnography is a “method, orientation, and way of life”(Adams et al., 2022, p. 3) and my supervisor found it important to present this section here as well, in literature review section, as it was the initial T0 moment, almost one year prior to delving into the specific topic of faith journeys. It seems like there is a need for writers who share their intimate experiences with difficult topics, such as “managing stigma, and becoming resilient, and the benefits and barriers of being certain kinds of people” (Adams et al., 2022, p. 5), in my case — being Christian in an often secular context. However, even before becoming aware of

such statements, I found that beginning my research within a faith and religious context using an autoethnographic approach felt not only natural but also methodologically and ethically necessary.

While the practice of narrating and critically examining one's own experience is as old as human experience itself, autoethnography, as a formally recognized methodology in the social sciences, is a relatively recent development, gaining scholarly acceptance toward the end of the twentieth century and continuing to expand since (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). Chang (2013) notes its expanding application across disciplines including anthropology, communication, education, nursing, religious studies, and social work — which reflects both the method's flexibility and its capacity to illuminate experiences that more conventional research designs might leave inaccessible. At its core, autoethnography combines three interlocking commitments: to the *auto*, or the researcher's self and experience; to the *ethno*, or the cultural and social world in which that experience is embedded; and to the *graphy*, or the act of writing and representing that experience for others (Adams et al., 2022, p. 3). A work that foregrounds only one or two of these falls short of autoethnography.

The method has its origins in the broader narrative turn in the social sciences, which gathered momentum from the 1980s onward as researchers began to question the assumption that knowledge could be produced from a position of detached objectivity (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). The researcher's subjectivity started here to not be a problem to be managed but rather to be seen as a resource to be cultivated.

Another aspect is that autoethnographic work serves several interconnected functions and the most important function for this research is that it offers “insight into sensemaking processes, even—and perhaps especially—how we grapple with experiences that generate discomfort or that do not feel right or make sense”(Adams et al., 2022, p. 4). Faith journeys and experiences with religious community can be part of what the authors call the “most challenging, confusing, and formative events, relationships, and social and political experiences we encounter throughout life”.

Ellis (2013, p. 10, as cited in Adams et al., 2022) captures the deeper orientation this requires when she writes that for many practitioners, autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world but "a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively." It is this dimension — autoethnography as a practice of attentive,

examined living rather than merely a research technique — that makes it particularly suited to the study of faith journeys, where my own life, as the researcher, cannot be cleanly separated from the phenomena under investigation.

Chang (2013) argues directly that autoethnography "offers a unique vantage point to the understanding of the social through the self and therefore should be added to the methodological repertoire of spirituality research" (p. 11), noting that spirituality, even if different than religion or faith, is an integral part of personhood — closely connected to cultural identity and expressed in both private and public life. This argument rests on the method's dual capacity: to enable researchers to explore their own spiritual experience with depth and honesty, and to situate that experience within the social and institutional contexts that shape it.

A search of the available literature reveals that autoethnographic studies situated within faith development or religious communities remain limited in number, and of those identified, several studies engage with experiences of rupture rather than spiritual formation. Whether this reflects a genuine pattern in the field, the limits of what gets researched, or simply the nature of faith-related autoethnographic motivation itself remains an open question. People could be more open to write autoethnographically when something has been fractured in their faith development — when the therapeutic arc from wound to understanding is most urgently needed. Railsback (2020) traces precisely this movement, from epiphany through to catharsis. Randolph (2008) offers a constructive exception, using autoethnography to document engagement with a faith community around environmental issues, demonstrating the method's capacity to illuminate both challenges and opportunities, as dimensions of religious community life. What is clear, however, is that authentic lived accounts of faith experience are in short supply more broadly, in public discourse as well — a gap documented at a global scale by the Faith and Media Study (Dritan, 2022), which found that 63% of people globally identified a need for high quality content on faith and religion and 84% believe there is a need for lived experiences to be shared. Autoethnography is not the primary focus of this study, but a methodological starting point from which a richer inquiry into lived faith journeys becomes possible.

Chang (2013) opens chapter three in the *Handbook of Autoethnography* by situating autoethnography as a "highly personal process . . . because the personal experiences of researchers themselves are the foundation of autoethnography" (p. 107). The reflexive self-examination

that autoethnography demands of the researcher is not an eccentric methodological requirement — it reflects a principle recognised across every field where practitioners engage with others' spiritual lives. Love (2002) argues that those who support students' spiritual development must first attend to their own — considering how they themselves create meaning, purpose, and direction, navigate their relationships, and locate themselves within communities of belonging. Puchalski et al. (2019) make the same argument in clinical care, insisting that professionals working in this realm need opportunities "to reflect on the role of their own spirituality and how it impacts their professional call and their own self-care". Taken together, these perspectives suggest that the kind of reflexive engagement with one's own faith experience that autoethnography demands is an instance of a more widely recognised principle: that those who engage with others' inner lives — whether as clinicians, educators, pastors, youth workers or researchers — must first attend carefully and honestly to their own. Autoethnography is the instrument through which that clarity becomes possible — and this study began there.

Bochner and Riggs (2014) situate autoethnography within the broader tradition of narrative inquiry, which understands storytelling as the primary means by which human beings make sense of their lives across time. There are many changes that are beyond our control, or that we go through unconsciously, but if we break down the complexity of our stories into smaller parts, that path that is being drawn could lead to real transformations (Siba, 2025). On this view, studying faith journeys necessarily involves studying narratives — the stories people tell in relation to faith and religious communities. The individual faith journey cannot be adequately captured by survey instruments or statistical aggregation; it requires methods that remain close to the lived texture of experience, that treat participants' accounts not only as data to be processed but as meanings to be engaged with later, honestly and with care. Ganzevoort (2011) makes a parallel argument from within practical theology, contending that a narrative approach values individual biography and religious construction over general descriptions, and that individuals construct their own bricolage of elements from various religious traditions and worldviews. Service design also recognised autoethnography as a method in the discovery phase. We could say that all together, the narrative inquiry tradition, service design and the practical theology framework thus converge in pointing toward autoethnography as an appropriate and theoretically coherent approach to start a study of faith journeys within a religious community with.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN (METHODOLOGY)

This study is positioned at the intersection of Research through Design and Research for Design. Design methods were not merely tools for data collection but active means through which knowledge was generated — shaping what could be known and how. At the same time, the insights produced are intended to inform future design interventions within faith communities and to contribute to the field of practical theology. In this sense, the research both emerges from and points toward design practice. It also operates, in a less conventional sense, within research about design: by bringing the topic of service design into a faith community, the study surfaces what happens to the researcher, conversations, processes and design tools when they encounter a context shaped by theological meaning and spiritual sensitivity. As health, religion and spirituality studies have suggested, entering this research context required the researcher's own spiritual self-knowledge as a precondition for entry. Before any tool could be deployed, I had to know where I stood — not methodologically, but spiritually.

Therefore, designing research to answer a question or address a problem is shaped by two equally important constraints: what is practicable and what is ethical. Making sure that my research is structured, coherent and appropriate, I used the research onion as a guiding tool. This guided me from abstract philosophies (outer layers) to practical data collection and analysis techniques (inner core) (Saunders, 2012). The logic behind the research design is presented in Fig. 5, and each stage will be further developed in the present and next chapter.

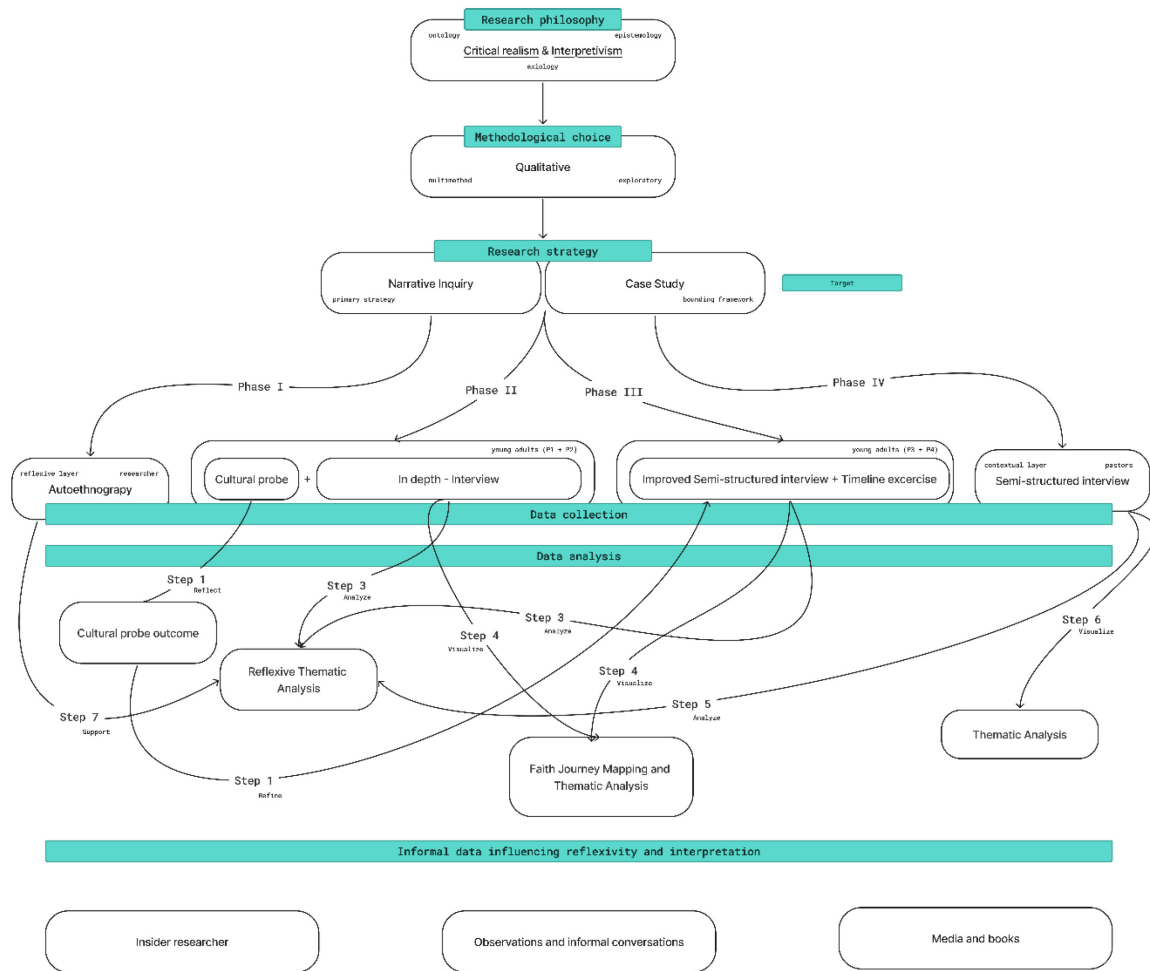


Fig. 5. The logic behind the research design

3.1. Research philosophy

“After all, at all stages in the research process you will be demonstrating your values... Choosing one topic rather than another suggests that you think one of the topics is more important. Your choice of philosophical approach is a reflection of your values, as is your choice of data collection techniques.”(Saunders et al., 2012, p. 139)

The choice of research philosophy depends on practical considerations, as each is suited to different objectives. If we are unaware of the research philosophy underlying our work, it can be difficult to identify the assumptions we hold about how the world operates (Saunders et al., 2012). Based on (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 140), my study is based on both *critical realism and interpretivism* for several reasons.

First, it adopts a *critical realist ontology*, believing that an independent reality exists but is only partially accessible through human perception and interpretation. Second, *epistemologically*, I take an *interpretivist view*, understanding that knowledge is constructed through socially and culturally mediated meanings, and that these subjective meanings motivate action. I believe the social world can be understood from the participants' point of view (DeMarrais et al., 2024). Not only in this study, but as a general attitude, I am seeking “to discover the meaning people make of their experiences” (DeMarrais et al., 2024, p. 10) and I am doing this by adopting an “empathetic stance”, which Saunders et al. call “crucial to the interpretivist philosophy” (2012, p. 137).

Third, *from an axiological perspective*, I do acknowledge that research is not value-neutral; my Christian worldview influences both the process and the interpretation of data. It is therefore a significant responsibility not to impose my own constructs on participants. Moreover, I am part of what is being researched. As faith is very personal, exploring faith journeys requires a special level of reflexivity, and my awareness of this practice has been addressed in different parts of this thesis (introduction and literature review) by incorporating autoethnography and engaging in ongoing reflexivity by critically examining how my values and assumptions may affect data collection, analysis, and presentation.

3.2. Methodological choice

This research is: *exploratory*, as the specific context of young adults' faith journeys within this community has received little direct scholarly attention; *multimethod qualitative research*, as initial use of autoethnography and literature review was used to define the nature of the sequential methods. Therefore, it takes an inductive approach that became progressively theory-informed as the research developed. It is associated with the research philosophies mentioned, and is sometimes referred to as “naturalistic, since researchers need to operate within a natural setting, or research context, in order to establish trust, participation, access to meanings, and in-depth understanding”(Saunders et al., 2012, p. 163).

Based on Creswell's thoughts (2013), it is qualitative because it starts with underlying assumptions and interpretive or theoretical frameworks that guide the exploration of research issues related to the meanings individuals or groups assign to social or human problems. To

investigate these issues, qualitative researchers employ an emerging inquiry approach, collecting data in natural settings that are sensitive to the participants and locations involved. The final report or presentation includes participants' voices, the researcher's reflexivity and a detailed interpretation of the problem, highlighting its contribution to existing literature.

Besides everything mentioned, I am also guided by a service design perspective (Stickdorn et al., 2018), particularly by situating my study in the first diamond of the Double Diamond framework (Discover and Define) to investigate needs, perceptions, and contextual factors within church settings. This corresponds to the Descriptive (*what is going on*) and Interpretive (*why is this going on*) tasks of Practical Theology.

The later stages of the Double Diamond framework (Develop and Deliver) are recognised as requiring collaborative engagement beyond the scope of this research, particularly through dialogue with the field of practical theology (as related to the Normative and Pragmatic tasks).

3.3. Research strategies

This study adopts a combined narrative inquiry and case study approach. While narrative inquiry provides the framework for understanding how individual participants construct and make sense of their faith journeys over time, case study logic grounds these narratives within a specific, bounded context — the Reformed Church in Romania, and a particular region within it.

A narrative is defined as a personal story (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 187), “an account of an experience that is told in a sequenced way, indicating a flow of related events that, taken together, are significant for the narrator and which convey meaning to the researcher” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996 as cited in Saunders et al., 2012).

As a research strategy, narrative inquiry offers greater meaning and analytical depth than standard qualitative interviews because it encourages participants to narrate their experiences rather than merely respond to pre-formulated questions. This allows the researcher to uncover how events are connected, what actions follow, and what implications emerge — all of which are often lost in question-and-answer formats. Narrative inquiry preserves the chronological order and sequencing of events as described by the participant, enabling

experiences to be linked over time into a coherent and meaningful story. In this study, participants take the role of narrator, while the researcher acts as a facilitating listener. This dynamic requires careful decisions about what to include, what to omit, and how to connect parts of the account — decisions that carry both analytical and ethical weight, particularly when participants share vulnerable or sensitive experiences of faith and belonging.

Because of its “intensive and time-consuming nature”, narrative inquiry is often used with a small number of participants, typically those “judged as being critical cases or extreme cases, from whom much may be learnt” (Saunders et al., 2012, p. 188). This is consistent with the sampling approach taken in this study. Although in-depth interviews are considered to be the primary method for collecting stories, other methods can be also used by the narrative researchers to record stories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). In this case the data collection was complemented by a visual narrative timeline exercise, which allowed participants to visualize their faith journeys spatially and chronologically, often surfacing connections or new information that words alone would have not captured.

The purpose of this strategy is to “understand the complex processes which people use in making sense of their realities” (Musson, 2004, p. 42).

Case study research is particularly suited to investigating contemporary phenomena within their real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2009 in Saunders et al., 2012). This situation highlights that young adults' faith journeys are intertwined with the community structures, relationships, and support systems surrounding them. The distinctive denominational church community, being a mainline church connected to a minority group, serves as an integral part of the research, functioning as a case study.

Focusing on how ministry related to young adults functions and the church-related contexts influencing their faith development, rather than on the church's overall operations, makes this an embedded case study. Including myself as a researcher and community member, along with young adult participants and church leaders, reinforces this case study approach by offering multiple perspectives on the same bounded context. Yin describes this as an embedded case study design. Together, these groups provide a comprehensive view of how faith develops and is supported within this community.

By integrating narrative inquiry with a case study, this research captures both the depth of individual stories and the specific context that influences them, oscillating between personal meaning-making and community-level factors. Incorporating the previously discussed service design perspectives, this study can generate new questions to explore in the next part of the double diamond process.

3.4. Research target

This study is situated within the *broader context of the (Hungarian) Reformed Church in Romania, specifically focusing on one district (Királyhágómelléki)*. While the research initially considered focusing on a single local congregation as a bounded case study, ethical and relational considerations informed a broader multi-congregational approach.

In insider research contexts, particularly within relatively small faith communities, focusing on a single congregation may risk indirectly identifying participants — especially when only one pastoral leader serves the community, which is the case for all local congregations involved. Because each local Reformed congregation usually has only one pastor, including one leader from a specific congregation could have revealed that leader's identity to the larger community, risking confidentiality. Therefore, the study intentionally selected *leaders from various congregations and levels* within the Reformed Church in Romania, rather than focusing on a single local church. This approach also enriched the data by incorporating diverse perspectives from different leadership roles and levels and community settings within the same denomination.

Given the potential sensitivity of narratives about faith development, support structures, and institutional dynamics, expanding the study to include young adults from multiple congregations within the same denominational context also reduces the risk of unintended exposure and mitigates the risk that findings may be interpreted as an evaluation of a specific local leader or congregation.

This shift allows the study to identify patterns of meaning-making and church experience across contexts rather than positioning one congregation as the primary analytical subject. The focus, therefore, moves from a single-ecosystem case study toward an exploratory qualitative inquiry within a shared denominational culture. The research remains contextually

bounded by the Reformed Church in Romania for ensuring theological and institutional coherence and reducing ethical vulnerability.

The *main target group of this research is young adults aged 18–29* who are members of a local congregation. This stage of life is often associated with identity formation and changes in belief, making it a relevant group for exploring faith development. All participants graduated from high school and are either university students, entering the workforce, or already working. The *target group tailored to the context includes pastors at various leadership levels*: three main pastors of local congregations (*egyházközség*), one secondary pastor of a local congregation, two pastors engaged in district level leadership (*egyházkerület*), one in mid-level leadership (*egyházmegye*), one in national leadership (*zsinat*), and all five involved in youth work at different levels—these roles are present in various combinations.

All participants, such as young adults and pastors, were selected using purposive and self-selection sampling, involving individuals with diverse experiences who were interested and willing to devote time to being interviewed. The goal was to explore in-depth a range of lived experiences rather than achieve statistical generalization. Therefore, although all young adults originated from rural areas, they currently study or work in various cities, some returning more often than others to the countryside. Pastors were chosen from three different counties (*egyházmegye*) in a way that they represent different leadership levels and church contexts and diverse relationships and responsibilities with the young adults, some of whom are basing their service in rural areas, others in cities. Three out of five pastors are very close to the target group (in age), between 29 and 35 and 2 other pastors are between 45 – 55.

3.5. Methodology positioning and limitations

This study is not a comprehensive project in Practical Theology. Typically, Practical Theology moves through descriptive (*What is going on?*), interpretive (*Why is this going on?*), normative (*What ought to be going on?*), and strategic tasks (*How might we respond?*), therefore ending with theological evaluation and practical guidance (Osmer, 2008). Here, the research is intentionally limited to the descriptive task: it focuses on understanding the lived experiences and perceptions of young adults in a faith community, as well as the perspectives of church leaders.

By taking this approach, the study aligns with aspects of Practical Theology that emphasize paying attention to lived experience, interpreting those experiences, and connecting tradition with today's context. It reflects a commitment to "staying close to experience", recognising that human experience is where faith is embodied, practised, and interpreted (Swinton & Mowat, 2016). However, the research does not make theological judgements. Instead, it provides an evidence-based account that can serve as a starting point for further practical-theological reflection.

While the research includes perspectives from both young adults and church leaders, it did not ultimately bring these groups together for direct interaction or co-creation. This was not part of the original research plan but became clear during the process. The depth and complexity of the topic required more reflection and in-depth analysis than expected, which made it difficult to add a co-creative phase within the study's timeframe.

However, including church leaders was a deliberate choice, reflecting the understanding that this research takes place within a faith community where shared practices, leadership, and common understanding shape the experience of faith. Listening to church leaders' perspectives was considered important for acknowledging the broader church context in which young adults' journeys unfold.

4. DATA COLLECTION & ANALYSIS

An autoethnographic exploration—driven by my personal motivation and need for ethical reflection—entirely shifted the direction and dynamics of an initial thesis topic. As a result, the thesis now includes an autoethnographic element, which has confirmed that it can serve as a reflexive layer both before and during data collection (Ellis et al., 2011). This, together with an extensive review of existing reports and literature (background research), laid the groundwork for formulating research and interview questions.

In this chapter, I am describing the process through which data was collected and analyzed across the different phases of this research. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, the methodology was not fixed in advance but developed iteratively—each phase informing the design of the next one. This iterative approach was a deliberate choice, rooted in my commitment to allowing themes and insights to emerge from participants' narratives rather than from my autoethnography alone. It is a result of reflexive positioning.

Therefore, young adult data was collected across four iterative phases, each shaped by the learning from the previous one. Separately, five leaders were interviewed for contextual and leadership purposes, which are important from both the specific faith context and organizational perspectives. In the following sections, data collection phases and data analysis rationale and steps will be presented.

4.1. Data collection: phases

The accuracy and richness of research can be improved by employing various methods to gather data on the same phenomenon, a concept known as data triangulation (Stickdorn, Hormess, et al., 2018). This also balances potential biases. Following this principle, I aimed to generate different types of data during the research, as suggested by Stickdorn et al. (2018). The following outlines the data sources used:

- Secondary data (collected by others for different purposes but repurposed for this research):
 - Desk Research (information from background research and literature reviews – on both young adults and church contexts)
- Primary data (collected directly by me for this study):

- Self-ethnographic approach: autoethnography (researcher)
- Non-participant approach: cultural probes (young adults)
- Participant approaches: observation (young adults), semi-structured interviews (young adults and church leaders), visual narrative timeline exercise (young adults)

The following sections detail each data collection phase, with the analytical process outlined in 4.2. The results are discussed in the results chapter.

The four primary data collection phases are presented also in Fig. 5 and are the following ones:

- Phase 1: Autoethnography (Reflection)

I began with autoethnographic reflection, started documenting and reflecting on my own experiences within Christian contexts. This phase supported early familiarisation with the research context, created the first point for the development of a visual narrative timeline exercise and helped me develop reflexive awareness of my position as an insider researcher.

- Phase 2: Cultural Probe (2 Young Adults) + Semi-Structured Interview

- Phase 3: Refined Semi-Structured Interviews + Visual Narrative Timeline Exercise (4 Young Adults)

Based on reflections from the cultural probe, I refined the interview structure. I introduced a more direct opening question focusing on participants' current faith position. Five participants took part in semi-structured interviews and a visual narrative timeline exercise. The timeline exercise supported mapping key moments, relationships, and transitions in their faith journey. During the timeline exercise, I facilitated the process and documented their narrative in real time as they shared experiences.

- Phase 4: Pastoral Leader Interviews (5 Pastors)

In addition, observational insights were gathered over approximately 9 months through informal engagement in church-related settings.

4.1.1. Autoethnography (Researcher)

“...to be able to walk in the customer’s shoes, you first need to take off your own.” (Stickdorn, Hormess, et al., 2018)

I began with autoethnographic reflection, documenting and reflecting on my own experiences within Christian contexts. This phase supported early familiarisation with the research context and helped me develop reflexive awareness of my position as an insider researcher.

Autoethnography was already discussed in the literature review as the initial T0 moment, even before delving into the specific topic of faith journeys. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate why and how the data collection method was implemented in practice, specifically through an individual autoethnography, as I am acting as a solo researcher in this case (Chang, 2022). This partly involves a little story of my thesis as well.

This autoethnographic reflection is a look back at my own journey through Christian communities over the past twenty-five years. My experiences are far from straightforward—they’re scattered across two continents, six countries, and eight different denominations. Along the way, I’ve met pastors, church members, family, friends, classmates, and even people whose names I no longer remember, both inside and outside formal church settings. There have also been moments I can only describe as divine interventions, some of which happened when no one else was around.

While my own story could be analyzed using the same visual framework as the participants’ accounts—since it’s a faith journey in itself—I’ve chosen not to include it here. Because my experiences stretch across many countries and denominations, and because the process involved countless hours of writing, reflecting, and revisiting memories through photos, songs, messages, and keepsakes, it seemed more fitting to leave it for a separate study. Combining it with the faith journeys of young adults in this project, which are expressed differently and within certain time limits, would have made things unnecessarily complicated.

Still, I think it’s important to explain why my own story is part of this discussion and what role it played. To show this, I’ll share how I chose my thesis topic. I recorded a 50-minute voice note where I talked through my thinking, then transcribed it and pulled out the key

parts, and later added new information that came to me while writing. For these details, please read the story of the thesis (5.1.)

The autoethnographic dimension of this current study did not begin with a review of the literature. It began with a thought that was at once personal and scholarly: before attempting to understand any topic in a faith context, I shall understand my own experience with it. I moved forward in this open exploration with a broad leading question: "What are my experiences with/How have I experienced Christianity in general/or Christian contexts (church services, events, people) throughout the years?" I didn't even know which question was the right one to ask.

My direct experiences with religious communities (as a direct participant) span two continents, six countries, and eight Christian denominations over 25 years (the earliest memory I can recall is of me being 6) — a biographical breadth that demanded very careful excavation. Adams et al. (2022), drawing on Ellis (2013, p. 10), remind us that for many who practice it, autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world but "a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively." It was in this second, deeper sense that autoethnography first entered this research — not as a method I selected, but as a posture I had already been inhabiting. It was an "emotional call", not yet working in tandem with any "systemic sociological introspection" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). That came later.

The process began not as a formal methodological exercise but as an act of orientation. I was aware of autoethnography as a method — I had encountered it in a prior course, where I had been asked to write at length about a personal experience. I found that format constraining this time: the linearity of prose struggled to hold the texture of lived religious experience, which did not arrange itself easily for me and did not give me an overview of my story; thoughts felt chaotic and all over the place; it did not bring meaning to me. This time, therefore, I turned to a visual tool. Working in Figma, I began placing memories — moments, people, places, feelings, environments connected to faith, not always directly connected to a local church context — without a predetermined structure. I was not following a protocol. I was following an impulse. Today I understand that personal experiences connected to the research topic (autoethnographic data), can be gathered in different ways (Chang, 2022).

What emerged from that impulse was unexpected. As I continued placing experiences, I noticed they were arranging themselves along an implicit axis — not strictly chronological, but broadly temporal, moving from childhood towards the present. I drew a horizontal line. I kept adding. What became visible was that the experiences I placed first were not the earliest, but the most significant, in terms of moments of deep joy, hurt, care, encounter, realisation, decision. The timeline that formed had emotional and spiritual weight, but it was neither hurting nor healing (at least this is what I thought). It felt like I dealt with many of the moments placed there before, but I never had the full picture, the possible hidden meaning, the sense of it.

However, using Figma to collect data was my initial step. As I stopped adding memories by naming the events briefly, I began to recall, observe, and reflect on each one. This self-reflection allowed for deeper perspectives on my research area (Chang, 2022). Questions like *What happened there? Who was there? What else do you remember?* —helped this reflection deepen organically. Sometimes, as I was writing about one event, other memories were activated, related to events that were not initially placed on the timeline. At some point, I started browsing through my pictures, previous conversations (Text, Messenger, and WhatsApp) to clarify details I wasn't entirely sure about. I still have a few details I would like to double check on, with those involved. I also thought about physical artefacts I didn't have access to at the time, but were kept as memories in a different geographical location. All these activities helped me create vivid "snapshots" of my memories (Muncey, 2010). Then I took some time to look at the data, holistically. It looked like a map. Next day, I looked at it again and started noticing different elements. I added symbols (people, places, divine, so on...). Symbols started diversifying (eg. people became family, friends, pastor or a random person I can't even recall by name). "Oh, this is getting pretty. I like how it becomes colourful". Meaning related to specific events was developing throughout writing or overall meaning-making during reflection times. However, analyzing each story within the big story felt overwhelming. Memories were from different context. School/University, c/Church, family, and other social contexts from around several countries. I was basically judging people whose perspectives I did not have, whose culture I did not understand. I realized I am not heading in a great direction. For example, there is a difference between saying "when X behave this way, this is what happened to Y" then say, "because X did that, Y felt this way". My way of

analyzing the data was clearly wrong, an autoethnography without the “ethno”. It felt heavy. I did not have peace. I stopped there with the autoethnography.

Analysis

Throughout the collection process, observations such as "this is becoming a kind of timeline" were noted as the data took shape. This reflexive annotation allowed analytical thinking to begin during collection rather than after it.

Patterns were identified through repeated reading of the material. These coalesced around several recurring categories: significant people and their relational roles (family, church pastors, friends within the church context); denominational differences that I had questioned from an early age; the lived experience of liturgy; characteristics of physical and social environments; and life stage as a factor shaping receptivity — the recognition, for instance, that certain information or experiences could not be meaningfully received as a child, only later. However, throughout the analysis, I realized that navigating the data on a 13" screen was challenging. Additionally, the extensive use of colors hindered pattern recognition and clear conclusions. This affected how the faith journeys of the interviewed young adults were visually represented. This reflexive awareness remained with me throughout all subsequent phases.

4.1.2. Cultural Probes (Young Adults)

Cultural probes are often used to get the most intimate insights from participants without the researcher having to be physically present (Stickdorn, Hormess, et al., 2018).

Rather than relying exclusively on semi-structured interviews, I included this cultural probe task as an initial unbiased generative tool (Stickdorn, Lawrence, et al., 2018) to support open-ended engagement with the research setting. My intention was to avoid immediately structuring the research encounter through interview questions alone, as I felt that doing so would be overly influenced by my insider researcher position and autoethnography and could require me to interact with participants' faith positions too early, without sufficient contextual grounding. Instead, I designed the probe as an open, initial activity that could

support reflection and serve as a starting point for later discussion before approaching faith-journey narratives.

Two young adults from the same local community, chosen purposively (at different levels of participation in Sunday services), were invited to attend a church service (during Prayer Week – a one-week event with guest pastors preaching) and to record anything they noticed, found meaningful, that captured their attention, or considered significant during the experience. Thoughts, questions, emotions, anything they felt like sharing. Although often it is recommended to aim for various outcomes—like text, photos, videos, audio recording (Stickdorn, Lawrence, et al., 2018)—I aimed for text and/or drawings, by taking into consideration the Reformed Church context I am researching in. I also deliberately kept the instructions broad so participants could decide for themselves what was relevant, rather than working within predefined analytical categories.

The cultural probe instrument consisted of a brief written prompt, blank papers, and a writing/drawing tool (see Appendix for the full instructions). While designing this instruction in my own handwriting to make it more personal, I aimed to emphasize connection, warmth, openness, and participant autonomy (Ren et al., 2017). Being aware of linguistic challenges in a culturally diverse community, I also mentioned that they did not have to write correctly or beautifully. I kept the instruction open, encouraging free-form expression and allowing participants to represent their thoughts, emotions, questions, or observations in any format they preferred. I did not provide predefined categories, themes, or conceptual frameworks, and I explicitly stated that there were no right or wrong responses.

The intention was that this activity would set the tone and provide a contextual entry point for later discussions about faith, allowing participants' own voices to surface before we shift to their faith-journey narratives. I initially assumed that participants' observations—such as what they focused on and how they described it—might offer an indirect indication of their current relationship to faith. This was true to some extent, but I did not feel I had the authority to draw such conclusions. The cultural probes led to adjusting the subsequent research design to include a more direct and participant-led approach.

4.1.3. Semi-structured interviews (Young Adults and Pastors)

Given the research's aim, the importance of personal contact, the nature of the data collection questions, and the time and completeness of the process, I chose to gather the main primary data through *semi-structured interviews* (Saunders et al., 2012). Participants were the ones who could provide a more complete historical information in this case (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The semi-structured interviews were conducted with two participant groups: young adults and church leaders. In both cases, participants were provided with the interview's context and themes beforehand in an organized way (see interview invitations and consent forms in Appendix), except for the first young adult participant, who played a significant role in improving the content of these documents.

Semi-structured interviews allow open, flexible conversations. In this type of interview, the order of questions may vary depending on the flow of the conversation, and some questions may be skipped, given the specific case at hand. (Saunders et al., 2012)

Interviews were conducted one-to-one, either face-to-face (4 young adults and 4 church leaders) or online (1 young adult interview via Google Meet and 1 Zoom). Since the location where an interview is conducted can influence the data collected, this, together with the time of the interviews, was always chosen by the participants, as they felt more comfortable (Saunders et al., 2012). For face-to-face interviews, young adults often chose their home, and leaders always chose their parish or office in their local congregation's location.

All interviews took place in Hungarian language and were audio recorded. The interview guidelines, invitations and consent forms are presented in Appendix. To keep a record of the interview status, the Target Audience Google Sheet was extended to support this, as shown in Fig 6.

Young adults, the main target group, were involved in interview sessions centered on three key elements rather than a strict sequence: reflecting on concepts and terminology, narrating their personal stories (4.1.4), and broader contextual questioning. While I've described these parts separately here for clarity, their order naturally varied depending on how each participant engaged in the conversation. For example, if a participant started sharing their faith journey spontaneously (which happened in one case), I followed their lead, letting their story unfold before gently guiding the conversation to conceptual or contextual questions later on.

This flexible, participant-focused approach aligns with the principles of narrative inquiry, in which honoring the speaker's voice and natural flow is more important than rigidly sticking to a set interview format.

were also invited to participate in a visual narrative timeline exercise, described in the next section. This supported reflection and often helped participants recall and articulate aspects of their faith journeys that might otherwise have been difficult to express.

The young adult interviews focused on:

- Understanding of context-specific terminology
- Participant's current faith positioning and relationship with church
- Faith development - key life events, challenges, and turning points (visual narrative timeline exercise) and faith journey
- Experiences within church communities - perceptions of support and belonging, and relational influences (mentoring functions)
- Reflections on faith journey exercise

In light of broader trends among young adults—such as openness to spirituality, curiosity, and caution toward institutionalized religion—it is important to consider how these concepts are understood within the context of this study as well. While not a primary focus, the research includes attention to how both young adults within the Reformed Church perceive and interpret terms such as spirituality, religion, and faith, faith journeys, spiritual health, community and mentoring, in order to support a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences. These questions weren't meant to be strict definitions but a friendly way to see how each person personally understands these concepts. If their stories started to flow naturally before these questions, I gently introduced these ideas later or let them emerge naturally through their narrative.

Every session also included a set of broader, more general questions that addressed what participants felt the church needed to understand and what kinds of support felt meaningful to them. Usually, these questions were saved for the end of the session, after exploring personal narratives. This reflective moment helped shift the focus from individual meaning to a broader, collective perspective, adding an important institutional dimension that complemented the personal stories.

Church leaders/Pastors were also interviewed to gain perspectives on how they understood the support of young adults within church contexts. Therefore, I conducted semi-structured interviews with 5 pastors in various leadership positions who work with young adults in different church contexts. These interviews focused on institutional perspectives on young adult faith journeys and church engagement and followed a different format from those with young adult participants.

These interviews provided important contextual insights that complemented the personal stories from young adult participants. While not a primary focus, the church leaders within the Reformed Church we also asked about how they perceive and interpret terms such as spirituality, religion, faith, faith journeys, spiritual health, community and mentoring in order to support a more nuanced understanding of participants' experiences.

4.1.4. Visual narrative timeline exercise (3 Young Adults)

In narrating their personal stories, the previously mentioned semi-structured interview evolved into a more in-depth narrative interview style, with the central element being a *visual narrative timeline exercise*. Participants (*narrators*) collaborated with me, the researcher (*listener and facilitator*), to explore their faith journeys (Saunders et al., 2012). They were supported in real time by a visual representation that illustrated how their experiences developed over time and how various factors were interconnected.

In this narrative phase, the involved young adults constructed their faith journeys through a guided timeline exercise and prompted reflection, by sharing answers in narratives that were integrated into the visual map we constructed together. Having already learned their current faith positioning during the introduction, I opened the exercise by introducing it (see the interview guideline), drawing a horizontal line across the page, distributing emotion stickers, and setting out differently colored markers for different moments of the conversation, later to be aligned with the audio recording, and to understand how meaning is developed. The leading question opening the journey was: "*When you think back over your life so far, what moments related to faith stand out to you?*". If the timeline exercise preceded terminology and their current position on faith, the question "*How did you get here?*" continued developing their journey, serving as a natural way to begin their personal story. From there,

participants were encouraged to go back as far as they wished, outlining their experiences over time.

During this phase, I served as a facilitative listener, using open-ended questions. If the first question led to a narrative without any details related to a Christian context, at some point one question gets more directive (to ensure we stayed within the aim and scope of this study), and the rest remain non-directive prompts, like “What was happening at that time?”, “What else do you remember?”, “Can you tell me more about that?” “Who was involved?”, “Why was this moment significant?”, “How did you interpret it at the time?” and “Has your understanding of it changed since?”, or other moment specific questions to support the story's flow without interrupting. These prompts, which served as follow-up questions, were reserved for natural pauses, ensuring that the participant's account remained authentic and prioritized.

During this phase, a dynamic visual timeline was created on A2 or A1 paper (depending on the physical space) or directly in Figma (for one online case). This served as an ongoing record of the story. I, the researcher, actively added notes, markers, and annotations as participants shared their experiences, documenting key events, relationships, and, at times, emotional changes. I also used different colors. Some participants, especially those with backgrounds in graphic design, contributed by adding their own annotations, symbols, or spatial arrangements directly to the timeline. During more intense narration, I often kept the timeline separate and reviewed it with the participant afterward for clarity. Consequently, the timeline was not viewed as an external task but as a collaborative, evolving artifact that grew alongside the narration, functioning as a memory aid for the participant, a conversation framework, and a visual record for later analysis. At the end of this exercise, participants reflected on the knowledge gained and shared what they found valuable and new.

All narrations were part of the audio recordings from semi-structured interviews (from the previous section), with participants' informed consent, and were subsequently transcribed in Figma. Visual timelines were produced during each session, though their form varied depending on the interview context. In face-to-face sessions, timelines were created collaboratively, with both the researcher and participants contributing annotations and markers, and were photographed at the close of the session. In the online session, the participant was asked to draw their own timeline (on paper or tablet) and I constructed the timeline independently in Figma, adding notes and markers in real time as participants narrated their experiences,

with participants contributing directly to the visual record as confirmation. In both cases, the timelines played a similar role by providing a clear visual record of how the story developed. However, the level of involvement from participants in creating these timelines varied.

The photographed real-time visual timelines are not included in full visibility here for ethical reasons. Since the community involved in this research is small and closely connected, visual materials — such as handwriting, annotations, and specific details — could more easily identify individuals. This is the reason why the co-created timelines were used only internally.

4.2. Data analysis: steps and rationale

Choosing the method to analyse data felt like “finding a path in a methodological jungle”(Zelčāne & Pipere, 2023). Following the example of Zelčāne and Pipere (2023), who demonstrated how combining multiple qualitative data analysis methods can deepen understanding of psychological constructs (such as resilience, in their case), this thesis also employs a *multi-methods approach*, combining thematic analysis with narrative-interpretive techniques (faith journey mapping and other visuals). Moreover, an *iterative approach* is also followed. Analysis did not strictly follow the chronological order of data collection, but moved between datasets, using information from one phase to inform the interpretation of others.

The data analysis consists of several steps and the rationale behind this iteration is as follows:

- The data from *cultural probes* were first used to inform the *refinement (Step 1)* of the interview design. It was later *revisited* during analysis and used selectively to support or nuance emerging themes from the interview and timeline data. While more fragmented in nature, it provided contextual insight into participants’ in-situ engagement with a specific type of church service.
- The primary analytical focus was placed on the interview and timeline data from young adult participants (Phases 2 and 3 from Data Collection). This material was analyzed using *thematic analysis (Step 3)*, which involved repeated reading, coding, and the development of themes across participants. These themes captured recurring patterns in how young adults experience, question, and navigate their faith journeys. In addition to thematic analysis, I conducted a *narrative-interpretive analysis (Step*

4) of the timeline data. This involved focus on individual meaning-making, examining the temporal structure of participants' faith journeys, including sequences, turning points, moments of tension or change, and key elements on the journey (people, events, attitudes, church related touchpoint, divine). Based on this, I developed visual journey maps that represented each participant's trajectory. These maps functioned as interpretive tools, which highlighted structure and relationships.

- The **secondary analytical focus**, related to context, was the analysis of the pastoral interviews using *thematic analysis (Step 6)* and their examination in relation to the findings from young adult participants. This comparative analysis focused on identifying both alignment and divergence between lived experience and institutional perspectives. This stage also produced interpretive tools.
- Finally, *the autoethnography* served as a **reflexive layer** throughout the analysis process as well. Upon revisiting, I decided not to use it to generate themes, but rather to support interpretation where appropriate and to critically reflect on my position as an insider researcher. The content of my autoethnography was not used as a data generation method.

Together, these layers provide a more complete understanding of how faith journeys are experienced and how support is encountered within church contexts.

4.2.1. Thematic analysis

Applied to young adults and pastors interviews, thematic analysis is a flexible method used for discovering, examining, and presenting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While many researchers associate thematic analysis primarily with interview and focus group data, its strength lies in its flexibility to analyze various types of texts, including narratives. Therefore, a thematic analysis was conducted following the guidelines of Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved:

- *familiarizing myself with the data*: transcribing data (visual timeline and audio-recorded data for young adults, and recorded data for pastors) into Figma on sticky notes. For young adults, data connected to the visual timeline was added to the timeline, and other data were collected separately. The current thematic analysis includes

all data from pastors and data collected separately from the timeline exercise for young adults;

- *generating the initial codes*: through the first reading, naming data across the entire data set by separating information that covered multiple topics on distinct sticky notes and bolding text I found relevant for each sticky note, which followed the general topics outlined in interviews.
- *searching for themes*: throughout the second re-reading, copying and pasting each sticky note into potential themes, one by one, which were connected to the research questions.
- *reviewing, documenting, reporting*: themes were reviewed in alignment with existing literature review on faith development.

Like any qualitative approach that involves data interpretation, thematic analysis— even after it appears finished— stays open to continuous revision rather than being considered final (McAllum et al., 2019). Therefore, stopping the analysis was challenging. Revisiting the research aim, questions, and faith development theory sections proved very helpful.

4.2.2. Narrative-interpretive analysis

Typically, narrative functions as: (1) a framework for cognition and perception; (2) a way to negotiate relationships and build connections with oneself, others, and the environment; (3) a tool for social and cultural cohesion; (4) an artistic act of creation; (5) an educational process and immediate experience; (6) a representational strategy for intrapersonal and interpersonal communication systems.

More about narratives were discussed in the 3.2. However, what must be added here is that narrative is always an iterative and evolving process, analyzing, organizing, and deriving theoretical insights from storied data can be complex. Therefore, knowing that separating story data into small parts can risk losing the meaning within the larger narrative context, I find collocation analysis one solution for tackling such challenges, and this way, aiming to ensure validity and create a comprehensive, interconnected research text (Mello, 2002).

Therefore, for the young adults timeline exercise, participants' stories were translated into structured visual forms (visual narrative mapping) and the content of these maps followed the principles of collocation analysis (Mello, 2002), incorporating referential and ordering

elements (time, illustration, description, order, background information, relationships), textual operations (patterns of motifs and characters), and educative operations (questions, perceptions, anecdotes – as thinking and learning about). These maps served as both a means of organizing data and an analytical tool.

The analysis for each participant involved the following steps:

- Co-created visual timelines were given digital form: all data (timeline exercise and audio recording) were transcribed in Figma. Each idea from the narration was added to a sticky note and connected, where possible, to the corresponding event on the timeline. Thoughts expressed across periods of time were noted accordingly.
 - Memories were numbered sequentially as they emerged (1, 2, 3...);
 - Experiences were organized chronologically, with events often represented as longer periods of time (pointing to longer processes) rather than as specific events that point to a specific time; the difference in representation is explained in the map's legend;
 - Annotations were added to capture meaning and context;
- Lines and numbers were added between steps to illustrate movement across memories;
- As symbols began to emerge, each was connected to the event it arose from, then gradually refined and diversified across multiple revisitations of the material; the representation of symbols (legend) continued to diversify until the last map was finished being analyzed;
- Visual elements (lines, colours, shapes, stickers) helped identify patterns both within individual narratives and across participants;
- Based on Yin's suggestion (2009), over time, this process contributed to a stage-based understanding of the mentoring community's role in faith development, resonating with Park's faith development theory (see 2.2.).

5. RESULTS & FINDINGS

“Maybe it would be nice to have a single-story result section”—I thought about it once. I was even determined to ask my supervisor in a meeting: “What if I expressed the results using storytelling?” But then I thought it would not fit the academic writing process and the thesis structure, in general. A few weeks later, I heard him make the same suggestion, to maybe write in a narrative manner.

Since the direction of this thesis unfolded in ways I did not expect and was heavily shaped by moments of reflection and prayer, I believe it would be appropriate to follow my supervisor's suggestion and continue with the strategy I have adopted in other parts of the thesis, since it originated in autoethnography (see 1.6. and 4.1.1. and 5.1) and was later adopted through the young adults' timeline exercise (see 4.1.4.), which led to their faith journeys.

I believe the greatest value of this thesis lies in its participants' lived experiences and, in its process as presented in a next figure. This story isn't a fairy tale, so don't expect fantasy. It's not even all storytelling. For that, I should sit more with the data. I will narrate, sometimes in the first person, sometimes in the third, all the way to the end, and I sincerely hope that you, dear reader, can understand the core of this story regardless of your perspectives on faith and grasp its essence for yourself. As one of my friends says, with this section I am “closing the loop”—but only this specific thesis loop.

Before presenting participant accounts, this chapter opens not with my faith journey — although I called it autoethnography at the time — but with this thesis's own journey, within which my autoethnography sits. Its full content is not made available here; it was constructed through a visual timeline and written narrative account produced prior to the fieldwork phase, it was analysed (to the extent I was able to analyse it back then) and is treated as background and context rather than primary data.

It is mentioned here to make my positionality even more transparent — and to allow the visibility of the T0 moment that defined the starting point of the visual narrative timeline exercise, so that you can understand the experiential foundation from which this study grew.

5.1. The story of this thesis

“...to be able to walk in the customer’s shoes, you first need to take off your own.” (Stickdorn, Hormess, et al., 2018)

I began with autoethnographic reflection, documenting and reflecting on my own experiences within Christian contexts. This phase supported early familiarisation with the research context and helped me develop reflexive awareness of my position as an insider researcher.

Autoethnography was already discussed in the literature review as the initial T0 moment, even before delving into the specific topic of faith journeys. Therefore, the purpose of this section is to demonstrate why and how the data collection method was implemented in practice, specifically through an individual autoethnography, as I am acting as a solo researcher in this case (Chang, 2022). This partly involves a little story of my thesis as well.

This autoethnographic reflection is a look back at my own journey through Christian communities over the past twenty-five years. My experiences are far from straightforward—they’re scattered across two continents, six countries, and eight different denominations. Along the way, I’ve met pastors, church members, family, friends, classmates, and even people whose names I no longer remember, both inside and outside formal church settings. There have also been moments I can only describe as divine interventions, some of which happened when no one else was around.

While my own story could be analyzed using the same visual framework as the participants’ accounts—since it’s a faith journey in itself—I’ve chosen not to include it here. Because my experiences stretch across many countries and denominations, and because the process involved countless hours of writing, reflecting, and revisiting memories through photos, songs, messages, and keepsakes, it seemed more fitting to leave it for a separate study. Combining it with the faith journeys of young adults in this project, which are expressed differently and within certain time limits, would have made things unnecessarily complicated.

Still, I think it’s important to explain why my own story is part of this discussion and what role it played. To show this, I’ll share how I chose my thesis topic. I recorded a 50-minute voice note where I talked through my thinking, then transcribed it and pulled out the key parts, and later added new information that came to me while writing.

The following account is written in the first person, as is appropriate for a reflexive researcher's narrative.

Even so, I make a conscious choice to set aside some personal stories—they can pull me into an emotional space where I want to share everything but can't quite find the words. I feel a responsibility to share honestly, since reflecting on these experiences has been both healing and clarifying—a personal testimony of transformation and new perspectives. Maybe one day I'll be able to tell the whole story; for now, it remains partly untold. Will it ever be finished? Probably not—we can never say everything, and as one interviewee said, each retelling brings new insights. Please keep in mind that what I write here is inevitably incomplete. My aim is to approach this process reflexively, aware of the ways we all shape what we see, read, and decide.

To sum up—and without going into too many details—I grew up in a Christian family and spent years moving between both Christian and non-Christian worlds. Those early years were full of searching, questioning, and trying to make sense of things, even if I didn't always realize it at the time. Things shifted after I turned 18; I started noticing things I hadn't before. Although I never felt like I was not part of my home church and the pastor always welcomed me back with genuine joy, warmth and huge smiles, during university years, I started looking there for a community to belong to—sometimes intentionally, sometimes just hoping to find my place. Despite my efforts, I never quite felt welcomed or able to commit, and a decade later, I was still searching. In 2021, everything seemed to fall apart; it was the hardest year of my life. Here I missed many things. Even though people tried to help, nothing really worked. By 2022, at age 30, I decided to focus more seriously on what Christianity meant to me. Before that, my faith had mostly been inherited—shaped by how I felt or what I liked. I went to church to either see others happy, to meet friends, to enjoy the sense of community, or just because I liked certain traditions or practices. Throughout this journey, I faced many questions and challenges—far more than I can describe here.

During one of my many searching phases—this one especially active and centered on Christian teachings about identity, calling, relationships, finances, and more—I explored resources in Romanian, Hungarian, and English, and across various denominations: Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist, Pentecostal, and Reformed. This is where I “met” someone I will mention later.

This was just before faith became truly personal for me. Alone, in my bathroom, I decided to stop searching and commit to what I believed was true—to trust God, the teachings of Jesus and build my life on that foundation. The comfort, love, peace, and freedom I’ve found aren’t simple or easy to describe. This turning point came at age 30, and it has changed me in ways I never expected. I’m still growing, and that will come through in the next parts of my story. Therefore, please don’t take this as an account of a perfect Christian—there’s no such thing in my opinion. For me, it’s all about grace, which is a gift, just like faith. We are all trying. Maybe.

In summary, the important point is that the relationship became personal in January 2023, but I had met someone in 2022 whom I later remembered when I encountered SDSI for the first time.

Romania, 2022

It might appear that the idea about the thesis started in Latvia 2024. So, looking back, it feels more like the thesis is a consequence of my faith journey so far (and I’m still noticing new connections as I write). To keep things clear, though, I’ll just take one step back from Latvia and talk about the event right before it, which happened in Romania.

Before Latvia, there was a moment in Romania that gave me hope. During that search season, I found a Reformed pastor through a Baptist podcast and later discovered the congregation he led. It was a breath of fresh air—not because I hadn’t met great pastors before, but there was something different about him and the atmosphere of his church. Although it felt grounded and direct, it was at the same time, less rigid—more open and approachable, almost “cool.” This encounter gave me hope and the sense that it’s possible to move beyond tradition and make faith more accessible in the Reformed Church, too, even if I didn’t put it into words at the time. That moment was refreshing. When I first came across the idea of service design (later), I realized that serving in church communities with some service design knowledge could also be a deeply personal and meaningful way for me to serve, given my background stories and how much the Church and faith had already shaped my life. I had no idea what that meant in practice. Still, I never thought I’d write a thesis in a church context—I was much more focused on public sector innovation, which was what first drew me to SDSI.

Latvia, June 2024

The story of this thesis really started to take shape in Latvia, in June 2024, near the end of my first year at SDSI. I still felt like I was just starting out on my chosen path, now in a much more international setting. Surprisingly to me, it was encouragement from a friend—someone who never showed any particular connection to Christianity—that helped me get started on this thesis.

As a "beginner" Christian in a sensitive cultural setting, I noticed that faith was often treated as a taboo subject. It seemed best not to bring up religion, gender, politics, or similar topics. I think people meant well—they wanted to be respectful and avoid offending anyone's identity. I remember telling my friend how hard it is for me to talk about my faith, since I never know how others will interpret my words or intentions. I also never want to come across as disrespectful just because my beliefs might be different—my aim is always to show active love for others, with respect to what they are willing to receive, regardless of their faith. And often I understand I have to step back, and I felt a real sense of responsibility to approach people and these conversations with care and respect.

This friend referenced the telephone game as an anecdote to illustrate my thoughts. That was the first time I considered that a thesis in a Christian context might actually be possible. But... me writing it?

Estonia, autumn semester (2024)

A few months later, during my first autumn semester in Estonia, I needed to pick a thesis topic. I circled back to my original interest—public sector innovation. As I worked through my ideas visually and analytically, I realized that Romania is 85% religious. That got me thinking: "How is it possible that...?"—and from there, a whole conversation opened up about ethics, values, and responsible governance. But this didn't quite fit with how I understood faith. Just like two county administrations can be completely different because of their cultures, so can two churches. That same semester, two people at EKA mentioned they liked talking about faith, religion, and spirituality, but those topics had become taboo because there were no environments where they could be discussed. Around the same time, someone (I'll leave out names, profession, and context for privacy) said students shouldn't interview

religious people for a particular project. That's when I started wondering: Who's actually listening to their experiences? What if I explored SD in a religious context? Could that work?

Throughout these past more than 25 years, I've faced disappointment and frustration, but I've also had heartwarming, defining moments in church communities. Since my decision in January 2023, I've experienced a steady spiritual growth, and the hope I found in Romania carried through my experiences in Latvia and Estonia. This inspired me to serve and give back to the Church through its local congregations. Interestingly, the denomination that enriched me in Estonia was the same one that had caused me the most frustration in Romania, with some healing happening earlier in Hungary (and I made a point not to focus on that denomination in my thesis). Writing about these tensions in my autoethnography taught me something important: there are no two identical congregations anywhere. A particular "D" church in Romania isn't the same as one in Hungary, or even another in Romania. Each congregation is shaped by its community—its culture, its traditions, its unique way of doing things. That might sound obvious, but it genuinely surprised me.

In this thinking process, I was encouraged to find a gap in the literature, but that was tough—I couldn't find much research connecting service design to the church beyond the realm of technology, which didn't interest me. I ended up looking into faith-based organizations and found a few gaps related to innovation, using "innovation" as a keyword instead. I wasn't thrilled about this direction, but I figured, "If this is what's out there in the research, what can I do about it?"

I started interviewing. The early interviews in this church innovation context revealed that the term "service" carried a different connotation in both English and Hungarian, often implying a transactional, business-like, one-sided act. Additionally, innovation faced some resistance, mainly because it was linked to technology, the digital realm, and flashy, concert-like experiences — the notion that making a church visually appealing was prioritized over its core essence. Participants (both members and pastors) consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining the core, mostly referring to the Word of God and His teachings, in any change initiative. These interviews happened within 3 denominations across 3 countries. Many, many interviews.

One thing that stands out for me is how important external and theological supervision felt when I chose my research area. It gave me a sense of safety—knowing I didn't have to know

everything and that someone would help keep me theologically accountable. I found this vital, especially since I hadn't figured out how to separate theology and service design. When I learned that external theological supervision wouldn't be allowed anymore because of new rules, everything shifted. I didn't fully grasp it at the time, but I thought it was too late to change topics. Suddenly, I felt like I had to represent all of Christianity, God, and the Church—an overwhelming responsibility. I worried that if I made a mistake in my imperfection, I could unintentionally cause harm, and I definitely didn't want that. I just didn't feel ready. There's a whole story behind these worries, which later took on a different meaning. Today I understand those things were coming from unchecked fears, which formed throughout so many years, in so many contexts.

Finland (and sometimes Estonia), spring semester, 2025

Looking back on my interviews and how things went with some church leaders, I realized I'd been a bit pushy at times. When one project was rejected, it triggered a bit of a know-it-all attitude in me. I still believe my intentions were genuine, but maybe my motivation was partly wound and ego-driven, which affected how I came across. I started to wonder if there was an issue with how I was introducing service design. I couldn't figure out why things weren't going well or why a particular church leader seemed so distant. I got frustrated—you know that feeling when you think your attitude is right, but you have no peace inside and don't stop to question yourself? Service blueprint was many times suggested by a professor. It was hard to imagine it ethical without theological supervision. After some reflection, I realised something was off with me. Without theological supervision, the subject felt heavy, and I didn't know how to reach out for help. I might have seen a little hope in that specific leader. In hindsight, maybe I jumped into such a big topic too soon. That's when my autoethnography entered the story.

Autoethnographic details

The autoethnographic dimension of this current study did not begin with a review of the literature. It began with a thought that was at once personal and scholarly: before attempting to understand any topic in a faith context, I shall understand my own experience with it. I moved forward in this open exploration with a broad leading question: "What are my experiences with/How have I experienced Christianity in general/or Christian contexts (church

services, events, people) throughout the years?" I didn't even know which question was the right one to ask.

My direct experiences with religious communities (as a direct participant) span two continents, six countries, and eight Christian denominations over 25 years (the earliest memory I can recall is of me being 6) — a biographical breadth that demanded very careful excavation. Adams et al. (2022), drawing on Ellis (2013, p. 10), remind us that for many who practice it, autoethnography is not simply a way of knowing about the world but "a way of being in the world, one that requires living consciously, emotionally and reflexively." It was in this second, deeper sense that autoethnography first entered this research — not as a method I selected, but as a posture I had already been inhabiting. It was an "emotional call", not yet working in tandem with any "systemic sociological introspection" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). That came later.

The process began not as a formal methodological exercise but as an act of orientation. I was aware of autoethnography as a method — I had encountered it in a prior course, where I had been asked to write at length about a personal experience. I found that format constraining this time: the linearity of prose struggled to hold the texture of lived religious experience, which did not arrange itself easily for me and did not give me an overview of my story; thoughts felt chaotic and all over the place; it did not bring meaning to me. This time, therefore, I turned to a visual tool. Working in Figma, I began placing memories — moments, people, places, feelings, environments connected to faith, not always directly connected to a local church context — without a predetermined structure. I was not following a protocol. I was following an impulse. Today I understand that personal experiences connected to the research topic (autoethnographic data), can be gathered in different ways (Chang, 2022).

What emerged from that impulse was unexpected. As I continued placing experiences, I noticed they were arranging themselves along an implicit axis — not strictly chronological, but broadly temporal, moving from childhood towards the present. I drew a horizontal line. I kept adding. What became visible was that the experiences I placed first were not the earliest, but the most significant, in terms of moments of deep joy, hurt, care, encounter, realisation, decision. The timeline that formed had emotional and spiritual weight, but it was neither hurting nor healing (at least this is what I thought). It felt like I dealt with many of the

moments placed there before, but I never had the full picture, the possible hidden meaning, the sense of it.

However, using Figma to collect data was my initial step. As I stopped adding memories by naming the events briefly, I began to recall, observe, and reflect on each one. This self-reflection allowed for deeper perspectives on my research area (Chang, 2022). Questions like *What happened there? Who was there? What else do you remember?*—helped this reflection deepen organically. Sometimes, as I was writing about one event, other memories were activated, related to events that were not initially placed on the timeline. At some point, I started browsing through my pictures, previous conversations (Text, Messenger, and WhatsApp) to clarify details I wasn't entirely sure about. I still have a few details I would like to double check on, with those involved. I also thought about physical artefacts I didn't have access to at the time, but were kept as memories in a different geographical location. All these activities helped me create vivid "snapshots" of my memories (Muncey, 2010). Then I took some time to look at the data, holistically. It looked like a map. Next day, I looked at it again and started noticing different elements. I added symbols (people, places, divine, so on...). Symbols started diversifying (eg. people became family, friends, pastor or a random person I can't even recall by name). "Oh, this is getting pretty. I like how it becomes colourful". Meaning related to specific events was developing throughout writing or overall meaning-making during reflection times. However, analyzing each story within the big story felt overwhelming. Memories were from different context. School/University, c/Church, family, and other social contexts from around several countries. I was basically judging people whose perspectives I did not have, whose culture I did not understand. I realized I am not heading in a great direction. For example, there is a difference between saying "when X behave this way, this is what happened to Y" then say, "because X did that, Y felt this way". My way of analyzing the data was clearly wrong, an autoethnography without the "ethno". It felt heavy. I did not have peace. I stopped there with the autoethnography.

In the meantime, I was encouraged to see my classmates also exploring topics outside their expertise. I saw it as both a privilege and a responsibility, especially since the Christian context has had such a deep impact on my life. I kept going right up until submission. I read a lot, trying to build an understanding I hadn't had a chance to develop before. I wasn't sure which resources were credible, which journals to trust, or why some weren't available. I got confused by how often terms like faith, religion, and spirituality were used interchangeably.

Which one should I use? Which is most credible from a research perspective? I also started seeing links to health, and I learned about new terms, like practical theology. I read about the biblical model of the church, but I didn't know how to research across three denominations. What responsibility did I have? Again, the lack of theological supervision weighed on me. I just kept reading and reading. I ran out of time to write as much as I wanted, but I did my best.

A week before my final deadline, I decided to pause and postpone my thesis. I just didn't feel at peace about it. I realized I wasn't writing from a good place—I had good intentions but couldn't manage all my questions and frustrations, and I worried I'd end up misunderstood, creating harm, who know. I did not want to be this type of a designer. My service design-related supervisor was very supportive and extremely kind, but I couldn't quite put my needs into words. At the same time, I felt pressure from a few people who either mocked me or made it clear what they thought my writing should or shouldn't be about. I was feeling especially sensitive then, and I really questioned whether I was the right person to write about these topics.

Pause (June-October 2025), Romania

During that break, I hoped I'd get the chance for external supervision, but it wasn't possible. Still, I discovered that my autoethnography was much bigger than I'd realized. A lot changed during the pause and after. The break helped me in two ways: First, it was key to understanding myself in relation to my research. It helped me reflect on my faith journey and relationship with the church and changed my outlook as a researcher. Many things also shifted outside the thesis context, but that's another story. When I came back, I could connect more confidently with others' journeys, stay grounded in my own identity, and show full empathy without judging. I hope I can keep that perspective. Second, my autoethnography became the basis for the visual timeline exercise I later used with participants, which turned into the faith journey maps. I noticed my own timeline was too colorful and layered—hard to spot patterns (Fig). In the new version for participants, I added sequencing, symbols for relationships, church touchpoints, and turning points (Fig), making the journeys easier to see and compare.

When I returned to my research, my direction was still unclear, but I received a great deal of support along the way. There were rejections, yet I noticed that my perspective had started

to shift. Even so, I recognized there was still much personal growth ahead—my attitude, more than anything, was what truly needed to change, and in many ways, it still does. This period became one where relationships were restored, fears eased, and a sense of peace began to emerge. Things were far from perfect, but I entered a new phase of my journey, especially in how I related to Church. Insights from faith development theories, greater self-awareness, and noticing the everyday details I once took for granted all contributed to this shift. I realized I was not alone in this process, and while I became less dependent on others, their support remained invaluable. My attitude and presence within the church community changed as well, and I know this wasn't solely my doing—prayer played a meaningful part. The environment I was in played such an important part. I also recognized the importance of maintaining appropriate boundaries and decided it was best to focus my research on a single denomination. Since theological supervision was academically unavailable, I leaned more on my field of studies, service design, believing it was more ethical to leave theological interpretation to those specifically trained. I sincerely hope my intentions are received in the spirit they are given and do not cause any harm. With all this in mind, I chose cultural probes as one of my data collection methods. The rest of that process—data collection and analysis—is detailed in Chapter 4.

The longer I reflect on these experiences, the more I feel compelled to write and add new insights. Yet I recognize that this account will always be incomplete; some details will stay with me, consciously or not. What I share here reflects my perspective in this moment—I'm certain that if I wrote about it yesterday or tomorrow, it would come out differently. Each time I revisit these memories, I notice new things. Thank you for reading this part of my thesis, for accepting its imperfections, and for allowing me to share a work that is, by nature, unfinished. I hope you find something meaningful as you continue reading.

Adams et al. (2015) describe the insider researcher as one whose embeddedness in a community is not a methodological liability to be managed but a source of interpretive richness to be cultivated — provided that embeddedness is subject to ongoing reflexive scrutiny. The autoethnographic process did not dissolve my subjectivity; it made it legible, both to myself and, hopefully, to you as well, through this account. In doing so, it transformed a potential source of distortion into what Ellis (2004) calls a resource for empathic understanding — the capacity to engage with participants' faith journeys not from a distance, but with the kind

of informed, examined proximity that only lived experience, honestly reckoned with, can provide.

5.2. Cultural probe outcomes

As a result here, it is important to know that the cultural probe was not subjected to thematic analysis. Instead, I approached this phase as an exploratory and reflexive component of the research design, focused on what participants' engagement with the task revealed about the suitability of the method itself — rather than the content of what they recorded, which was used to support findings from thematic analysis where appropriate, and will talk about it later in this narration. The cultural probes led me to revise my assumptions about how participants' faith journeys could be accessed and represented.

From this experience, I identified four methodological insights, as it follows:

1. *Observational data cannot reliably reveal faith positioning*

Observing participants in a church service and asking them to record what they noticed did not provide reliable insight into their current position on their faith journey. While the data captured what participants attended to externally, it did not meaningfully reveal how they understood their own faith or how they situated themselves within it. I reconsidered my initial assumption about what in-situ observations of a church service could provide when making faith-related judgments. The probe demonstrated that such an approach risked attributing meaning to participants that they had not explicitly articulated, particularly given my position as a researcher with prior familiarity with the context.

2. *Church settings can be governed by strong social and cultural norms*

Participants were sensitive to visibility and perceived expectations of appropriate behaviour during service. This affected both how and where (e.g., in the pew) they felt comfortable recording data.

3. *The mode of data collection can shape engagement*

Practical factors — such as writing on paper versus using a phone, or the size and visibility of materials — influenced participants' ease during the task. Despite this, participants were flexible and creative in adapting their engagement to what was comfortable for them.

4. *Open, non-directive data in a familiar setting heightens the insider researcher's interpretive responsibility*

Designing the probe as highly open and non-directive gave participants freedom of expression. This created a tension between openness in data generation and the ability to draw grounded interpretations. It felt like my insider researcher's interpretive responsibility got heightened. The absence of explicit anchors in participants' responses increased the risk of unconsciously projecting meaning onto the data, necessitating reflexive awareness.

The cultural probe impacted on Research Design and it led to two concrete adjustments in the subsequent research design: (1) It shifted to participant-led articulation and later interviews included a direct opening question — *"How would you describe your faith/relationship with faith at the moment?"* — allowing participants to define their own position without requiring inference from observation; (2) It refined the study focus as this phase confirmed that the research should prioritize participants' lived and self-expressed interpretations of their faith journeys, rather than analysing church services or liturgical practices. This was further reinforced when the first probe interview, transcribed, revealed its natural potential to be transformed into a journey map.

Therefore, the primary outcome of the cultural probe was methodological rather than empirical. Overall, the main value of this phase therefore lies in: (1) Informing and improving the alignment between the research question and data collection methods, supporting a shift toward more direct, participant-led approaches in later phases; (2) Deepening understanding of the sensitivity of the conditions under which data can be generated within a Reformed Church setting.

5.3. How to navigate the next sections – Primary Data Outcomes

Moving forward, I listened to young adults' faith journeys and interviewed pastors at various leadership levels. Due to the small number of young adult participants, my insider researcher role, and the sensitive nature of their stories—as they involve family and very personal details—their stories couldn't be published as three separate, complete faith journeys. To protect their privacy, I will avoid using acronyms, so their stories are not tracked. I will also

avoid using acronyms for pastors due to confidentiality concerns as well, as not many pastors share the same combination of responsibilities involving the Church and youth ministry. However, I may include some quotes (translations of the original Hungarian) to add nuance and, in doing so, honour their trust, even if they didn't explicitly request it.

The strategy for organizing this next section lies in answering the research questions presented in the introduction. In the first part of the results section—Understanding of terms—for clarity on context, I will use interviews to answer the first research question: *How do young adults and church leaders understand and describe key concepts such as faith, religion, spirituality, faith/spiritual journey, spiritual health, ~~community, and mentoring~~?* The *community and mentoring* aspects related to this question will be addressed separately. The next section of results lies in—Faith Journeys—and here I will try to answer the question *How do young adults narrate their faith journeys over time, and what patterns of meaning-making, turning points, and relational influences emerge?*

Church Community Support followed. Here the questions *How is church experienced within these journeys, and which church-related touchpoints are perceived as supportive or hindering?* and *How do church leaders perceive and conceptualize support for young adults, and how do their perspectives relate to young adults' narrated experiences?* will be answered in this order, together with *How do young adults and church leaders understand and describe [...] community, and mentoring?*

In the last part of the results section – Changes in the church – , I will try to bring answers to the two remaining questions, noting that the question *How can service design methods contribute to generating insights into young adults' and pastors' experiences and facilitate reflection within faith-based contexts?* will be answered reflectively, as the methods have been used throughout the thesis, finally turning into *How can insights from this study inform contextually appropriate ways of strengthening support for young adults within congregational life?*

5.4. Understanding of terms

Here I will try to answer the question *How do young adults and church leaders understand and describe key concepts such as faith, religion, spirituality, faith/spiritual journey, spiritual health?*

As the terms faith, religion and spirituality are used interchangeably in research, it was important to see how the involved participants, members of the same denomination understand these terms. To address the question of understanding these terms—faith, religion, spirituality, together with faith/spiritual journey and spiritual health—I am sharing the mind map, a non-linear visual representation used to organize and clarify participants' input. Spiritual health was included in this grouping because pastors mentioned it alongside the other three topics. While most feedback comes from the interviewed pastors, comments from young adults are also included. I will emphasize the main differences in how these two groups approach the subject. Although I can't do it complete form, I will use many quotes, as the use of these terminology appeared to create confusion in literature and I believe it is important for me to not distort any important nuance from the perspectives received.

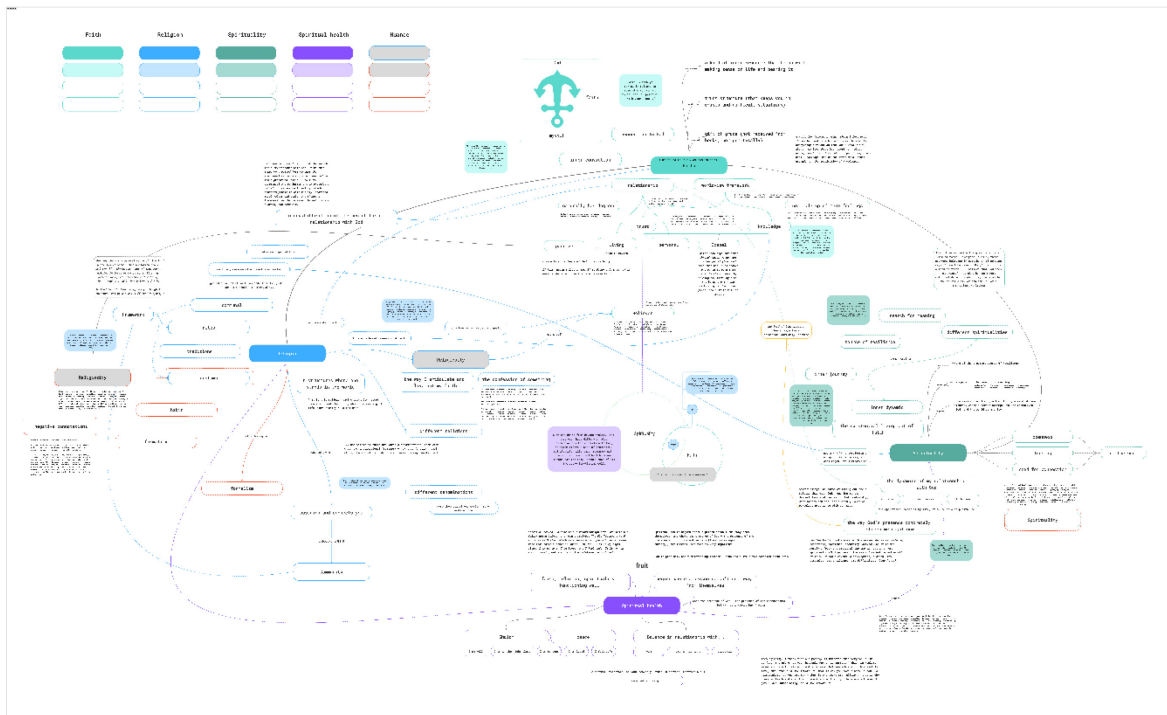


Fig. 7. FRSSH Mindmap – A visual representation to organize and clarify participants' input on Faith, Religion, Spirituality and Spiritual Health

Before proceeding, it's important to note that when conceptualizing terms, leaders generally have a clear understanding with minimal deliberation, except for one leader who appeared emotional during the interview and requested to skip questions related to definitions of faith, religion, and spirituality. That leader still discussed topics like faith journeys, community, and mentoring. Additionally, one leader provided insights on faith and spirituality from three

perspectives: theological, psychological, and mental health. In general, definitions felt very inclusive, and there was such a beautiful balance between expressing a more inclusive definition and nuancing on their own. Young adults communicate their thoughts differently, in ways that differences are not always clear to them. Here, more thinking is involved, as they have not engaged with all terms at once before.

In the words of the pastors, *Faith* is “A worldview framework within which I interpret the world — both visible and invisible reality — everything I accept as true about this world, about humanity, about God, about sin, about grace, about the future, about hope. It is, on one hand, knowledge, and on the other hand, trust grounded in the acquisition of knowledge.” “Through this knowledge and trust, we connect to the Gospel, the good news that God loves people and wants to save them from the chaos caused by missing the mark, by sins, and by distrust — and wants to give them order, peace, and a state full of trust.” Knowledge and trust are interconnected — “I can only trust in something I know to some degree, right? And I can only truly know something toward which I also have trust. So, if I trust you, I let you closer, I can get to know you better — but in order to trust you, I also need to actually know you.” It is a “relationship — specifically a living relationship, a personal bond with God, the Creator. Theologically, if I were to unpack it, I would say it is a gift of grace — it cannot be learned from books, it cannot be inherited genetically. Psychologically, it is a kind of a trust structure — faith that holds you together in crises and difficult situations. From a mental health perspective, if I were to search for keywords, I would say it is a kind of inner resource that helps in making sense of life and in bearing it.” “It is like an anchor that is anchored in heaven — through it we connect to the invisible world, to God, whom we cannot touch with our hands, but to whom we can attach ourselves. For me, faith is the means, the way of entrusting myself to God.”. For a young adult participant faith is “when you certainly believe in something you cannot touch, see, or perceive with your senses.”, another young adult automatically feels a slight resistance as the first thought goes to religion but when the participant goes deeper into it, mentions that faith is “what a person's belief system is like, so how they think about things that have happened to them, what do these things pass on to them. How they interpret it.” and another participant’s thinking also goes to religion, this time Christianity, and for this young adult it means believing in God, as “faith means the way I live my everyday life. It's such an organic part of my life that I can't really abstract it away from it — it's just how we live, my family and I, or with my community. This kind of

lifestyle." In essence, young adults and church leaders have a very similar view, but clearly, church leaders give more nuanced, yet very easy to understand definitions.

A few characteristics of faith that were mentioned by leaders and are worth noting: 1) "faith is not made up of mere feelings, but rather of convictions, of knowledge, and of trust built upon that knowledge. Trust tends to function even in spite of feelings"; 2) "those who live their faith personally, who are connected to God, let's say, in such a way that they don't merely recite a fixed prayer or observe only the outward customs of religion, but rather exist in a more intense, deep communion with God — in a prayerful presence, sharing their daily lives with Him on an everyday level" and are active members of the community, were mentioned as believers. They call this person a believer; 3) faith can be passive or living/personal, the later one being the kind that moves you, forms you. As one pastor mentioned: "If faith doesn't live in me, if it doesn't form me, if it doesn't shape me, then that's a passive faith." Although this specific leader interprets religion differently, he mentions that one can place themselves within "this worldview" and I call themselves a Christian — but if that means nothing in terms of their personal life, their growth, or their interactions with others, then he wouldn't call that a living faith. "We tend to call that religiosity"- the pastor adds. And this takes us to the next point, religion.

Religion, as defined by the pastors, is "a crystallisation of the search for a relationship with God, which then takes on a guided form so that the individual can once again be connected to the supernatural world. A cultural, ceremonial and worldview system grounded in belief in transcendent reality, which connects people to spirituality, provides moral values and goals, and shapes a framework for the believer through rituals, customs, and community." It is, in other words, the outward architecture through which faith finds its communal and cultural expression. As one pastor puts it concisely, it is "the way I articulate and live out my faith," while another describes it as "a somewhat more theoretical expression, more institutional, the knowledge-based dimension of faith, drier, more doctrinal" — one that "structures where one stands in the world."

Central to religion in this sense are its rituals. Drawing on Van Gennep's 1909 work *The Rites of Passage*, one pastor points to how religion accompanies the great thresholds of life — baptism, confirmation, marriage, burial — not by solving the problems these moments carry, but by carrying people through them. A couples therapist might suggest that a

quarreling pair who cannot find words use a lit candle as a signal of readiness to talk; a tired singer finds that beginning her pre-dinner ritual of prayer and song opens, almost unbidden, what she describes as a new dimension. "The ritual doesn't solve the problem," the pastor notes, "but it helps."

Yet the word itself carries weight. Religion and religiosity, as several pastors acknowledge, tend to be spoken of "in a rather pejorative sense." It is, as one puts it, "a loaded word. These days, religiosity is an empty, increasingly hollowed-out concept." In contemporary usage — particularly across Europe — to be called religious can suggest someone merely going through the motions. Even within Christian circles, the "religious" person is sometimes perceived as one who, as another pastor describes, appears among believers as something of an outsider: "the 'religious' ones appear somewhat like outsiders who practice religion out of habit or mere formality."

This pejorative drift, however, is not the whole story, and it points to a distinction running through the pastoral responses: two types of religiosity. The first sustains — it is the communal and cultural form through which a living inner relationship with God is expressed, shared, and reinforced, embedding the believer in tradition, meaning, and community. The second is religiosity emptied of conviction: "a kind of religiosity that has no conviction of faith behind it, only a certain cultural attachment to a set of customs, to a community." When it functions well, religiosity connects; when it does not, it becomes formalism. One pastor argues, precisely for this reason, for rehabilitation of the concept: "Perhaps it would be worth filling it with good things again — because if I am a believer, then my religiosity means that this faith, this knowledge and trust that I have acquired, I confess it, I express it somehow." For another, authentic religiosity remains possible but conditional: "when I say I am religious, it means that I express my faith within a particular culture, the Reformed culture, for example. But it is only authentic when it is nourished by an inner relationship with God."

Young adults navigate this same tension in their own language. One participant captures the paradox directly: "Religiousness is limited in the fact that I know there is a God and I know there is a church, and all of that — but not practicing it. Faith is something you also practice. Obviously, this is a slightly paradoxical statement, because faith is about believing — but at the same time it's not just that, it's also, I think, about what you actually do in practice." Another interviewee frames it through external expression: "So religiousness — the external

expression of faith. With religiousness, it's not necessary to have genuine faith (in God) — there are those who only show out of hypocrisy how religious they are. Broadly, religion flows into habits — into liturgy." A third approaches it with more hesitation and confusion: "This is also a belief system that encompasses God, His teachings, all kinds of churches, Christianity, Reformed... hmmm, I don't know."

Religion, therefore, in the understanding of participants, provides the framework — the rites, the customs, the community, the doctrinal structure — but without the animating inner relationship, this framework risks becoming what the pastors warned about at the close of the previous section: not a living faith, but religiosity in the hollow sense. The distinction is not between religion and faith as opposites, but between religion nourished by an inner relationship with God, and religion reduced to habit and formality.

Spirituality, theologically, was articulated as "the existential living out of faith, a kind of inner journey where a person attempts to see themselves, God, and the world as a unity" — and psychologically, as the same pastor puts it, "a kind of space for the search for meaning". He invokes Viktor Frankl in this discussion, the psychiatrist, who was a "great master of this — he created the science of logotherapy", as someone who understood this dimension of human existence deeply. From a mental health perspective, spirituality is described as "one of the greatest sources of resilience".

The word itself, as one pastor notes, carries baggage and this is where its Hungarian language use comes in: "Spirituality (hu: *spiritualitás*): an interesting expression, who uses it and in what circles. It tends to bring in more negative connotations from somewhere further away — more associated with Eastern religions, spiritism, the meditative." Yet the same pastor is untroubled by this: "I am not afraid of this word, because I know this is not what it means. It rather points to a kind of spiritual openness, a certain spiritual longing, a need — a genuine desire to connect spiritually (*lelkileg*: through the soul). We are not merely physical beings, but spiritual (hu: *spirituális*): beings as well, and we seek spiritual things (*lelki* – of the soul)."

What spirituality is emphatically not, in this view, is vague emotionalism. It is "not merely a foggy and emotional phenomenon, but an inner, spiritual process (*lelki* – of the soul) — the way I live before God in all of this." Its content is concrete: "How the Word of God shapes me, how prayer shapes me, silence, repentance, obedience, community, service." And

it has texture across time: "It has a rhythm, a development, a depth, its struggles, its challenges, its difficulties." It is the operational order of one's relationship with God — intimate, dynamic, and ongoing.

As one pastor frames it personally: "What I call spirituality is the way God's presence concretely shapes me right now — because there are other spiritualities too. Whatever someone believes in, along those lines there is an inner dynamic to this thing." This opens onto a broader observation: spirituality is not the exclusive territory of religious belief. "Even if we set aside the question of what kind of faith — everyone lives by faith, everyone believes in something. If someone says 'I don't believe in God,' that too is a form of faith — 'I believe that God does not exist.' That also has an inner, spiritual dynamic — which is, for example, the spirituality of atheism, or of a materialist worldview." Spirituality, in this sense, names the inner dimension of whatever framework of meaning a person inhabits — which is precisely why it can serve as a source of resilience far beyond the boundaries of institutional religion.

Young adults engage with the concept more tentatively, and from noticeably different angles. One offers a broad, soulful framing: "Psychology of the soul — it doesn't necessarily deal only with matters of faith but rather with matters of the soul. Spirituality might include how we experience love, but also how we experience faith, towards religion." Another is more guarded, describing a kind of deliberate distance: "It doesn't really resonate with me. Quite a lot of spiritual stuff comes up in my studies, assignments, and practices, and as a Christian it feels very strange to engage with these things — like when it's about myths or very spiritual (hu: *spirituális*) symbols. I kind of shut myself off from it. I know it exists but I don't engage with it because I don't believe in it. For example, horoscope. I can't give it significance, but I do listen to other people's perspectives on it. It doesn't particularly preoccupy me." This person did not see spirituality as related to previously mentioned understandings of the soul. A third reduces it to felt experience: "Spirituality, I imagine, relates to the senses — what people feel. When they feel good, spirituality is good; when they feel bad, it's bad. That's how I see it." Apart from the first participant, who considers himself more spiritual but not religious, the other two young adults displayed a certain distance from the word that pastors approached more openly. One pastor remarked "*ahogy te mondod*" (*as you say it*) after using the word spiritual, which corresponds to the Hungarian *spirituális*. This was not

surprising, since in Hungarian, the word isn't commonly used; instead, we refer to it as *of the soul*, as explained in the section on defining terms.

The contrast with the pastoral definitions is perhaps sharpest here. Where pastors describe spirituality as structured, developmental, and grounded in a living relationship with God, young adults tend to experience the word as either too broad, or too feeling-dependent to hold a firm definition. The inner journey the pastors describe — with its rhythm, its depth, its struggles — does not yet have a name for the young adults involved.

The youngest pastor does add a nuance the others don't: that spirituality also has an outward face — "both outwardly, what others can see, and inwardly, what we ourselves experience with our God." This is a subtle but meaningful tension within the pastoral voices themselves. Where most locate spirituality firmly in the interior life, this view suggests it spills outward too, becoming visible in how one lives — which brings it close to the boundary with religion, and perhaps signals that the line between the two is not always as clean as the definitions imply. The same pastor offers this with a characteristic honesty, noting that "my view is still forming, so these are subjective opinions — they do not necessarily align in every respect with the findings of established theological research."

Faith, religion, and spirituality are not isolated concepts — they are living forces that, when functioning well, draw from the same divine reality while each playing a distinct role. As one pastor summarizes: "Faith provides the connection to God, religion offers a kind of framework, spirituality fills that framework with content." They are, in other words, layered and interdependent: faith animates, religion structures, spirituality inhabits. But the relationship between them moves in both directions. When all three are healthy, they reinforce one another; when they are not, they undermine each other. And if the emphasis shifts too heavily onto any one of them, it can even become pathological — religion without faith becoming empty formalism, faith without community becoming untethered, spirituality without grounding drifting into something unrecognizable. **Spiritual health**, then, is not a fourth concept added onto the other three — it is what emerges when all three are alive and in balance.

"**Spiritual health** begins where a person doesn't run away from themselves, and where the presence of God — the presence of the transcendent — brings not anxiety (I emphasize again: not anxiety), but freedom. And this is very important." With these words, one pastor

sets the tone for what spiritual health is and is not. It is not the anxious performance of religious obligation — the dread of a missed prayer, a missed Sunday. "God is precisely about maintaining freedom. Jesus has quite a few parables about this — that the Sabbath, for example, does not hold us, we are not held by it." More broadly, the pastors define it as "balance in our relationships with God, with our fellow human beings, and with ourselves." The Old Testament word for this is Shalom — translated as "peace," but meaning far more: "a state in which I am well, I am in my right place, I am content, I am loved, and I feel safe." It is not an end in itself, but a fruit of the relationship with God.

One pastor offers a striking image for how spiritual health works: "What I believe and live out and internalize has a forming effect on my life. Just as what I eat does. Similarly, what I let in spiritually. If I take in bad spirituality, it will certainly ruin my life." What we allow in — spiritually, intellectually, relationally — shapes us, for better or worse. Even a misinterpreted faith carries consequences: "If I live in a so-called badly interpreted Christianity, if I perceive it in an unhealthy way, that too has a bad effect." It is worth noting in this section as well, as one pastor adds, that in Hungarian-speaking contexts the word "spiritual" itself carries a slight foreignness — the more natural expression is *lelki egészség*, health of the soul.

This freedom, however, does not mean clarity about where one stands at any given moment. Free will means humans choose, God provides the framework, "But a person's spirituality can reflect on exactly this, can seek this — this is its dynamic, this can be examined as much as one is able. Because 'my thoughts are not your thoughts,' as God says. But that doesn't mean you cannot reflect on it."

Spiritual health is therefore not a destination to be reached. Drawing on Matthew 5:48 — "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" — one pastor reframes perfection as direction rather than arrival: "Which in reality means a constant striving — not a nirvana that you achieve in this earthly life, but rather: strive toward it. That is why you have a body, a soul, a spirituality — that is why there are religions, that is why there is faith and spiritual community — so that: you have every framework given, dear human being, so strive toward it." The sense of having arrived, he cautions, can itself be a false comfort.

Nor can spiritual health be assessed from the outside with any certainty. "It is not really anyone's place to decide" whether another person is spiritually well or not — people can

perform wellness while living something different entirely. And yet, as a pastor notes, there are visible signs: "There are obvious signs that a life is either withering or flourishing and developing. Like the development of a tree — you can see when it is sick, its branches dry out." In a believer, too, the signs show — weariness, languishing — but only to those who are close, who are present, who know much about the other. "To live this, you need to be in community, you need to be there, you need to know a lot about the other person."

Among young adults, the term itself was unfamiliar — "I haven't used this one yet, but I like it" — yet the intuition behind it was not. One participant describes it as "when you correctly live out faith, religion, and spirituality" and points to the conditions that make this possible: regular engagement with Scripture, genuine relationship with God, participation in community, and perseverance in faith. Another reaches for it through a more experiential lens — the ability to spend a longer stretch of time without sadness or distress, though what counts as "longer" differs for everyone. In moments of solitude, when there is no interaction and one is left with oneself, the spiritually healthy person can consciously recognize that they did what they could in a given situation, settle it inwardly, and from that place simply be. A third locates it in the evening: "If there is no mental burden before you go to sleep. To fall asleep without consuming yourself." It comes in waves, not continuously — moments of mental stillness alongside panic and anxiety at other times. What helps, one participant finds, is the question: "What could I learn from this?" — the recognition that growth itself contributes to building spiritual health.

Spiritual health, as described above, is not static. This naturally raises the question of movement: not just where one is, but where one is going. Which brings us to a term young adults stopped at, **spiritual growth**, but pastors somehow covered in through faith journeys within the developmental process. In the view of young adults, this was nuanced. One participant expressed it through the biblical imagery of moving from milk to solid food — early faith involving more accessible scripture, while mature faith means engaging with harder truths that directly challenge one's behavior and lifestyle. In their words, growth happens when you *"accept what the Word criticizes in you, in order not to live according to what the Word criticized."* Another connected spiritual growth to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, noting that self-actualization sits at the top, and that it is difficult to pursue higher spiritual fulfillment *"when the basic-level needs aren't met."* Importantly, participants did not view spiritual growth as passive or inherited — being raised in a Christian family was not seen as sufficient,

because *"life, and the things that influence you, that happen to you, whether you want it or not, they shake you out of all of that."* This movement through challenge, disruption, and deepening is precisely what the broader concept of faith journey attempts to capture. And yet, as the interviews revealed, the language of journey itself required negotiation before it could be used.

Among the key terms used, **faith journey and spiritual journey** — the terms I initially introduced — along with life journey, which emerged as a suggestion from two participants, appeared with roughly equal frequency across the interviews, with none clearly favoured over the others. It became evident that participants, both young adults and pastors, do not naturally default to faith- or spirituality-related journey language in everyday speech. Life journey was organically suggested and slightly preferred by two participants; however, in other cases, the faith journey was more present than the spiritual journey. I ultimately retained the *faith journey* as the primary term, as it also better reflects the focus of this thesis within a religious community context. Life journey, while a meaningful concept, encompasses a far broader range of personal dimensions, environments, and dynamics that fall outside the scope of this study. That said, the term frequently overlapped with concepts of developmental process and growth.

When it comes to **faith journeys**, across the interviews, pastors consistently rejected a linear or ladder-like model of spiritual development. One pastor put it with particular clarity by adding that: *"For me the faith journey is not a 'developmental process' in the sense that we can only step upward on the ladder. Rather try to imagine it as a valley, where there are depths, heights, hills, you wander there, there are crises and opportunities for new beginnings."* This image below (Fig. 8) captures something that pastors described from their own experience of accompanying others: that the journey moves through inherited faith, questioning, doubt, crisis, renewed certainty, falling back, and new beginning, not necessarily in that order, and not necessarily only once.

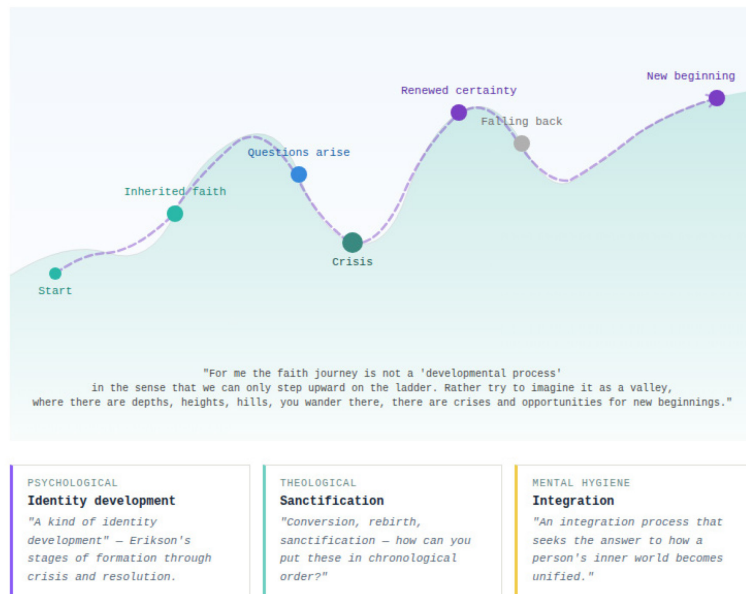


Fig. 8. The faith journey as a valley, based on pastoral interviews

The *valley image* is not merely a metaphor — it reflects a theologically and psychologically grounded understanding of how faith develops. The expert pastor drew on multiple frameworks to name the same reality. First, he described it psychologically, through Erik Erikson, as "a kind of identity development" — the formation of self through crisis and resolution that is the hallmark of young adulthood in particular. Then, he named it theologically as sanctification, while noting the difficulty of separating it from conversion and rebirth: "How can you put these in chronological order?" Third, he framed it through mental hygiene as "a kind of integration process — how a person's inner world becomes healthy... how a person's inner world becomes unified." All three perspectives point to the same essential conviction: the faith journey is a process to be accompanied, one that has no clean endpoint in earthly life. As one pastor said: "It is a discovery journey that has no end in earthly life and I cannot grasp it in the sense that now I am here and I step over to the next level. I go through these, and maybe at some point I fall back again. This is what is interesting about it."

The biblical reference that emerged in the interviews was Peter — a deliberate choice. Peter's faith journey was also like this. He is with Jesus for two or three years, and yet he denies him. So did he go down? Or did he rise above? There were crises in him, right? It is not a linear process. An inner dynamic for him too, wrestling, spiritual for Peter. Lord, what have

I done? Was it good? Was it not? And so on. So, in this sense the faith journey is a developmental process." Therefore, crisis is not seen as the opposite of faith.

For young adults, in particular, this understanding carries significant practical implications, since the 18-29 period is, as one pastor described it, the time when "who I am, where I belong, who I believe in, what partner I choose, what vocation I follow — all of this takes shape and solidifies." It is precisely the time when the deepest valleys tend to occur — when inherited faith meets the real pressure of adult life and either breaks or becomes personal. As one pastor described the model of accompaniment he tries to practice: "The relationship between the master and the disciple was a life-community... they saw how Jesus lives, how he behaves, what he does, and this is how their character was also formed. I also try to do this, to be there, to pay attention to them, to discuss. Meanwhile, I feel they are also being formed. I am also a participant in their life journey." This final sentence — "I am also a participant in their life journey" — speaks for itself. It suggests that the pastor is not the ultimate guide with all the answers, but rather a fellow traveler who might be slightly ahead on the same path, journeying through the same valley.

To conclude this part, it is worth noting how a pastor reflected on the complexity of discerning good from bad in one's life: "It's not certain that when you're walking in that valley and you feel good, it actually is good. And it's not certain that when you're going downhill, that is necessarily bad." Drawing on the story of Joseph from the Bible — who, despite being thrown into prison by his brothers, later recognized that "God turned it for good" — the pastor emphasized that while a person feels they're going down, God may be building something else entirely. This is why, he noted, "it's hard to say — humanly speaking — whether this particular thing right now is okay or not okay." Yet this uncertainty is precisely where spirituality lives: in the striving, the reflecting, the seeking. As he put it, the human being has free will to choose, while God points to the path — and things we once thought were bad may prove otherwise, and vice versa. Theologically, he grounded this in the call to "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" — not as an achievable state, but as "a constant striving" toward which every human framework is given as a guide— mind, body, soul, faith, religion, community — is given as a guide.

5.5. Faith journeys

Next, I will discuss how they narrated their journeys and first address the sub-research question, which is: *How do young adults narrate their faith journeys over time, and what patterns of meaning-making, turning points, and relational influences emerge?* The focus here is on the *how*, the way they narrate, not the what, followed by turning points, patterns of meaning-making, and relational influences.

5.5.1. How they narrate

The way participants narrated their faith journeys *varied significantly*, and that variation itself became part of the analysis, knowing that we, interviewers, are also interested in the way people said what they said, not only what they said (Saunders et al., 2012). This section covers this point but does not delve deeply into every aspect of their narration, as such a level of detail would not help with the scope of this thesis. I found it important to mention aspects related to their general tone, narrative structure, and emotional register.

General tone

Some stories have a more positive *general tone*, while others have a more negative one at the beginning. It takes extra prompts to remind participants about opposite-feeling events, in case they don't arrive at them on their own. For instance, the first participant brought up positive experiences only after I mentioned “[*empathetic comment*] *Is there maybe anything positive that you remember as well?*”. The same logic applies to journeys that tend to be positive and to those that prompt them to think about moments that felt less pleasant to them.

Narrative structure

After transcribing the findings from each recording into sticky notes in Figma and once the first journey map was ready, analyzed, and cleaned, I created a *first faith journey map template* from it, which was copied and pasted as a starting point for the next two cases. The template worked to some extent, but never completely.

The first participant narrated more associatively. Rather than moving through time in order, one memory would surface and lead to another — one experience triggering the next — and when stopped, the next helping prompt was asked. The journey unfolded that way, in this

case, on a predominantly negative tone. Within shorter periods of time, some chronological order emerged, but it did not hold across the whole narrative. When prompted about positive experiences, the participant began moving between adulthood and childhood and back again, not by chronology but by association. What was most evident in this style of narration was that it felt like the first time the participant was truly engaging with the material — sitting with experiences that perhaps had not been examined directly before. It was the interview with the most realizations, where things seemed to surface and take shape in the moment of telling, rather than arriving already formed. This associative quality reflects something important about how spiritual memory works — it is not always stored in sequence. It is stored in feeling, in image, in connection. Whether this participant had ever gone through a similar reflective process before remains unknown. Based on the nature of the narration, however, it would be reasonable to assume this was the first time.

Another participant narrated *chronologically*. The journey was presented as a sequence of events, with a clear sense of before and after, cause and effect, which was clarified during the after-narration time, when I asked for clarification, I could not ask while the participant was narrating. This style of narration produced a cleaner, more ordered account — one that translated naturally into a journey map, where emotions and experiences can be traced along a visible line over time. The downside of chronological narration, however, is that it can limit the amount of information that comes to light. What fits neatly into a sequence is shared; what gives essence sometimes is left out. It is worth noting that this participant arrived prepared to the interview, with the idea of sharing a testimony (idea got from the invitation sent, although it was mentioned that there is no need to prepare before). Testimonies are narrative forms that are by nature structured and have a beginning, middle, and turning point. That framing shaped what was told and how. The preparation was noted in two ways: the interviewee did not answer the question I prompted but instead jumped enthusiastically into narration, and there was no meaning-making during the narration, unlike the other two participants. It took maybe two prompts to understand the actual sequence of events during the interview preparation, and many more to grasp the additional details of each smaller narration as part of the big story. Comparing it to the previous example, I could say that a tool that can only receive a chronological narration will miss much of what is actually there.

The last participant narrated differently, more *process-based*. For example: Rather than moving through time in order, events were placed — both physically on the timeline exercise

and verbally in the conversation — not at specific points but somewhat randomly, emphasizing longer periods of time rather than discrete moments. This was not disorganization. It reflected a different relationship to the faith journey itself and a different type of content — one that is felt less as discrete events and more as ongoing, overlapping experiences that resist being pinned to a single point in time. Up until this point, the template that had worked for one participant could not simply be replicated for this faith journey based solely on the participant's narration. However, during the discussion, the specific moments became more visible. This style of narration required a different kind of listening and a different analytical approach, as turning points and specific details emerged after revisiting and prompting more.

Some examples from this type of narration, from the same journey, are: “This is the clearest one, it was always present, this was the first and most constant thing that brought connection to my faith.”, “ This came to mind because we go there every year since ... and not just the place, but what also brought me closer to being able to immerse myself more deeply are the people we meet there. There are many people I look up to because of their faith and who they are as people, and I generally meet them there — since I was ... old, I have never missed it.”, and another long time event was described as “This has always been such a part of my life that when I think about defining things related to my faith, [this event] is always automatically there. I developed so much through this, it showed me a side of Christianity and of being a believer that I don't think young people experience elsewhere very often. How open everyone is, how youthful, how attractive, how far people come from to be there because truly nowhere else do people experience something like this. There is no single defining moment here, but the fact that I know this will happen again, every year, I will be there again and I have a role and a part in it, and I so much look forward to it and it is such a foundational thing in my life on a yearly basis, that I couldn't miss mentioning it.”.

Emotional register

When it comes to emotional register, three distinct tones were present across the interviews, though all three participants were *willing to engage openly and vulnerably* and exceeded the time limit. The first participant narrated from a *reflective and emotional* register. The tone carried weight, things surfaced slowly, and there was a sense of processing happening in real time — as if the conversation itself was part of making sense of the experience. The second participant brought a *calm and stable* register. The tone was measured and grounded, less

driven by emotional peaks, yet still genuinely engaged. There was a sense of settledness in the narration of someone who had already done some of that processing and was now sharing from a more integrated place. However, some realizations happen throughout the already prepared narration as well. The third participant narrated from an *enthusiastic and positive* register. The energy was forward-moving, the engagement warm and momentum-driven, and the overall tone reflected a faith journey held with a sense of gratitude and clear direction.

What this reveals is that there is no single way people narrate their spiritual lives — and that the tool must be flexible enough to receive all. In the case of these narrations, only a few elements remained stable and easy to reuse: the starting point

The practical conclusions for improving the faith journey map template (note: this section will develop throughout the thesis):

- It is important to build in flexibility for both specific moments and periods — not just point-in-time events but ongoing, recurring, cyclical experiences (like an annual gathering someone hasn't missed in years);
- It is important not to rely solely on the first narration. The most significant content sometimes emerges only after prompting and revisiting;
- Consider whether the template should receive the narrative rather than organize it from the start — a more open capture phase before any structuring occurs;
- Don't interrupt narrative style, but do interrupt narrative misdirection. The starting question can be universal and open enough to work across all three narrator types, but the researcher needs to stay alert to whether the person is actually answering it or answering something they assumed you meant.
- The template could benefit from having two distinct layers: content layer — what was said, which captures the journey itself: the experiences, events, periods, turning points, emotions along the way. This is the primary material — what gets mapped; meta layer — how it was said. This is the researcher's space, filled in during or just after the interview. It holds observations about emotional register (was the narrator guarded, released, surprised?), narration style, pacing, what seemed to surface for the first time, what felt revisited, and the general atmosphere of the session.

5.5.2. Turning points

In this research, turning points are viewed as moments of major change—caused by external shifts (new pastor), periods of intense reflection, deliberate choices, realizations that produce movement, or developmental transitions in faith authority as outlined by Parks (2011). These are moments in a person's story where a significant shift occurs—whether in life, perspective, faith, or identity—due to an event. These moments act as divides, creating a before and after in the narrative. Importantly, a turning point does not need to be resolved to qualify as one; even unresolved moments can redirect the journey, influencing the person's path differently.

In these faith journeys specifically, turning points are often external/structural, relational/emotional or internal/cognitive and they often look like:

- A shift in environment — a change in the people or community around you, that reorganizes what's possible in your faith life (eg. a new pastor moves in—it's the *precondition* that made other turning points possible)

For example: *"About a year after my confirmation, our congregation got a new pastor — and though I was barely attending at the time, a cousin's invitation to a summer Bible week turned out to be the moment everything shifted. That's when I met the pastor's children and his family, and something changed. Then one of the pastor's children invited me to the congregation's youth group sessions. I had attended before, but roughly out of obligation — as you had to go for a while after confirmation — but even there I wasn't paying attention with the previous pastor."*

- An invitation — someone invites you somewhere, presents an opportunity to engage with faith, and suddenly you find yourself somewhere you weren't before
- An *encounter* — with a person, a community, a text, an experience — that changed how someone understood God or themselves

For example: *"This is where my interest towards this role of a teacher began. I tried to process it — I was afraid to go to a psychologist, but I did go in the end. Before that, my way of coping was to meditate and try to calm my mind by emptying it of everything, and that worked. Then I heard about Buddhism and meditation, and started listening to a radio programme that spoke about these kinds of teachings — and this is where another helper enters the picture, after 2022. [Radio host]"*

- A moment of *crisis* that led to deeper faith or to leaving faith
 For example: *"I was going through my first breakup, and there was this female pastor — she is like my fairy godmother — who was there for me through all of it, and this happened at this camp as well. It was such a defining moment for me that to this day, when that year's camp comes to mind, I think — dear God, how hard it was, but how good it was that X was there, who was with me through the whole thing."*
 Or questioning *"What is it that I do on my own and what is it that I think is an expectation? While being in twelfth grade, which is described as a "pretty stressful year — finals, stress, first relationship, decisions". As the participant explains, "I had to decide what to do with my life and all these tensions built up inside me. [...] it was constantly like — this is already too much, and on top of everything else, my first relationship also started around then, and I was also struggling with how my parents would receive that. And then I started looking at what I could cut out. [...] So maybe I cut out serving, the music. I always felt this anyway — what if I didn't do it? It was never the case that I just didn't do it. Maybe there was also a curiosity in me. What is it like when I just say I'm not coming? There was also some rebellion in it and a tempting feeling of how cool it would be to say — listen, I'm not going now. You go, I'm not going."*
- A loss — grief, betrayal, disappointment — that forced a reckoning
"These are these kinds of memories I have. And also how many times I complained that I didn't want to go, and that I was being forced to."
- A decision — consciously choosing to trust, to commit, to walk away, to return
 For example: *"And then in November, after one of the youth meetings [I remember we were already at the gate, I was saying goodbye to X, and then certain questions came up again — I don't remember exactly what my doubts were about at that point, but I know they always came up when we had already packed up and I would have said goodbye], and I said 'enough' and — Lord, take this burden from me. I literally felt like the weight of all my sins was on my shoulders, and I said — Lord, please take it, my life is in your hands and I am grateful for what you have done for me."*
- Moments of courage — to say no, to express things differently, to take a decision, which can also start in moments of courage to ask for help, which produces shifts in how one relates to authority and is very visible in stages of faith developmental transitions in faith authority as outlined by Parks (2011)

For example: “but there was a moment when I finally said no”; “I said, ok, I need some time to think this through, I decided to give myself time [...] I think this is was a very defining moment back then. I felt like it was the first time I said no to something; there is something I am not doing, even if everyone is expecting this from me. So this was the first big step.”

- A realization that produces movement — the moment of sudden clarity that reframed everything that came before it

Among the turning points observed, **realizations** deserve particular attention, as the prompts (helping open questions) often produced them and it presents a great value for in approaching faith journeys. Some arrived in the past — a moment of understanding that reframed what came before it and redirected the journey. Others arrived during the interview itself, in the act of telling — moments where the participant reached a new understanding and perspective on things that felt different before. This second kind, where insight emerges through narration, is described in narrative research as an epiphanic moment. Both types were present across the interviews, and both functioned as turning points — moments after which something was different. However, there were also realization that emerged as a result of prompting, and the effect of these answers are not yet known. For example, around the end of the timeline exercise, one participant mentioned a constant negative figure on his journey, and how grateful he feels for the presence of this person on the journey. Basically, a negative turned positive. It was stated that “*looking back, I feel grateful to him, because without that experience, I probably wouldn’t be where I am today or who I am now.*” These realizations often overlap with patterns of meaning-making.

Besides this, there are also memories that felt like prolonged turning points, as the longer or shorter process/period before or after a turning point. For example:

- A long period of questioning
- Growing up in a difficult or supportive church environment
- A slow drift away from faith over years
- A gradual awakening rather than a sudden one

5.5.3. Patterns throughout narratives

With only three cases, **it would not be appropriate to claim definitive patterns**. However, the emerging patterns are worth noting, as they warrant testing in a larger, more diverse sample in future research.

One of the clearest emerging patterns is that *the emotional tone of the early church experience seemed to shape the overall trajectory of the narrative in the absence of supportive community*. The participants whose first memories in a church context were negative — marked by loss, grief, exclusion, or bullying — tended toward a more negatively dominated narrative overall, and that tone persisted until something intervened: a person, a community, an experience of feeling supported or seen. The participants whose early experiences were positive — feeling part of a community, feeling supported — tended to carry a more stable or positive tone throughout. The beginning, in other words, left a mark. As one participant naturally reflected while narrating his last shared memory, but first chronologically on the journey, “Oh, and there’s also this... My grandmother and grandfather raised me, and at my grandmother’s funeral, I wanted to jump into the grave. I must have been around six years old. They had to pull me away from there. She was the one who raised me and taught me everything—she was part of my everyday life. My earliest memories [thinking] are probably within the framework of Christianity, I think. Maybe something was already shaped or influenced there, I’m not sure.”

Across the interviews, a distinction emerged that felt important to name. When participants described being hurt in a church context, *the source of that hurt was a specific person* — a peer, a pastor, a family member, by either their own actions or lack of actions. Not everybody separated what a human being did from what the church is meant to be, and from who God is. Another particularly striking pattern emerged around experiences of bullying. More than one participant described *situations that were remarkably similar in what happened — yet the outcomes differed*. What seemed to make the difference was not the situation itself but the kind of support received and how that support was felt and internalized. This suggests that it is not only the wound that shapes the journey, but also what surrounds the wound — whether someone was present, whether that presence was felt as genuine, and whether it was enough to keep the person connected to faith and community.

When participants quickly reflected on their timelines at the end of their exercise, the most consistent theme was *the significance of specific people on the journey* — individuals who were there at the right moment, said something, helped, understood, supported, or simply that their presence raised questions or realizations. Relationships were the most frequently cited factor shaping the direction of the faith journey. This pattern points to the responsibility that any person in a church community carries — often without knowing it — simply by being present to someone else.

Across all three cases, despite the differences in tone, narration style, and emotional register, one thing was consistent: *all three participants were searching for something*, as their current state (relationship with faith). The content of that search differed, as did the language used to describe it. But the searching itself was present in every journey.

All participants were active and coming back with questions when they did not understand, to ensure they understand it clearly and are answering the right thing, which is saying something about the character of participants.

Finally, it is worth naming that *the interview process itself seemed to create conditions for meaning to form*. The act of being asked, being listened to, and being given space to follow a thought — particularly in the more associative and emotionally weighted narrations — produced realizations that the participants had not arrived with. I find this important as it speaks to the value of creating spaces where people can narrate their faith journey at all.

Two of the three participants described their *Christian identity as something consciously chosen, rather than simply inherited*. They could pinpoint when faith became personal—when what had once been handed down by family or culture turned into a belief they actively embraced. This transition was gradual, unfolding through periods of questioning, uncertainty, and reflection about what they truly believed and wanted, instead of simply following what they had been told. The shift *from inherited to chosen faith*—from passive belonging to active engagement—emerged as a consistent developmental pattern across their stories.

The third participant's journey diverged, as no clear personal choice had yet been made. In this case, faith had often felt imposed rather than invited, and negative experiences—like peer bullying, lack of family support, unhelpful pastoral responses, and a community that never felt genuinely supportive—had accumulated without resolution. As a result, the search

for meaning moved outward, toward a different religious tradition, which Parks notes is a common response to hurt. Here, a conscious decision or commitment had not yet taken shape; the search continued, the direction had changed, but the defining moment of choosing—declaring one’s beliefs and committing to them—had not yet been reached.

Another pattern that emerged across the journeys relates to *how faith was introduced and held within the family context*. The participants whose narratives carried a more positive overall tone did not describe faith as something that was forced upon them. It was present in their upbringing, often significantly so, but *it was not experienced as mandatory* — there was room, even implicitly, to find their own relationship to it. *This is not to say that wanting to meet expectations was absent*. Several participants described a felt sense of needing to meet expectations — of family— even when nothing was explicitly demanded of them. That pressure, unspoken or spoken, was felt, and in case it was unspoken, it turned out to be reflected on positively. The difference, however, seems to lie in whether faith was experienced as something imposed from the outside or something that had space to become their own. Where that space existed, the journey tended to move toward personal ownership. Where it did not — where faith felt more like an obligation than an invitation — the narrative carried more weight, more resistance, and more distance to travel before anything felt genuinely chosen. This connects directly to the pattern of inherited versus chosen faith, and suggests that the conditions of early faith formation — not just what was believed but how it was held and transmitted — have a long reach into the shape of the journey that follows.

Across several participants’ stories, *major life transitions*—such as moving from secondary school to university, or from university into adulthood—stood out as times when faith could become unsettled or quietly set aside. As new responsibilities, identity questions, and changing social circles accumulated, faith that had not yet taken root internally was especially vulnerable to being pushed into the background. When faith relied mostly on external supports—like a familiar community, established routines, or family expectations—these periods of change highlighted just how fragile it could be. In contrast, when faith had become truly personal, participants often found ways to carry it through the disruption, even if it looked different or had short-term negative consequences. This pattern suggests that transitions serve not only as possible turning points, but also as tests of resilience, revealing whether faith has been internalized enough to outlast the loss of the structures that once supported it.

5.5.4. Patterns of meaning-making

Realizations appeared across the narratives as a distinct mode of meaning-making — not necessarily moments that redirected a faith journey, but moments in which something previously unexamined came into focus. These realizations were often inseparable from periods of questioning: the questioning created the conditions for the realization, and the realization in turn deepened or redirected the questioning. Importantly, realizations did not always occur at the time of the original experience — they could emerge years later, prompted by a conversation (like the interview), knowledge of a new framework, or the act of narrating itself. Unlike turning points, which imply movement and a before-and-after, realizations in this sense are interpretive: they name what was already there, or what has only now become visible. What distinguished this pattern was its cumulative quality — questioning and realization rarely produced immediate change, but they accumulated, quietly reorganizing the person's internal landscape until the conditions were right for something to shift. In this sense, questioning and *realization together are less like turning points and more like the slow work that made turning points possible*. For example, a realization that names something without changing direction — like seeing through confirmation — is more of a meaning-making moment, or part of a period of questioning.

Therefore, across the narratives, *meaning-making* did not appear as a single, fixed moment of interpretation but as a layered and ongoing process. Some meanings were constructed *contemporaneously* — at the time of the original experience, even in adolescence, before the person had the distance or frameworks that come with age. Thoughts like the following ones express this type of meaning: "I already interpreted it this way back then, not just now." Others emerged *in the act of narrating itself*: the interview became a space where interviewees visibly worked out what certain experiences meant, sometimes for the first time. For example: "Oh! Now I remembered something!", or "Buuuut... Now that I am saying this, I remember that back then...", or "Wow, now that you asked about it [positive experiences], there was a moment when my religion teacher showed me that...". And then others still were *retrospective* — meanings made after the fact, looking back across a longer timeline, often shaped by subsequent experiences, new relationships, or conceptual frameworks encountered later in life, like: "Looking back, I feel grateful to him [a relationship that felt constant and negative over the years], because without that experience, I probably wouldn't be where I am today or who I am now. I wasn't grateful before to that guy for setting me on a path."

or “This is the sum of coincidences that happened to me. Or not coincidences, but things that were written. Is there such a thing as coincidence, or does everything happen for a reason? Everything happens for a reason. This is my new confession of faith.” or “Wow, very strange.... I thought about many things, but I would’ve never said that X would be on my life path.” However, *not all meaning-making arrives at resolution*. Some experiences remain open — not yet fully interpreted, but not without weight either. A childhood loss, a formative relationship, an early encounter with faith — these can leave a trace that shapes the person long before they have the language or distance to understand it. As one interviewee, with a tendency towards narrating negative experiences, at the end of the interview, reflected on their grandmother's death and their earliest memories within a Christian framework: “Maybe something was already shaped or influenced there, I'm not sure.” This was the last memory the person shared. Although the meaning is not made — something was started.

All this suggests that *faith journey narratives are active sites of meaning-making* in their own right — and that the same event can carry different layers of meaning depending on when and from where the person views it.

Looking more closely to these journeys, I observed *receptivity as a condition for meaning-making*, since the same encounter, teaching, or community can be present without producing a turning point, if the person isn't yet in the state to receive it. All faith journeys in this study illustrate this perfectly: the encounters or the teachings were there earlier, a person or community had already set something in motion, but it only became meaningful later, in a different relational and emotional context. The meaning wasn't in an event itself; it was in the moment the participant was able to take it in. For example, one participant mentioned that the same story, retold multiple times, kept revealing new layers of meaning — like realizing only after five retellings that a quiz he/she had filled out anonymously was targeted specifically at him/her. As the person mentioned, “this actually only came to my memory two weeks ago because I started retelling the story. I had already told it maybe 5 times, and the ideas kept coming to me.”

Receptivity, however, is not only a condition of readiness — *it can also be eroded by familiarity*. One participant described how proximity and routine had gradually dulled their ability to receive what was once meaningful, noting that even a teaching they found genuinely compelling required conscious effort to appreciate: 'Just recently I was listening back to a podcast

he was in and I thought — wow, he says really great things. And I had already heard it before. I need to come back to my senses and realize — oh, this is actually special, and be grateful.' This points to a different kind of receptivity challenge — not the inability of a younger self to absorb what was being offered, but the numbing effect of over-familiarity on someone already embedded in a faith community. As the participant reflected: “you can get bored by familiarity, while someone else would do anything to have this much happening in their community. I often have to remind myself what a privileged position I am in.” Meaning, in this sense, is not something received once and retained — *it requires active, recurring reconstruction.*

A recurring pattern also emerged specifically in the closing reflections of the interviews — after participants had finished narrating their story and were invited to step back and look at the whole arc. In these moments, a distinctive type of realization surfaced: not about the events themselves, or the turning points already named, but *about a specific person on their journey.* These post-narrative realizations varied in character. In some cases, a figure who had been a constant source of tension or negativity throughout the narrative was suddenly reframed — their presence, previously experienced as harmful or obstructive, revealing an unexpected positive dimension in retrospect. In other cases, the realization was quieter: someone who had been present at certain moments, without the participant fully registering their significance at the time, was now recognized as having mattered — as the person who made a turning point possible, or whose presence created the safety needed to step into a new community. What these realizations shared was their timing: they did not emerge during the story itself but after it, in the stillness of having just finished telling it. The completed narrative created a vantage point from which certain figures — whether dramatically significant or quietly present — finally became visible in their true weight.

Other comments around the journey were about a divine attribution and not all expressions of divine attribution emerged from within a sustained faith community. One participant, who had faced significant gaps in both family and communal support throughout adolescence, nonetheless described moments of striking spiritual sensitivity. Reflecting on a near-miss accident, they described an immediate impulse toward gratitude: 'my gratitude expressed itself in prayer... I could only give thanks to God through prayer.' In another moment, they recalled voicing to their godmother: 'God still has a plan with him' — attributing divine purpose to someone else's life being saved at a time of confusion. And in yet another

reflection, they described what felt like direct divine communication: 'it was like a little reminder: hey, by the way, I hold your life in my hands, and now I am giving you a sign to point to the fact that maybe you should move in a more positive direction. This came from someone higher than myself.' These moments were genuine and unprompted — and notably, they all occurred before this participant eventually sought a different spiritual framework. Yet these experiences could not take root within their original faith environment as the context had been experienced as forced and unescapable, navigated out of inability to say no, and ultimately marked by the lasting negative influence of one figure whose bullying left a shadow over the whole. It was not simply that the conditions for faith were missing — it was that the conditions actively working against it accumulated into a sequence that made remaining within that framework increasingly untenable. It is worth noting that seeking a different spiritual environment after experiencing harm or coercion within one is not an anomaly — it is a natural and self-protective response. A person who has been hurt within a specific framework will instinctively seek a space where they can engage with spiritual questions on their own terms, without the associations of past harm. In this sense, the eventual shift toward a different spiritual path was less a theological decision than a relational and psychological one — a search for belonging and spiritual exploration in a context unmarked by negative figure and forced actions.

For another participant, direct attribution of God emerged not at the beginning of the faith journey but at a later stage — after a significant crisis of authenticity had been worked through. Raised in a supportive church and family environment, this participant had long engaged in various forms of service until a moment of honest questioning surfaced: was this genuinely desired, or simply expected? As they reflected: 'I think this was a very defining moment back then. I felt like it was the first time I said no to something, there is something I am not doing even if everyone is expecting this from me.' A semester-long pause from music followed — the first conscious act of self-differentiation within faith. Years later, having worked through questions of identity and authenticity, the participant returned to serving — in worship and other areas — but from a different interior place. Divine attribution now described not external signs but an internal transformation: 'I can truly only say that God worked this in me, that I would desire it [other areas of service than the previously constant service areas around music].' Paradoxically, the participant who is “the type of person who hates deciding on matters that concern my own life” and needs to “ask everyone who is

somewhat close” in order to commit more easily to what he/she will decide had, despite always having the most relational support, now described needing it least when moving to a different city, having arrived at a faith sustained primarily through direct relationship with God: 'I don't want to ask anyone's opinion, only the Lord God's alone.'

A third participant described divine presence in a moment of striking clarity and intimacy — when the accumulated weight of unresolved questions finally broke open into prayer: 'Lord, take this burden from me. I literally felt like the weight of all my sins was on my shoulders, and I said — Lord, please take it, my life is in your hands and I am grateful for what you have done for me.' This moment of conversion was deeply felt and anchored in a relational context — a peer community, a significant accompanying figure — that had made it possible. Yet the years that followed brought a gradual loss of that communal grounding, as circumstances made it difficult to find a new faith community to belong to. In this relational and communal vacuum, and with an active desire to engage with questions of faith, the participant became entangled in an online group that operated with manipulative dynamics. What is notable is that even within this harmful context, meaning-making did not cease — it was precisely the collision between the group's claims and the participant's internalized faith foundations that eventually produced a moment of sharp realization: 'It clicked when X said: you know that Jesus is not God. Until that point I tried to tell myself that sure, what they teach me is God's will, and this based on the Bible, but when he said that Jesus is not God it was like an emergency brake on a train, and this is where everything stopped. I remembered everything and I realized that... he wanted me to worship someone else. For me this is a foundational belief, that the Trinity exists.' The exit from this experience, however, was not immediate — it unfolded over several years through a carefully sequenced process of confession. First to a closest friend, a key figure throughout the journey; the following year to a trusted pastor in a private setting — 'I couldn't own it in front of everyone'; and finally, a public confession that the participant described as the moment of being truly free.

5.5.5. Relational influences

The relational influences could be considered as church-related touchpoints and therefore, considered as what in these relationships is perceived as supportive or hindering. Therefore, the relational influences are part of the church-related touchpoints analysis. Different relational influences appear throughout the journeys, some being directly connected to church

settings (family members, pastors, fellow members from the same generation, older generations), others not being related to church (romantic relationships, classmates, other friends, influences coming from online manipulation).

Across all narratives, relationships and community emerged not merely as the context in which faith developed, but as its primary medium — the substance through which the topic of faith was first encountered, interpreted, and either embraced or rejected. Yet how relational and communal contexts were experienced varied significantly across participants, shaped not only by the objective quality of those relationships but by where each person was developmentally at the time — their cognitive and emotional capacity to process what was being offered, and whether the relational environment was safe enough to receive it.

Several distinct types of community appeared across the narratives. Some participants described nurturing, consistent communities — multigenerational, relationship-based, with opportunities to serve and be active, where belonging felt natural and faith was caught as much as taught. Others described institutional communities structured around obligations arising from family, ritual, and authority, where participation was expected rather than chosen, and where the dynamics between the person and the community created barriers rather than bridges. For some, the community present was perceived as actively harmful because of the presence of one person (key figure) — coercive dynamics, unchecked bullying, and authority figures (parents, pastor) who failed to intervene left lasting marks on how faith itself was perceived. For others, the presence of one person (the key figure) brought safety and familiarity. The same negative influences and situations dealt with differently produced a very different storyline. What is clearly the difference between the two journeys is not the absence of bullying, in this case, but rather how the "community" dealt with it, in case it was present. In one case, community was simply absent — the person was searching, open, willing, but walking the path alone for some time.

A recurring thread across these varied experiences was the dynamics of authority — specifically, how participants related to figures such as parents, pastors, and generational mates in different events and circumstances, and whether those figures were perceived as approachable or distant, safe or imposing.

Pastors. One participant described, reflecting on why they would never bring their deepest faith questions to a pastor: *'This distance is the worst thing. It builds such walls between us*

that we don't even dare to ask them such things. Even though they are supposedly leading your soul — they are the pastors, they should be helping with this. But when a pastor enters the room, everything changes. Mood, energy, way of speaking.' The pastoral role, as institutionally embodied, had become in the story of one participant the opposite of what it intended — not a figure of approachable spiritual guidance, but one whose very presence closed down the possibility of honest conversation. In the absence of such accessibility, this participant described turning to artificial intelligence instead: *'I go in the direction of least resistance, which is artificial intelligence.'* That a person's deepest spiritual questions find their way to an AI rather than a pastor could sound like a statement about relational distance and institutional mismatch. However, a previous story, mentioned before, shows how turning to the pastor is not always what is needed, but rather a supportive community, often composed by people from the same generation or others one looks up to. As another person mentioned that the previous pastor was not interested in the person regarding his experiences with the youth group. As the person mentioned later, *"He never asked what our interests were or what we were doing. Maybe once he asked what kind of music we listened to. I remember that. But in general, he was not interested in our lives. With the current pastor, it was different."* However, although the next pastor had a different attitude, was interested in the people and spent time with them, the key figure in this story was also a person with a considered more mature faith, from the person's own generation — *"What maybe helped is that the kids of the next pastor were close to my age and it was easier to get along. Probably, I would not have been in such a strong relationship with the new pastor if it weren't his child."*

It seems like the pastor's institutional role and the pastor's relational presence are not the same thing, and participants consistently responded to the latter rather than the former. Where they were present and relational, their influence extended — often indirectly, through their children or through the communities they helped create — into the lives of the participants in meaningful ways.

Family. This thesis did not research on the effects of family relationships of faith, but it did observe that although those relationships can very much affect a faith journey, especially if a supportive church community is also missing, family is more a background to the story, as people do not necessarily share their faith related questions with parents. As one participant mentioned: "I often take it very much for granted that they are there and obviously they play a role in my faith life, and in my life in general, and that's also why I didn't draw them first

— because many times it seems so obvious — but then I realized that my parents... that's where it all starts from, so it would be good to draw them too."

This backgrounding of family does not mean family was unimportant — rather, it operated as a kind of foundation that was assumed rather than examined, present rather than processed. As the same participant elaborated: "regardless of the fact that they are my parents and I obviously look up to them in many ways, I wasn't always able to connect my faith life with them in the sense that I didn't always know what their exact expectations were of me, but they were fine with the fact that I wouldn't necessarily discuss my struggles with them, because after all they are my parents. I can comfortably talk to others with whom I feel more comfortable regarding my more personal things, and that's why it was good that these people existed — people I knew were close to my parents, so they were probably wise enough and suitable for me to share these things with, but if there's something I don't want to discuss with my parents, I know these people are there. But regardless of this, they always knew everything about me, and still do now. Maybe I don't always tell them things right away, but we are close enough that if something happens and I'm not doing completely well, then obviously they are the ones I share it with and talk it through. In every period of my life there were times when I really needed and expected them to stand by my side in something."

Where family was actively responsive to signs of harm, it served as a protective factor. As the same participant recalled: "For example when I was little, the village school really didn't work for me — being someone's child, a lot of bullying, today I don't experience it as badly anymore because I don't remember much of it. We're talking about a small village where the pastor was everything — not a big city, where being a pastor's kid means as much as your mum being a hairdresser. My parents took very seriously how much I was being hurt by this and a year later they moved me to a school in the city. They didn't just say 'well kids.... and it'll sort itself out.' When you can't find a hold on someone, you find something that seems like a good reason — but it still wasn't fair of course."

Beyond protection from harm, family also shaped faith formation through intentional investment in development: "*Mum was more present at school, but in other things (e.g. music) it was dad who was there. Every Wednesday, he drove me to piano and singing classes. It was a dad-daughter program. I actually often forget how good that was back then, but it often*

comes to mind how seriously he took my development. They were also really there for me in my both relationships."

Peers and same-generation relationships. Several participants described how faith, in its earliest stages, was mediated entirely through the people and relationships encountered before it had become personal — and that those early relational experiences, whether nurturing or not, left a framework through which everything that followed was interpreted. One participant reflected directly on this: the reason they associated their original faith context with negativity was not theology, but people — the bullying that went unaddressed, the authority figures (parents, pastor) who did not intervene to support, the absence of anyone to turn to in moments of confusion and genuine searching. As this person observed, you first experience religion through the people and relationships you encounter in a specific community, before it becomes personal. Where those early relationships were safe and warm, faith had room to grow. Where they were perceived as harmful, indifferent, or simply absent, the path toward developing a personal faith became significantly more complicated — and for some, it led away from the original context entirely, not out of rejection of the spiritual, but out of a self-protective search for a safer space in which to keep asking the questions.

The role of same-generation peers emerged as particularly significant across narratives — not as a secondary relational category, but often as the primary one through which faith felt safe enough to be explored honestly. As one participant noted: "*Probably I would've not been in such a strong relationship with the new pastor if it wasn't his child.*" The accessibility of peers created conditions that authority figures, however well-intentioned, could not always replicate: "*I remember there was an occasion in the youth group when we held a separate conversation for the boys and the girls, and there we brought up sins quite openly and talked about them. The point was that the pastor wasn't with us and everyone was roughly our age. You can open up more in front of peers than in front of an older person.*"

Romantic relationships. Romantic relationships appeared across narratives as a relational influence that intersected meaningfully with faith development, though they have received less analytical attention than church-based relationships. Their significance lay less in their direct theological content and more in the way they introduced new pressures, decisions, and identity questions that interacted with faith at pivotal moments. For one participant, the beginning of a first relationship coincided with a period of significant stress around academic

demands and serving obligations, contributing to a moment of conscious self-differentiation — the decision to step back from musical service. For the same participant, a second relationship and its ending became a turning point in how relational input itself was understood, leading to a deliberate decision to stop seeking others' opinions and to rely instead on direct relationship with God. Romantic relationships, in this sense, functioned as catalysts — not shaping faith directly, but creating the conditions under which deeper questions about identity, expectation, and authentic choice were forced to the surface.

Online encounters/relationships. One participant mentioned a harmful relational influence from outside the original faith community — an online group encountered during a period of communal absence and active spiritual searching. What made this entanglement possible was precisely the vacuum left by the loss of the participant's original community. With an active desire to engage with questions of faith and no safe relational context in which to do so, the participant became vulnerable to a group that operated with manipulative dynamics. What is notable is that even within this harmful context, meaning-making did not cease — it was precisely the collision between the group's claims and the participant's internalized faith foundations that eventually produced a moment of sharp realization: *'It clicked when X said: you know that Jesus is not God. Until that point I tried to tell myself that sure, what they teach me is God's will, and this based on the Bible, but when he said that Jesus is not God it was like an emergency brake on a train, and this is where everything stopped. I remembered everything and I realized that... he wanted me to worship someone else. For me this is a foundational belief, that the Trinity exists.'* The exit from this experience was not immediate — it unfolded over several years through a carefully sequenced process of confession. First to a closest friend, a key figure throughout the journey; the following year to a trusted pastor in a private setting — *'I couldn't own it in front of everyone'*; and finally, a public confession that the participant described as the moment of being truly free.

What ultimately made recovery or reorientation possible was the presence of at least one safe relational figure: someone who could be trusted, who listened without judgment, and who encouraged the person toward a different path. The harmful relational influence did not have the final word; but its effects were lasting, and until this day, this person is still not committed to a local congregation.

Divine attribution. Not all expressions of divine attribution emerged from within a sustained faith community. One participant, who had faced significant gaps in both family and communal support throughout adolescence, nonetheless described moments of striking spiritual sensitivity. Reflecting on a near-miss accident, they described an immediate impulse toward gratitude: *'my gratitude expressed itself in prayer... I could only give thanks to God through prayer.'* In another moment, they recalled voicing to their godmother: *'God still has a plan with him'* — attributing divine purpose to someone else's life being saved at a time of confusion. And in yet another reflection, they described what felt like direct divine communication: *"Looking back on it now, the way it came across to me — or the way it comes across to me now — was like a little reminder: 'hey, by the way, I hold your life in my hands, and now I am giving you a sign to point to the fact that maybe you should move in a more positive direction.'* *This came from someone higher than myself."* These moments were genuine and unprompted — and notably, they all occurred before this participant eventually sought a different spiritual framework. Yet these experiences could not take root within their original faith environment, as the context had been experienced as forced, navigated out of an inability to say no, and ultimately marked by the lasting negative influence of one figure whose bullying left a shadow over the whole. It is worth noting that seeking a different spiritual environment after experiencing harm or coercion within one is not an anomaly — it is a natural and self-protective response. A person who has been hurt within a specific framework will instinctively seek a space where they can engage with spiritual questions on their own terms, without the associations of past harm. In this sense, the eventual shift toward a different spiritual path was less a theological decision than a relational and psychological one — a search for belonging and spiritual exploration in a context unmarked by negative figure and forced actions.

For another participant, direct attribution of God emerged not at the beginning of the faith journey but at a later stage — after a significant crisis of authenticity had been worked through. Raised in a supportive church and family environment, this participant had long engaged in various forms of service until a moment of honest questioning surfaced: was this genuinely desired, or simply expected? As they reflected: *'I think this was a very defining moment back then. I felt like it was the first time I said no to something, there is something I am not doing even if everyone is expecting this from me.'* A semester-long pause from music followed — the first conscious act of self-differentiation within a faith context. Years later,

having worked through questions of identity and authenticity, the participant returned to serving — in worship and other areas — but from a different interior place. Divine attribution now described not external signs but an internal transformation: *'I can truly only say that God worked this in me, that I would desire it [other areas of service than the previously constant service areas around music].'* Paradoxically, the participant who is *"the type of person who hates deciding on matters that concern my own life"* and needs to *"ask everyone who is somewhat close"* in order to commit more easily to what he/she will decide had, despite always having the most relational support, now described needing it least when moving to a different city, having arrived at a faith sustained primarily through direct relationship with God: *'I don't want to ask anyone's opinion, only the Lord God's alone.'*

For a third participant, divine presence was encountered in a moment of striking clarity and intimacy — when the accumulated weight of unresolved questions finally broke open into prayer: *'Lord, take this burden from me. I literally felt like the weight of all my sins was on my shoulders, and I said — Lord, please take it, my life is in your hands and I am grateful for what you have done for me.'* This moment of conversion was deeply felt and anchored in a relational context — a peer community, a significant accompanying figure — that had made it possible. Yet the years that followed brought a gradual loss of that communal grounding, and it was in precisely that relational vacuum that the harmful online entanglement described in the previous subsection took hold.

Conclusion on relational influences. What is very clear from these journeys is that although the church is experienced via relationships and healthy communities greatly facilitate growth, individual encounters with “someone higher” than oneself also happen outside of such environments. Without community, however, disruption arises — whether or not a person is personally committed to Christianity. Moments of crisis, no matter their type, are shorter and easier to pass through with a supportive community present

It is equally important to note that across the narratives, *personal questioning, conscious decision-making, and the initiative to ask for help were all present* — and were in fact decisive turning points in each journey. The person who asked for someone to be physically present before a difficult conversation, the person who chose to take a break and named it as such, the person who decided to take this topic seriously in their life and start reading about it, the person who opened up to older friends during a crisis rather than staying silent, the

person who made a decision about following a certain path and leading — each of these was an act of personal agency. What the community provided was not a replacement for that agency but the context in which it became possible to exercise it safely. A person is more likely to raise an uncomfortable question in an environment that welcomes it. A person is more likely to ask for help when they trust that help will be given. A person is more likely to start a conversation when there is a mutual openness for connection. A person is more likely to name a struggle when they believe it will be received without judgment. A person is more likely to return to a place where he/she is welcomed. And the examples could continue.

Yet even personal agency does not fully account for what is visible in these narratives. Beneath the decisions, the need for answers, the questions, the realizations, and the moments of initiative, there was consistently something that came first — an interior stirring, a moment of gratitude, a level of trust, an unnamed or named unease, a pull toward something that would bring meaning, safety, relief. What activated the urge to question, to pause, to pray, to express gratitude, to reach out, or to change direction is a question this thesis does not have the scope or the tools to address. It is the dimension of these journeys that resists reduction, and it is acknowledged here simply as what it appeared to be: a mystery that was present in every story, quietly underneath everything else.

The touchpoints themselves — the camps, the services, the serving roles, the annual events — were rarely experienced as significant in isolation. Their significance was almost always relational: carried by the people present within them, shaped by the quality of care those people offered, and remembered not as programs or structures but as moments of being, or not being, known, supported, and welcomed back. Community, in this sense, plays more the role of a permission structure — one that can make it possible for individuals to take the steps that only they could take, in response to something only they could feel. How might we become such communities?

5.5.6. The Value of the Experience

One of the most significant outcomes of these conversations was the context, space, and environment created for reflection and participation, as well as the nature of the questions. As the participants themselves expressed, the act of being asked, being listened to, and being

invited to pay attention carried its own weight. In their own word, I will mention some of their thoughts.

They rediscovered and observed the importance of people who were always there. Looking back through the lens of these conversations, one participant was caught off guard by what surfaced:

"You brought up things I had completely forgotten. I totally forgot about the father-daughter programs, and how much X was present. Obviously, I'm not that close to him — he was always there from a professional and ministry perspective — and it's strange that, meanwhile, subconsciously, he plays such an important role in my life and how much he supports me and stands by me. Strange to realize these things in hindsight. I never looked at him as a friend, more as a leader — but look how much he was there when it mattered."

The conversation didn't introduce anything new — it simply created the conditions for something already true to become visible.

They noticed the therapeutic quality of being heard. Without being framed as therapy, the experience carried a therapeutic weight. In one participant's words: "This experience was completely therapeutic — absolutely, thoroughly positive." What emerged was not a structured intervention but an open dialogue that allowed the person to arrive at their own conclusions in their own time.

Participants noticed what had gone unnoticed. Small but meaningful realizations came through — things that had been present all along but never consciously registered. As one participant said: "It never occurred to me before that I felt better in that space when X — a familiar person — was there."

Participants also recognised the quality of the questions themselves. Perhaps most tellingly, the value of the process was reflected in how the questions were received: "You asked really good questions — hats off — especially the way you were able to zero in on the important things. You saw the whole picture with eyes I hadn't seen it through yet." Obviously, this leaves me with gratitude. However, I would not be able to comment on anything different, as I am not always completely sure how the questions and my own realisations appeared on

the spot. Some questions were already prepared as helping questions, but there were other moments when reflection and discernment on the spot were needed to continue. Open questions, clarifying questions, that turned to be useful.

This points to the tool's value lies in asking questions that the person hadn't thought to ask themselves.

One participant, reflected on his own experience and what happened to him *when faith was not pressured* upon him. Perhaps the most delicate and telling result came from a participant who had every reason to remain closed. As a child, he had been bullied by someone within the very community he was later expected to embrace — and no one intervened. Adults around him, including his parents, not only failed to protect him but continued to bring him into spaces shared with that person, including church. The institution, for him, had become inseparable from that wound. Faith had been imposed, in a context of unaddressed harm, which I truly hope will receive healing, hope and reconciliation in the future. In this participant, who was struggling with expectations and was often forced to attend church services, specific ministry gatherings, or events, and was invited to attend the cultural probe as well, something shifted. In his translated words:

"The current prayer week services weren't bad either; I didn't go there with the intention of blocking out the message. There were one or two messages that came through to me — maybe I shaped them in a way that felt comfortable for me — but they were still good teachings. I didn't feel like they were trying to push me to have a Reformed faith; seeking to serve and the other things they talked about don't apply only to the Reformed faith."

The absence of pressure made room for genuine reception in case of one wounded participant. The person chose to be present. The invitation itself also carried meaning. As the interviewee expressed: "When you invited me for the observation (cultural probe) exercise before, it gave me a lot and made me think about many things. I paid attention and it felt good. You asked me to join, and I hoped it would help me on my path. I've never had anything like this before (talking about the way of interacting with the church service). I didn't even pay attention to my own confirmation."

This coming from someone who had sat through years of compulsory religious participation without ever truly being present, was extremely significant. The difference was what made the invitation and joining possible. The person was asked, was available and curious, was welcomed. The interviewee also honestly named the way openness and resistance could co-exist, even in the same space: "What was strange was that when I entered the church, I felt completely open and willing to let things in, but other times when I entered, I felt like there was a wall there. I couldn't let anything in or make sense of it."

5.6. Church Community Support

In this section, I will include both young adults' experiences, based on the interviews, and their faith journeys, as expressed through the visual narrative timeline exercise, as well as pastors' data, also based on the interviews conducted. The questions *How is church experienced within these journeys, and which church-related touchpoints are perceived as supportive or hindering?* and *How do church leaders perceive and conceptualise support for young adults, and how do their perspectives relate to young adults' narrated experiences?* will be addressed in this order, together with *How do young adults and church leaders understand and describe [...] community and mentoring?*

5.6.1. Church-related Touchpoints in Faith Journeys

When it comes to church-related touchpoints, young adults mentioned: confirmation, church related services (Sunday Service, Prayer Week), programs related to specific generations (religious class for kids, catechism classes, youth groups), events that occur once or twice a year (Bible week, camps, retreats), service areas (where people were involved in serving in community), relationships (family, pastor, friends, members of a specific generation and other community members were mentioned).

Besides this, personal devotion times ("I just try to follow the Bible [...] I prefer it when I read Scripture and try to interpret it myself. [...] I always do it in the morning. I try to put this in first place [...]"), personal encounters with God (within or outside an organized church setting — "my gratitude expressed itself in prayer... I could only give thanks to God through prayer." [talking about an accident]) and encounters with other friends outside the church community were mentioned, as they mattered to the individual's faith journeys (for example: "Things happened that set something in motion inside me. Not necessarily things we did

together, but things that came from her. She had a suicide attempt, and that was the moment I kind of lost it a little, but I was there for her. That was when I started thinking about what someone bigger than ourselves — whoever that someone might be — wants to teach me, why I had to be in that moment. [...] I started reflecting on how much this had set in motion in me - being able to be there so that this thing wouldn't happen to her. I don't know. [...] She is my greatest teacher. Someone who set me on a path — the person from whom I have grown the most.")

Before faith becomes personal, church appears to be experienced primarily through relationships with fellow members. As one participant expressed: "I don't think I'd even be attached to the place if these people weren't there." The place itself — the building, the institution, the formal structure — carried little intrinsic meaning. What carried meaning were the people encountered within it, and the quality of those encounters.

Within these settings, what was hindering or supporting was often around either the quality of relationships or around the opportunities — existing or not — for such relationships to form. A congregation that offered only the minimum — one Sunday service, one Bible study — left little room for the kind of relational depth that participants described as formative. As one participant noted: "In our congregation I think there are more opportunities that are contributing to my spiritual growth — many extra gatherings, concerts, Bible studies, many events, that are even happening because we host or initiate them. I think this is a big added value, and the opportunities are much wider. Not like in other congregations, where there is one Sunday service and one hour of Bible study during the week, and that's it for possibilities in terms of congregation/community life."

Once faith became personal, after personal questioning and decisions were made, many touchpoints were seen as points of interaction with God as well. As one participant reflected on their primary service area: "this was my closest connection point to God at all — that's when I felt close to Him, when we sang together with the others. I could obviously sing at home alone, but that wasn't the same and this is what I missed. I simply felt that I had no connection point with God, there were opportunities, but this was the confirmation that this is my area and I need to stand firm here because nothing else gives as much as this — in fact I think nothing else gives anything." [talking about service area]

This transformation — from performing a role to experiencing a connection — was not instantaneous. It followed a period of questioning and a consciously taken pause, after which the return to serving carried an entirely different interior quality: "I don't know how the other areas came about. Truly just that God worked this desire into me. It strengthened my faith so much [the happening in a consciously taken break] that afterward it wasn't even a question for me why I wouldn't take on helping at youth group with food, or leading a devotional, or running the girls' circle."

Similarly, recurring annual events that had always been present in a participant's life took on new significance once faith had become personal: "This has always been such a part of my life that when I think about defining things related to my faith, [this event] is always automatically there. I developed so much through this, it showed me a side of Christianity and of being a believer that I don't think young people experience elsewhere very often. How open everyone is, how youthful, how attractive, how far people come from to be there because truly nowhere else do people experience something like this. There is no single defining moment here, but the fact that I know this will happen again, every year, I will be there again and I have a role and a part in it, and I so much look forward to it and it is such a foundational thing in my life on a yearly basis, that I couldn't miss mentioning it."

5.6.2. What supports the faith journey

The way young adults express their views on *community and mentoring*, including the nuances and depth of the information, depends very much on whether they have to give definitions or are expressing their thoughts and needs while narrating lived experiences.

When asked about *mentoring*, the distinction between a teacher and a mentor was instinctive and clear: "A teacher rather tells you how things are, how they work — but they're not necessarily interested in your struggles. A mentor also tells you what's okay, like a teacher does, but places it in the context of where you are." A mentor is someone who sees you as a whole person — who knows your struggles, your joys, your everyday details — and whose opinion you actually value, "even if it doesn't always match yours." Crucially, a mentor's presence changes how experiences land: "those small stories [...], it didn't register in me that if someone had found me then, maybe I would be mentally more stable now." Several significant moments in this person's life passed through them because there was no one there to help

make sense of them. Young adults often don't articulate the need for a mentor in the moment. As he reflected, "if there had been a mentor back then who said, 'look, every event has an experiential reason' — maybe I would have thought about it."

When asked directly, participants described *community* in relational, warm, and noticeably unconditional terms. As one participant states: "church community can be a spiritual support, a guide, and companion/helper in critical situations, but it is not always like this. But this should be. It is important for it to be a community." Another adds nuance: "community means that we have the same goal, we grow together in faith, where in everyday life we are loved by the people that surround us, people are there for each other, we lift each other up, we bring out the best in each other. In good times and in bad." A third expresses it in relational and simple terms: "We have accepted one another, with our flaws and our good qualities alike, we can laugh together, we are curious about each other, there is love among us that makes us part of the community. We like each other."

Throughout the journeys, feeling part of things emerged as one of the main supporting aspects mentioned. Participants feel a sense of community when they are taken into account and noticed. As one participant adds: "I don't want to be in the center, but I want to be part of the community as well, where I am not perceived as an outsider." What these definitions share — across three different faith contexts and three different searching modes — is that community is experienced as a relational reality to belong to.

However, when participants were not asked directly but simply invited to tell their stories, a richer, more specific picture of what a supportive (maybe mentoring?) community looks like emerged. This surfaced through narrative, memory, and the recounting of specific moments that had mattered to them. These characteristics, emerging from lived experience, will be examined in the following section — and together they form a portrait of what Parks (2011) would recognise as a mentoring community.

Parks (2011, pp. 120–123) describes the mentoring community as the most powerful form of community for emerging adults — one that offers hospitality to the potential of the emerging adult self, poses challenging questions, provides access to worthy dreams, and recognizes the person both as who they are and who they are yet becoming. It is not simply a supportive social environment but a specific kind of belonging in which the still fragile, inner-dependent self of the emerging adult can flourish with integrity. The narratives examined in this thesis

offer a grounded, lived illustration of what such a community looks like in practice —as a concrete relational reality, experienced through specific people, specific moments, and specific qualities of presence. The characteristics that follow are drawn directly from those narratives, and together they form a portrait of the mentoring community as it was lived and remembered.

5.6.3. What hinders the faith journey

Just as the quality of relationships, opportunities, and responses could be the most defining supportive factors in a faith journey, their absence or distortion emerged as equally defining in the opposite direction. In the experience of young adults, hindering dynamics were not always experienced as overtly harmful — sometimes they were simply the quiet absence of what was needed. This does not mean the faith journey can't take another turn, as one pastor mentioned in later comments.

Where supportive communities were characterized by faith that is admired and figures who are approachable and understanding, hindering ones were marked by *authority dynamics that closed down honest conversation*. When figures of authority — pastors, parents, leaders — were experienced as unapproachable, distant, or imposing, the natural response was not to push through but to find another path, or to stop asking altogether: “This distance is the worst thing. It builds such walls between us that we don't even dare to ask them such things.” In the absence of such accessibility, the search for guidance found other outlets: 'I go in the direction of least resistance, which is artificial intelligence.'

Where supportive communities were characterized by older generations being genuinely interested and taking younger people seriously, hindering ones were marked by *indifference to the inner lives of young people*: "He never asked what our interests were or what we were doing. Maybe once he asked what kind of music we listened to. I remember that. But in general, he was not interested in our lives. With the current pastor, it was different." The absence of being known was experienced not as neutral but as a relational failure that shaped how the entire faith context was perceived.

Where supportive communities offered space for active participation, serving, and honest questioning, hindering ones left little beyond *passive attendance*: "Not like in other congregations, where there is one Sunday service and one hour of Bible study during the week, and

that's it for possibilities in terms of congregation/community life." Where the only option was to sit and receive, belonging became thin. The peer dimension revealed this most clearly — honest conversation required the absence of authority figures: "The point was that the pastor wasn't with us, and everyone was roughly our age. You can open up more in front of peers than in front of an older person."

Where supportive communities accepted pauses and did not pressure, hindering ones made *participation feel obligatory rather than chosen*. The relief that accompanied the discovery of genuine choice points implicitly points to what had been experienced before: "I realized that I can choose this, that it's not an obligation but something I can choose and something I can do on my own terms."

Where supportive communities took young adults' challenges seriously and addressed harm when it was present, hindering ones *left bullying and coercive dynamics unchecked*, allowing the negative influence of one figure to cast a shadow over the entire faith context. Where supportive communities created space for reconciliation, hindering ones left fractures unresolved. As one participant mentioned about a figure that had been bullying him for a long time, combined with parents' expectations: "To be honest, he still comes up sometimes in my thoughts. And I guess that's my own weakness—that I haven't fully gotten over it. [...] The problem is, we tend to compare ourselves to people who are much further ahead, instead of to those who might not be at that level yet. Or we focus on qualities where they are clearly better than us, but we don't compare ourselves in areas where we might actually be stronger. [...] There are moments when these thoughts come back. I'm happy for him that things worked out, but at the same time, I feel this pressure coming from my parents' expectations. I internalize that expectation as something I'm lacking, like a gap I need to fill. And I try to fill that gap with something—but unfortunately, I sometimes end up making that sense of lack even bigger."

One hindering dynamic stood apart from the others because it had no relational opposite in the supportive material, not because no one experienced it positively, but because it appeared as a structural absence rather than a relational quality. This is *the relocation and integration gap, combined with a period of heightened vulnerability*. When life circumstances took a young person away from their original local church community, there was rarely anything waiting for them on the other side. No mechanism for integration, no person tasked with

accompanying the transition, no community that actively reached out or made belonging easy to find again.

This gap was particularly consequential because it tended to coincide with a period of heightened vulnerability — new city, new context, fewer familiar relationships, more open questions. For some participants, it was navigated by returning home every weekend, effectively refusing to put down roots elsewhere. For others, the absence of community during this period created the conditions in which harmful relational influences could take hold — the communal vacuum that made harmful entanglement possible was partly a product of this very gap (as expressed in the online relationships part). Another participant, who had not had a positive experience with the community back home, was not even curious about finding community elsewhere, even though he/she became very interested in the topic under study. The peer dimension was especially acute in one case. A young adult relocating loses not just a community but a generation — the peers who had accompanied their faith development, who knew their history, who could be honest with them. In a few thoughts from young adults: "After this, out of gratitude, there was a period when I started moving in this direction [...] and I moved more towards faith instead. I became more conscious. [...] But this came to an end after a while because of school and friends."; "I became distant from everything — from the church, from the youth groups. I tried to find a youth group here too, went a few times, but I didn't really feel like I belonged. [...] I didn't feel like one of them."; "It wasn't a conscious decision. Not that I didn't want to go — it just faded. I joined once a month, once every two months, and then faded out. Not conscious. Just fading."; "I was in twelfth grade — it was a quite stressful year. Final exams, stress, and having to decide what to do with my life. And all of these tensions built up inside me during that time."

In the next section, the supportive characteristics of communities, drawn from young adults' stories and lived experiences, will be presented in the hope that we can all work more intentionally towards and pray for such communities to form, and that we will all understand our role in them and how we can bring our received gifts to be involved in such community formations, so that young adults, and not only, no matter their stories, will find support and a place for a turning point to occur.

5.6.4. What makes a church community supportive

5.6.4.1. Young adults' perspective

1) the quality of relationships

What is very clear from these journeys is that although church is experienced via relationships and healthy communities greatly facilitate growth, individual and personal encounters with God can also happen outside of such environments. Without community, however, it appeared that disruption happens — whether a person is a committed Christian or not. It is very clear from the three journeys that moments of crisis, no matter the type, are shorter and easier to pass through with a supportive community.

The characteristics of supportive relationships that emerged across the narratives were consistent and specific. They were not simply relationships of proximity — being in the same congregation or attending the same events — but relationships marked by particular qualities, as follows:

- *A character of faith that is admired and looked up to.* As one participant described a key figure in their journey: "It's very defining that the other camp leader is a spiritually very mature lady, already an older woman, and she is very important to me, we are very close to each other."
- *A visible character of love* — relationships marked not by formal care but by a genuine, all-encompassing warmth that was felt rather than performed: "When you get to know her, you realize she carries everyone in her heart, everyone." This quality of love extended beyond individual figures to characterize the entire relational atmosphere of the community: "It's truly all based on relationships. Everyone loves everyone very much, everyone is very close to each other. They're really like family friends."
- *A personal memory and history* — relationships that had accumulated over time and carried specific, embodied moments: "she was the first one to bathe me and that's always the first funny thing that comes to mind about her." These relationships extended beyond the walls of organized church life: "We went through everything together — we built a house together, accidents."
- *Presence and support in crisis* — being genuinely accompanied through difficulty rather than merely acknowledged. This took different forms across the narratives.

Sometimes it was sustained accompaniment over time: *"I went through my first breakup — there was also a coworker, a female pastor, she's also like my fairy god-mother, she was very there with me through the whole thing. That camp was such a defining one for me that to this day, when that specific year's camp comes to mind, I think — dear God, how hard it was, but how good it was that X was there, who was with me through the whole thing."* At other times it was deliberate, physical presence at a single moment of vulnerability: *"So I knew that when I announced this, X needed to be there as a mediator, and we literally did it that way — we were going home from an event. He sat in our car with his wife, so they would be there with me when I communicated my decision. I asked them to be there because I was very afraid that he wouldn't understand this because he operates differently."*

- *Older generations being genuinely interested and taking younger people seriously.* This was not a formal mentoring structure but an organic movement of care across generational lines: *"I got in a different circle of friends — 2-3 girls from youth group who are much older than me, all of them 7 – 10 years older than me. It was not really a group of friends because I was still young then, 15 at the time [...] I was having a crisis — we were in a very big fight with these girls (who were bullying) and I was in such an upset state. I wasn't even that close with these other girls, and they asked what was wrong and I just told them everything. [...] After I told them everything and they listened to all of it, they really took me under their wing and basically became my new friends. It's been going on ever since. That wasn't without its clouds either, but I can say that they pulled me out of something very bad at the time, and I don't know where it would have gone if they hadn't chosen me — as a 15-year-old girl — to be their friend, while they were already pursuing their master's degrees."*
- *Having access to people who are close to the figures one admires but may not have the courage to approach directly — a kind of relational bridge:* *"because he, on the other hand, found it very hard to accept this decision, and this influenced my decision to a very large extent. Because I don't really care about what others think, I get over it, but what he would think — I was very afraid of that. And X is his right-hand man in many things."*

2) the quality of opportunities

Beyond the quality of individual relationships, supportive communities were also characterized by the quality of opportunities they offered — and specifically by the atmosphere in which those opportunities existed.

The most consistent descriptor across narratives was a *family-like atmosphere* that persisted beyond formal gatherings: "Everyone loves everyone very much, everyone is very close to each other. They're really like family friends. The extended family also goes there, so truly every thread ties together." And: "I always feel such a family-like atmosphere there that even if we don't see each other for half a year because everyone lives scattered around, when we do meet it's such a good feeling — yes, I'm there again — like they're my family."

Closely related was *generational bonding* — the experience of growing up within a community over time, alongside others, in a way that produced shared history and mutual responsibility: "we grew up there together, we're roughly the same age, we looked after the younger ones, everything took shape there, and they were only week-long camps. Our parents had their hands full with camp related responsibilities and we had to figure things out ourselves."

Supportive communities also offered *opportunities for constant, uninterrupted connection* across different life stages, so that belonging was never contingent on a particular role or season: "This is also something I grew into — first as my parent's child (as they were serving), then as one of several coworkers' children, then as a confirmation student, then simply as a participant as a youth group member, then as a coworker, and this year I am the [role]."

Importantly, supportive communities also took *young adults' challenges seriously even outside of formal church contexts*: "It had escalated to such a point that even in our youth group, there was a separate meeting among the coworkers, about what to do with the younger ones who were simply bullying each other." The boundary of the community's concern was not the boundary of the church building or the formal program.

Involvement and serving within the community also emerged as significant, not merely as a contribution but as a source of connection and belonging: "I gladly go there to support them, even just with my presence. Or after everything is done, I can help packing up things." And: "I'm not sure it would have stayed this way if I hadn't been so involved in things." The simple act of being present and useful was experienced as relational glue.

3) the quality of response

Perhaps the most nuanced dimension of supportive community was not what it offered structurally but how it responded — to questions, to struggles, to decisions, and to the need for space.

Feeling understood emerged as foundational: "And X, one of our leaders (in the area the person is questioning whether is her/his own), said he completely understands what I'm feeling, as he went through the same thing. And it felt so good that he understood my situation that suddenly I didn't even see it as a problem or a bad decision anymore. What if I take a break?"

Alongside understanding came *practical and honest advice*, calibrated to the actual challenge being faced: "He also said that if I need time for this decision — whether I continue or not — then I should give myself time. But he also said that this time shouldn't be spent leaning back and doing nothing, but that I should use it to figure out what I actually want. To figure out why I want or don't want to do it. What do I want instead."

Supportive communities also created a *felt sense of safety* — not merely the absence of harm but the active presence of care: "And such a family-like and special group formed that from that point on I felt that I wasn't only doing it because I was serving, but the people also gave something extra. It became a safe environment." And more simply: "Concretely, I can't even give examples, but the feeling." And: "This also helped a lot [being advised] but the best part was that I felt supported in this. He was a very defining person, willing to help in anything during that period."

Supportive communities also *accepted pauses and did not pressure* — recognizing that faith development is not linear and that stepping back can be part of moving forward: "it was right after the break I personally took, and from there it became very important to me. I realized that I can choose this, that it's not an obligation but something I can choose and something I can do on my own terms."

And crucially, they *welcomed people back* after a pause had been taken, without judgment or condition: "The congregation has now become an integral part of my life, so after this questioning time, it was very obvious how much I missed it and how much I didn't find my place, and afterward, I think God somehow worked it out so that not only the [previously

questioned service area] would be missing, but through this He also reshaped something in me. I had been doing all of this so much out of habit and with such a neutral feeling that it was like — of course I'm serving but it's like...there's no soul in me, I was doing all of this completely heartlessly, and then when I started again after this break — I wanted to be everywhere, I joined the youth group work, I stood beside the youth leader, I said I'll help with anything, whatever it is, I'll help, and wow... everything became different — not drastically but gradually it shaped me to see in everything something I can contribute to, and through this the youth group and congregation truly became so important. I love talking to the older ladies in the kitchen when I go home, the first thing I do is say hi to them — I think I also revalued all my personal relationships after this, which are all basically present in the congregation, for the most part."

Finally, supportive communities created *space for forgiveness and reconciliation* —by holding the context in which it could eventually happen: "For example, when I was little, the village school really didn't work for me — being someone's child, a lot of bullying. [...] The reason it was able to change was because I got out of the environment, and the other thing is that the people who bullied me a lot later became my friends. It was a very long road because from 5th grade they also ended up in the same school. We were in confirmation class together and classmates again from 9th grade. There was a temporary break while we had time to grow up, but we hadn't grown up enough for it not to continue. [...] Afterward, one of them reached out to me so we could talk things through, and she was my biggest bully, and she was the one who reached out and apologized for everything. I don't know. I think by then we were simply so emotionally exhausted and there was no other option but to talk it through — otherwise we'd lose our minds. Something changed there, I don't know. [...] She is still present in my life, more in the youth group context etc., but we've completely moved past the bullying. [...] I was also able to let those things go with her. It was so good and such a relief for me too — that we start with a clean slate, that whatever she or I did, this was the only option."

5.6.5. Pastors' perspective

As the interview data from pastors is also very rich, I will present the findings as addressing two research questions and directly answer the question: How do church leaders perceive and conceptualize support for young adults, and how do their perspectives relate to young

adults' narrated experiences? combined with How do young adults and church leaders understand and describe [...] community and mentoring? In these answers, sometimes pastors talk about themselves personally; other times, they present a general image of what they sense and notice in the specific context, thereby representing a broader perspective.

In summary, according to pastors, *young adults' support* is perceived as fundamentally relational, and not program based; support is very personalized, not one-size-fits-all; support means giving them real ownership and space; it very much includes knowing when to step back and refer; is mostly called mentoring, not pastoral care; support requires the church community, not just the pastor and is important to not treat young adults as a problem. In its deepest understanding, support is ultimately about belonging to something larger than the congregation and it requires being with them on the road.

The *shift from program to presence is one of the central insights*, as pastors, again and again, returned to it as the one thing they would change if they could. "If I were to change something, it would be to build up a better, relationship-based, and not program-centered presence. Only the church would need to think in a completely different structure because now we think in terms of service [Sunday, Holidays, weekdays, prayer week,...], Bible study, women's group, and so on."

Some pastors recognized that the real pastoral work frequently happens in unstructured moments — over coffee, on an outing, in the margins of something else. Support, in this understanding, is less about creating the right program and more about being available in the right way. Another described what genuine presence actually looks like in practice: "In whatever form we want to serve people (as pastor, youth leader, etc.), we have to live among them. You have to be present." This was presented as a way of being, saying that you cannot support young adults from a distance. "Often from a casual conversation more comes to light."

Many pastors agree that support means walking alongside rather than leading from above, and this theme came up in many parts of the interview, whether through how pastoral care is viewed, the pastor's attitude, or the perceived needs of young adults.

One pastor framed the entire pastoral relationship through The Road to Emmaus image: "We walk with them on the road, this is how I can put it. The example of the disciples on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection. They walk together and talk. Here it's like this too. We

invite them into this, that from our inner circle we give them someone — me or a pastor colleague or someone who is further along on the faith journey." Support in this sense means the pastor walking in the same direction and at the same pace as a companion.

Pastors also expressed that *support often is very personalized, not one-size-fits-all*. One of them noticed that people are at different stages and need different things and support must be tailored to their actual situation. One pastor described the goal as: "to help someone in their specific personal situation, in exactly what they are present in, in some form." "If they know more things but aren't living them out, then that's where we need to place the emphasis." Support here seems to always be about adding new information, but rather about helping someone integrate what they already carry. One pastor mentions stages of faith and Fowler in his comments, as "It's important to know what phase of faith they are at, they are not children, they are partners, partners in their own faith development too, in conversation and in ministry too.[...] we have to work with them differently. That's why this matters"

Support can also show up by means of giving them real ownership and space. For example, not being waited for is itself a form of not being supported. As one pastor mentioned, "It's two-sided. How much they want to be in it and how much they are being waited for. There are those who are not waited for, but really want to be there and are there. There are those who would go and also wouldn't, and it depends on how much they are being waited for, how much they are being confirmed in that they have a place there." *Waiting for here* — being expected, being wanted. "People have always needed to be at home somewhere, to be taken in, to be loved, accepted, to be an active member.", therefore support begins in whether a young adult feels expected, wanted and welcomed when they walk through the door. In some pastor's opinion, many congregations fail at this most basic level.

Giving them a ministry area and *letting them unfold* means creating with them, giving them space, authorization, and trust. In the translated words of a pastor, "The young person would do a lot of things differently and if it's possible to be flexible in this... If they receive their role in this, and their place, and they are encouraged and emboldened to serve and get involved, and they feel it is their own, then that enormous energy can unfold." One pastor described deliberately building a community where young adults carry real responsibility: "Close to my heart and to those colleagues with whom I work most closely as leaders, pastors, is that we give young people as much space as possible for unfolding, for getting

involved, so that they feel and know that this is their cause, and their ministry, and they receive assignment and authorization in this — at ministry and leadership level too — so that they take it over and feel responsibility for it too."

While support and being there for young adults is indispensable, the pastors also mention that is important to *know when to step back and refer* in this supportive mindset. An interviewee with diverse professional backgrounds, including theology, psychology, and mental health support, stated that the pastor cannot and should not attempt to be everything. As the pastor explained, "You always have to weigh, there is a kind of sensing too, that if there is a problem, how long should you sit in the boat with someone? Or are you even the most suitable person to sit with them in the boat?" Support, properly understood, includes recognizing the limits of what one person can offer and building the network to fill those gaps, as referring is considered to be an act of pastoral responsibility. "If there are suicidal thoughts in them, obviously I refer them towards a child or adult psychiatrist I know... For example, an alcohol problem, then I spoke with the director of the alcohol rescue program, signs of child autism at eighteen months, I spoke with a specialist, and the parents were delighted. So, a very good relational network also needs to be built, and I don't necessarily consider myself competent for every boat-sitting." One pastor framed this as a task in itself: "This is also a pastoral task, if I see that it reaches its limit for me, to still lead the person." In this sense, the support does not end when the pastor's competence ends — it continues in the form of a warm handoff to someone better placed.

Support is often called mentoring Although one countryside pastor have no request for support and no connection with young adults at all (except for those at 18-19 who are still in their last year of highschool), one city pastor involved in youth work mentions that "There is greater demand for mentoring than for pastoral care. As if it's starting to emerge, but well then let's not call it pastoral care... it's just that the culture for it hasn't developed yet. We keep it as mentoring." Pastors recognized that the word pastoral care carries connotations of sickness or weakness that young adults resist. Mentoring feels more like a partnership, is very personal, it follows the person's pace and need, therefore is flexible in duration and depth. Pastors who conceptualized support well consistently resisted the idea that they were fixing something broken. They were accompanying someone on a journey that was genuinely theirs. As the person involved in starting youth work, "Sometimes there is one topic, we discuss it, that's it. There are also those that last 1–2 years, depending on what the other

person wants to achieve. They have freedom in this because obviously it's about their life, and we can't tell them that you will have to come up to this point.", "They are not children, they are partners, partners in their own faith development too, in conversation and in ministry too."

Continuing with the topic of support, it is notable that *support requires the community as well*, not just the pastor, since the *community itself appears as the environment of support*. One pastor defined community "with the image of a living congregation," continuing with "the community is not perfect, but honest. It not only teaches but also listens. A community not only takes in but also retains. Communally. Theologically: the body of Christ. Psychologically: a space of secure attachment. From a mental hygiene perspective: a retaining medium." The community is itself the primary medium through which support happens. What one pastor cannot offer, the community can, if it is healthy. Being heard was also stated as the most basic form of support; the simplest and most irreplaceable form of support is undivided, embodied attention (simone weil)

In this community, *role models also appear to be a source of support*, especially for young adults who carry gaps from their family of origin. The community can offer what home did not or what home does not mean to offer. One pastor described how a pastor-as-father-figure shaped his entire faith journey: "Since my father was absent from my life [...] it meant a lot that I saw how the local pastor related to the children. It meant a great deal from the perspective of a father figure, which I understand looking back now." Pastors also recognized that peer-to-peer support within the community is not a lesser form of support — it may be the most sustainable form, because it doesn't depend on the pastor's availability.

Support was largely linked to the attitudes adopted by pastors and the community, as it can also mean not viewing them as a problem. *Young adults are an opportunity*. As one pastor mentioned, "Young adults should not be looked at as a problem but as an opportunity. For me, the question is not how we keep them, but how we walk with them on the road." Retention is something done to someone. Accompaniment is something done with someone. Support here is not holding on; it is more about equipping for wherever they go. One pastor expressed this with a parenting analogy: "My life philosophy is that I raise my children in such a way that if I walk out of here, a car hits me, and this was our last conversation, then I know that my child can stand on their own feet in this world and hold their ground

anywhere. While I'm alive, may I be with them on the road." Another pastor, who has served for more than 25 years, confidently notes that support has not failed when people leave. In his translated words: "I always say, that's also why I shouldn't be sad that mine [the ones I have the responsibility to pastor] leave from here, because then they will be good community members somewhere else." Three out of five pastors described this kingdom-level understanding of support — the goal is not that the young adult stays in this congregation but that they grow into a mature, rooted faith wherever they land.

In a very honest and vulnerable way, pastors also described *what often gets in the way of support*. They mentioned that pastors often project an image of having everything together, and that *the pastor's own inauthenticity can itself a barrier to support*. These pastors were all aware that if young adults cannot see a real human behind the role, they will not bring their real struggles. As one pastor expressed it: "Many pastors also give the impression that in their life everything, absolutely everything is fine, and then how could I, the imperfect one, approach the perfect one?" If the pastor's language is always aspirational and never honest about difficulty, they believe young adults read the gap and conclude that their real struggles have no place in this community. Another pastor made visible what he witnesses by saying, "What I see is that we pastors tend to talk more about what should be rather than what is, as if we don't want to acknowledge reality."

Often, the *community is closed and protective of itself*. In situations where support depends on openness—such as being willing to be seen, ask for help, or demonstrate need—communities with a cultural environment that discourages this openness make it difficult for even well-intentioned pastoral efforts to connect with those who refuse to open up. The most persistent barrier was the closed, self-protective culture of village and small-town congregations: "Everyone's self-defense reflex is working at maximum and we don't open up, we don't expose ourselves before others, we are afraid of this because we become the talk of the village." One pastor illustrated what this closedness costs with a question that answers itself: "Which woman who cannot afford to turn to a specialist would say — excuse me for the example, but I want something this vital — that she is frigid? At which women's Bible study would she bring it up? You might also say that this doesn't go along with church life. You're right about that, only you know, she is a woman living an incomplete life because of this, but she can't turn to a specialist and she doesn't know what to do, and I imagine that in very many places they turn to the pastor first." The community cannot hold what it is not safe to

say. Several pastors named the deepening of trust as the still-missing piece — even after decades in the same place: "The trust is present, only if the deepening of it were also there."

Also, many young adults, and even other members of the congregation, *do not know that pastoral care exists*, do not trust it, or do not believe it can help. This is not just an individual problem but also a cultural one that takes time and intentional work to shift. "It's just that the culture for it hasn't developed yet." While asking for help is seen as problematic, there is also a very *limited structural offer* for the 19–29 age group. "If we don't think of the youth group that stops at age 18-19, then this is the age group of the congregation with whom I have the least contact or come into contact with the least often." The structural gap is real. It is great that good intentions exist among all pastors interviewed. However, support often also requires actual occasions, actual spaces, actual invitations, and gatherings. Without these, even young adults who would engage have nowhere to go.

Pastors also named the consumer lens as one of the most serious cultural threats to genuine community, placing the *church community at odds with consumerism*. "This is also a big challenge in this society, that we look at everything through consumer glasses, that what does the church give me, what do I get from the congregation, whereas the congregation is precisely that community where we bring in what we have to steward, those talents that we received." This reframes the community entirely — from a service you receive to a shared story you participate in and contribute to. The consumer asks what the church offers. The community member asks what they bring. When this distinction collapses, so does genuine community. Besides what has already been mentioned about community, pastors defined community also as: "the group of people who gather in our case with the purpose of worshipping Jesus and of meeting each other," or more simply still, "there is something common that belongs to all of us, we search for it together and we are together." A third described it in terms of direction rather than structure: "for me it is 'together'. That not alone but together we try to serve/the ministry, together we try to solve the difficulties. With God included, together, this is the double/triple/ together." What runs through all of these definitions is the primacy of togetherness, as a shared orientation toward something beyond the group itself.

I want to finish this section by highlighting that, in this Christian setting, support fundamentally involves helping a young adult discover their place in an organic belonging — to Christ and through Christ with others — providing their life with a framework they cannot envision

living without. As one pastor mentioned, it is ultimately about belonging to something larger. In his translated words: "That something builds us into itself in such a way that we can no longer interpret our lives except through the fact that we belong to each other. That's why Jesus says "I am the vine; you are the branches..." What is common in us is not that the music is good, that the community place is cool and the yard is beautiful, and they organize good programs, not that the pastor preaches well, but that I need Jesus and I have no life without Him — well, this is what would form us into a community. So that I cannot live without you. This is what gives Christian communities their true cohesive force. This is truly the mortar."

When it comes to mentoring, one pastor often used the term over pastoral care, reflecting that the culture hasn't adopted it yet: "The culture for it hasn't developed yet. We keep it as mentoring." In this pastor's experience, the word matters because pastoral care suggests crisis, while mentoring implies partnership — The Road to Emmaus image, two people walking and talking together. Mentoring was seen as personalized, unhurried, and mutual: "They are not children, they are partners, partners in their own faith development too." It follows the person's pace, can last from one conversation to two years, and requires the mentor to resist giving ready answers, instead sitting with open questions. What pastors call mentoring is therefore more accurately a collection of informal conversations that go deeper than expected, reactive presence for those confident enough to seek the pastor out, and serendipitous encounters that nobody designed and nobody can replicate. One pastor named this honestly and without defensiveness: "Although perhaps this is precisely a slight weakness of our community — this concrete practical mentoring could still develop quite a bit."

5.7.Changes in the church

5.7.1. Young adults' perspectives

Before going into pastors' accounts, I will present what young adults believe the church should understand, if it would like to change something. And the most fundamental shift needed is relational. The first thing they would point to is simple human connection. Not programs, not structured activities, but a pastor who walks up and says "hey, how are you, what's going on with you?" — and means it. As one participant put it, if the pastor simply came over and showed genuine curiosity, "I would be much more open." Young adults are acutely aware of when they are being managed rather than known. The difference between

a pastor asking "*why weren't you at the service last week?*" and "*how was your week?*" is not lost on them — the first produces shame, the second produces connection. There is also a longing to be heard, not just taught: "I am much more curious about their own opinion than about what they have learned or rehearsed about something."

The second thing they would point to is a clear-eyed awareness that the world is changing, and the church needs to move with it. Having attended events run by other communities, this participant was struck every time by how others marvelled at what their own home community did — "we are in a very privileged position at home, because this is not the standard." Many congregations, they observed, are still holding tightly to a "conservative, rigid, grey ceremonialism" that, in the participant's opinion, no longer reaches people. The form of worship matters for this person: "a twelve or thirteen year old sits one way in the pew when we sing Psalm 90 — but if we sing a livelier song with the same message, they engage with the whole thing differently." And the instinct to gatekeep — the suspicion toward those who attend without paying their church tax to that particular congregation — pushes away exactly those on the edges who most need to feel welcomed. What is needed, in this case, is "the kind of openness that draws people in and keeps them there."

Further, in order to answer the question of *how insights from this study can inform contextually appropriate ways of strengthening support for young adults within congregational life*, it was important to understand what needs to be known to organise around, given the limitations of my knowledge, time, space and scope. In addition to the practical theology lens I identified as needed for the next steps after this research, I defined *contextually appropriate* by grouping pastoral data into: pastor's general attitude, their understanding of the context young adults are growing up in, their challenges in reaching young adults, structural gaps raised, their responsibilities, and attitude towards forms and content.

5.7.2. Understanding of young adults

To understand why reaching young adults is so difficult, it helps to understand the world they are navigating. When asked about their views on young adults' challenges, almost all pastors acknowledged societal factors that, as one put it, "strongly influence how a young adult experiences life." What they named was: war situations, rising prices, mobility, increasing life expectancy, the effects of the digital world, the sheer volume of information

young people are exposed to daily, and an overwhelming abundance of opportunity and stimulation. "Everything has sped up so much," one pastor said. "It's hard to be bored nowadays, it's hard to experience moments where things aren't constantly buzzing along." Another added simply: "The world has come closer" — and illustrated what that means: "Would you have heard, 50 years ago, that a tribe in Uganda had been massacred?" The consequence of this acceleration is not only overstimulation but exhaustion — “fatigued attention and low motivation” from the sheer volume of data and input that young adults absorb daily, often without realising what it is costing them.

This has changed rapidly. One of the most notable observations came from a pastor around the age of 35, who noted the shift even within his own generation: "Even just within my own generation, it was less common to have difficulty committing. Not even thinking about earlier generations." The lack of commitment that pastors observe in young adults is not, in this reading, a character flaw or a spiritual failure. It is, at least in part, the effect of a world that has fundamentally changed the conditions under which commitment is formed and sustained. As one pastor expressed after reflecting on young adults' challenges: "I believe this is the effect of this world we live in — and because of this they find it somewhat difficult to find their place."

Perhaps the most vivid example of this was illustrated through a restaurant analogy shared by a pastor with a diverse professional background.: "50 years ago you walked into a restaurant and ordered lunch — they brought a first and second course, you ate it. 20 years ago they said, well, there are 3 kinds of soup and 3 kinds of main course, what would you like? And you felt good that there was something to choose from. Today, you walk into a restaurant and, figuratively speaking, there are 50 kinds of soup and 50 kinds of main course. You start to feel anxious about which one to choose, and then you choose. You sit down to eat, and as you glance to the side while spooning your soup, you look at the next table and think... Ah, that looks better. Maybe I should have chosen that." The anxiety comes from the abundance of options — and from the permanent suspicion that the better option was always just out of reach. As he named it plainly: "In the freedom of choice lies the pain of giving things up." The abundance of choices available to young adults — in relationships, vocation, faith, lifestyle — produces not freedom but what another pastor called "too many options but few handholds": a state of psychological paralysis. And this is compounded by an impatience with slow processes: "energy fades, the patience fades, they are not persistent, they want it

immediately." The capacity to sustain a commitment over time — to stay in the boat, to keep showing up, to let a relationship or a faith deepen slowly — is precisely what the surrounding culture makes hardest.

Added to this is a dimension specific to the Hungarian Reformed context in Romania. Several pastors pointed to the generational inheritance of regime changes as a factor shaping how young people experience identity and belonging. As one pastor described it: "This carries through into youth work, into uncertainty, lack of self-confidence, and searching for one's place. They had no opportunities — today there are too many." They are also, often without knowing it, carrying the unresolved searching of the generations before them, for whom the ground kept shifting beneath their feet. Alongside this historical disorientation sits a cultural one: the pressure of what one pastor called the lie of "realize yourself" — which produces its own set of identity crises and ingrained patterns that are difficult to name and even harder to escape. Amid social uncertainty and cultural pluralism, Christianity is often seen, in certain circles, as an "outdated" view that once offered a framework for identity, something suited to an earlier, less enlightened time, according to one pastor.

An older pastor, around the age of 50, recognized that: "As an older person, I can see that their way of thinking can be completely different from what our generation's was — and that's not necessarily a bad thing, because they grew up in an entirely different context." The difference is context. And the examples, as one pastor noted, could continue indefinitely — "you can bring a million examples." One pastor went further, naming all of this as something with a deeper common source — chaos that occupies people, wears them out, questions everything, and causes confusion. "Although chaos takes many forms," he said, "it springs from the same source." Whether or not one shares that theological reading, the observation it points to is hard to dispute: the various pressures young adults face — overstimulation, identity confusion, commitment anxiety, historical disorientation, cultural pluralism — are reinforcing one another, and together they constitute a context that is genuinely more demanding than anything the current generation of pastors grew up in.

This section can perhaps close with the words that one pastor chose to end his own reflection on the subject: "It's not easy being young today, with all the stimulation and temptation. It wasn't easy for us to be young adults either, but it was a fraction of the stimulation and influence they have to experience today."

When being asked about how they see young adults, their challenges and needs, pastors gave the following portrait. They see young adults as being in transition, searching, capable outside but fragile inside, they are spiritually open, often institutionally wary, in an identity flux, intellectually deep, relationally wounded, and longing to belong.

WHO THEY ARE

In between

No longer children, not yet arrived adults. Inhabiting an extended, undefined transitional space — making the most foundational decisions of their lives all at once: faith, vocation, relationship, belonging.

THE CONTRAST

Capable outside, wounded inside

They appear receptive and able to manage the world well. Beneath that lies fragility — family burdens, relational disappointments, and unprocessed pain that rarely finds a safe space.

"From the outside they seem very capable... yet there is a lot of woundedness in them too."

THEIR DEPTH

They don't stay on the surface

Leaving home opens them up in ways adolescence does not. They become capable of deeper intellectual, spiritual, and emotional engagement — willing to sit with serious questions about the world and their place in it.

"You can have more serious and deeper conversations with them. They don't stay on the surface."

THEIR INNER WORLD

Paralyzed by too many options

The abundance of choices produces not freedom but paralysis. Every yes requires a no — and that cost is felt deeply, even when it never becomes fully conscious. Patience fades fast; they want things immediately.

"In the freedom of choice lies the pain of giving things up."

THEIR FAITH

Searching, not indifferent

Honest, questioning, ambivalent. Open to God and transcendence — but significantly distrustful of the church as institution. Yoga and meditation embraced, organized religion criticized. Their doubts are signs of engagement, not departure.

"Their faith is often seeking, questioning and ambivalent — but precisely because of this, honest."

THEIR QUESTIONS

Theologically serious

Conversations about predestination over lunch, about suffering, about doubt — these are not performances of skepticism but genuine searches for truth. They deserve honest engagement, not easy reassurance.

"They have questions, very good ones."

WHAT THEY CARRY SILENTLY

A quiet self-esteem deficit

Behind the drive to perform is often a hidden compulsion to prove themselves — and beneath that, a history of rejection they carry without naming it. Needs daily attention, like refueling.

"You can't live on memories."

THEIR SELF-PROTECTION

Hard to open up about home

They fiercely protect their own story — especially their family background. Talking about wounds feels unsafe. Yet these are often the very things weighing most heavily on their lives.

"They find it hard to talk about their wounds, to speak honestly about what is going on at home."

MIXED-GENERATION SPACES

Outsiders in the room

Being present in communities where they feel like second-class members is a real challenge. The step of entering a mixed-age space — especially church — is bigger than it looks from the outside.

"I know that for them it is a big step to be present in a mixed context in terms of age group and thinking."

HOW THEY DISENGAGE

A quiet fading

Disengagement is rarely dramatic. Once a month, once every two months, then silence. Not a decision — a drift. And once gone, shame and stigma make returning feel far heavier than it needs to be.

"The church stigmatizes those who stepped out — and that's why return is very difficult."

📁 They are a gift to the community

Young adults bring a freshness and energy that older generations cannot replicate. When they are absent, the community loses something specific and irreplaceable — its capacity for renewal, for being aired out. Their presence is not a bonus; it is central to the vitality and depth of the whole.

"If they are not in the church, the community loses that natural quality of renewal, of being able to air out."

♥ What they long for

- A place to belong
- To be known without judgment
- Rest from the searching
- Real answers to real questions
- A path back after drifting
- To be lifted up, not managed
- Genuine depth in relationships
- Healthy self-worth
- To be seen as the future, not a problem

WHAT THEY BELIEVE WORKS — AND WHAT DOESN'T WORK WITH THEM

✓ What works

- ✓ Invitation, not command
- ✓ Genuine welcome and belonging
- ✓ Space to ask real questions
- ✓ Ownership and real responsibility
- ✓ Authentic, lived example from leaders
- ✓ A small, reliable relational anchor
- ✓ Faith offered, never imposed

✗ What doesn't work

- ✗ Being talked down to
- ✗ Their voice being dismissed
- ✗ Rigid roles and assigned spaces
- ✗ Pressure or forced participation
- ✗ Stigma after drifting away
- ✗ Faith being pushed upon them
- ✗ Feeling like an outsider in mixed-age spaces

This is the summary of what pastors' mentioned when being asked about young adults, as described in the interview guideline.

5.7.3. Challenges in reaching young adults

The challenges pastors mentioned in reaching young adults are could be summarized by what I presented in the next Image (Fig. 9)



Fig. 9. Pastor's challenges in reaching young adults, based on interview data

5.7.4. Pastors' responsibilities

And before any ideation could start, based on the interviews, the following information has been also gathered and interpreted as an overview of the responsibilities pastors seem to have, as shown in the next image (Fig 10).



Fig. 10. Pastors' responsibilities, based on interview data

5.7.5. General attitude of pastors

And what contributes even more is probably the general attitude of pastors, which comes through across all interviews, is one of *humility, genuine relational investment, and a theological steadiness* that holds without pretending everything is fine. However, at the base, faith is present as their total orientation, and the priorities follow from this. The youngest interviewed pastor described his own identity in this layered way: "I am a disciple, that's the first. I am a follower of Jesus, and from this, everything in every other area and mode is influenced by the fact that I am a disciple. Priorities are taken from Scripture too, first of all, God's plan, following Jesus, family, and ministry. It is important to me that our theological vision is clear and unambiguous, Bible-centered. Important are The Five Solas that the Reformation brought. This is what I start from when I say that, beyond being a theologian, I am a pastor, and beyond being a pastor, I am a youth leader. These are the modes in which I function and which I vary, and of course, this has nuances in every responsibility." This commitment and attitude appeared in many other comments, and some of them are made visible throughout the chapter.

More experienced pastors returned again and again to the recognition that they cannot and should not try to be everything: "Pastoral counselor, mentor, teacher, manager, bookkeeper, youth worker, musician, firefighter, soldier, shepherd, you get it? Everything. Well, how can you? And you perish in this, or because of this, it doesn't work." This was a hard-won clarity about limits — and about the danger of the pastor who cannot see them: "The biggest problem is when you suffer from such blindness that you think you can while you can't, and you don't bring people in, you don't trust people, you don't ask for help, and then everyone perishes in it."

What sustained them through difficulty was not professional competence but a sense of calling they returned to repeatedly, no matter how young. A less than 30-year-old pastor said: "For a while, the momentum and the desire and everything carried me forward... This goes on for a while, but then the fuel runs out. But if I can reach back to a calling, or to something I received from God, then I can work with that." Alongside this, a genuine interest in people ran through nearly every conversation. "What interests me is the person." One reflected that "from a chance conversation more comes to light" than from any formal setting, and several described their role as fundamentally relational.

Pastors were honest about their own struggles in ways that felt very authentic. One pastor, around the age of 30, expressed: "I think there might be a problem with my self-assessment. Can I be x years old and not accept myself? I often measure myself against others. It can get ugly, and you can become bitter that you are not as good as others, at the ministry level." One pastor with around 25 years of experience described deliberately building structures that would not collapse without him — "I consciously strived for this too, that these things don't depend on me, that if I'm not here, if I step back, if I leave from here, if I die, anything can happen, then the congregation doesn't collapse" — and making peace with the slow, unmeasurable nature of their work: "If we have done it, tried, and acted with our best intention, knowledge, and will, then from that point we let things go. This is the biggest challenge."

When asked about who is helping pastors overcome all challenges faced in their work, although the Reformed Church started offering mental health support for pastors recently, one pastor was strikingly frank about the cost of ministry carried without support: "This is currently bleeding from quite a few wounds in the church, there is a lot of pastoral burnout... [...] There have unfortunately already been suicides, active or passive."

Underlying all of this was a commitment to authenticity as the core of ministry, as a condition for genuine pastoral work — and as the thing most at risk in a culture where everything is being relativized. "I think that one of the greatest challenges for every pastor is how one can be authentic in a world where everything is being relativized. Every pastor has to answer this honestly. So how do I accompany young people on their journey in a way that doesn't give them ready-made answers? I accompany them. Until every pastor poses this question and doesn't shed the cloak of all-knowingness, this won't work." The stakes of this authenticity are concrete and pastoral: "So, if the pastor lives authentically in the congregation, owning his sadnesses, his difficulties, his struggles, I think then faith may not be a burden for them — for young people — but will be life." This also means accepting that authenticity includes being disappointing: "There are certainly examples when someone is disappointed in their pastor. And let them be disappointed, because it's not the pastor you should believe in. This doesn't mean that the pastor shouldn't try to live as authentic a life as possible, but you can't live such an authentic life that you will never be disappointed in it. So, if you get to know me more deeply, you will certainly reach disappointment too. And if I get to know you better, I will certainly reach it too. I will see your sins, your wretchedness. We are both sinners. We truly need to clarify within ourselves already that we are not the ones who save

people, it is not our task to convert them. Jesus said make disciples of all nations, but your task in this is to teach them. The new life will then be born, right? " Accepting this critical attitude with openness also shows up in another comment "So there is a kind of spiritual yes, but not towards the church [...] towards the institution there is great criticism. But I think this is an easy attitude because the institution, as long as it exists and as long as it will exist, can always be criticized, whereas God — God is the one I wouldn't say you could, because He is perfect, that's how I think. So, there can be distrust towards the institution but not towards God". Therefore, pastors have their human limitations and imperfections as well.

5.7.6. Service Design in a Christian church

The distinction I explained in the definition of terms was endorsed by interviewees as well. The Hungarian word *szolgáltatás* — service rendered for payment — and *szolgálat* — ministry — are not simply two words for the same activity. They describe two fundamentally different orientations toward the person in front of you. One requires nothing beyond competent delivery. The other requires a shared story.

The pastor who named this distinction was precise about what is at stake: "I can arrange insurance in such a way that just do it and goodbye." It is seen as *szolgáltatás* does not always ask for a relationship because there is often there is no relationship needed— only a transaction with a beginning and an end. *Szolgálat* was seen different in kind, not just degree. "Our worship service is for God, I cannot pay for it." What is offered in ministry is offered because it belongs to something larger than exchange — a relationship with God and with others that cannot be reduced to what is owed.

What makes this more than a linguistic observation is the acknowledged vulnerability of even the most intimate pastoral moments to transactional logic. Baptism, wedding, funeral — precisely the occasions where the whole person stands before God and community — can quietly degrade into *szolgáltatás*, into moments where someone pays and someone delivers and both parties leave having fulfilled their obligations. The pastor did not minimize this danger. But he also refused to let it be the last word: "This shouldn't make us abandon the fact that even so this is a ministry." The transaction may be what the surface looks like. The ministry underneath is not cancelled by it.

That is also a broader generational orientation that older pastors and their colleagues, and those who have been able to follow multiple generations describe with some consistency: a tendency among young adults to evaluate belonging through a lens of personal relevance. “What is worth it for me, what is good for me, what serves my advancement” – is considered to be a logic of a generation formed in a culture of curated choice, where every commitment is weighed against alternatives and where institutions must justify themselves in terms of individual return. The church, asking for commitment, presence and contribution without being able to promise measurable personal benefit, sits awkwardly within that framework. The young adult who faced a lot of bullying and lack of support expresses this at the beginning of his narration: “honestly, I didn’t find there what I truly needed. Maybe it sounds selfish to want to take something out of it, but I think faith and religion are meaningful when they help me grow. And if I don’t find myself in something, if it doesn’t build me up, then I might end up letting it go instead of engaging with it, as with something that nurtures me.”

This distinction opens onto something larger about what community is and what it cannot be. "In a service for payment there doesn't have to be connection, there might be but it doesn't have to be. But in the congregation I cannot be like that." Therefore, it seems like congregation is the space where connection is not optional. One can consume without connecting, but one cannot genuinely belong without it. The transactional mode therefore contradicts the essence of community.

However, taking into consideration what the literature review already presented, *this appears to be a service design study*. First, because I believe that SDSI developed in me a certain mindset and a set of tools that I would not have arrived at through a more conventional research path, although it was very challenging to place it into this thesis structure. The program activated something — the ability to look beyond typical research techniques and use design as a way of knowing. That is what happened here, and that is why I consider this a service design study. Already from the beginning. The way I arrived to the research.

The most obvious connection is the journey map. Faith journeys can be represented that way — visually, temporally, with highs and lows, with moments of transition and turning points. But the SD connection goes deeper than a method. Service design takes the human and the context seriously, and that orientation was essential in this research. The context is very

sensitive. The subject matter — religion, spirituality, faith, belonging, hurt, community — required sensitivity. A purely analytical framework would have missed too much.

It is also SD because many things that emerged from the interviews could be transferred into tools we use in service design. If I had graphical abilities, I would love to create storyboards out of these journeys, but I do not. Collaboration is needed between designers. Or, for example: personas. Types of members, types of pastors— these are not boxes to put people in, but they are a more accessible, human way to understand a community like the Reformed Church. The organizational structure representation also did something important: it made visible a gap that is hard to name in words alone. That is also what design often does. It externalises what is experienced but not yet seen.

And while the church is not a service in its most known understanding — and I want to be careful to hold that distinction — SD tools can still serve the church in the way they serve any human-centered context: by helping a community get to know the people it exists for, by creating conditions for personal relationships, by reducing all the cultural barriers that resisted for generations (especially the vulnerability needed in such communities for healing to happen, for walls and unnecessary stigma to disappear), by helping people understand the importance of a personal relationship with God, and by making it possible to organize around actual needs rather than assumed ones. So that we actually become “branches of the vine”, rather than a structure that people pass through without connecting to anything living. The local church often feels disconnected from the big one in terms of qualitative thin.

I also believe that co-creation and prototyping for local or scalable solutions belong in practical theology — not only in design. There are things I am not aware of, things that require theological depth I do not fully have, and that is precisely why collaboration matters. At this moment, after entering into such deep waters and having an understanding with so many details, my mind is already in the ideation phase. I see many opportunities, in many variations, around community. At the same time, I am aware of the risk. In a consumer-shaped world, it is tempting — even for churches — to adapt not just the forms but the content, just to make people fit in. I consider the theological ground very important to stand on, crucial even. But understanding this ground also takes time for many of us. Can we understand while in it? If not being grounded theologically, what would make the religious/faith community different than any other community? What are young adults, or people in general, looking

for? And is what they are looking for something the church was always designed to offer, just that it might have happened in a language or form they could not yet recognise? Are we patient in walking alongside others in this search?

Hitelesség (either the act of being *authentic* or *trustworthy* - which encompasses genuineness, vulnerability, trustworthiness, and the alignment between one's words, actions, and inner convictions— someone who does not perform a role but shows up as they truly are; not self-proclaimed but rather a characteristic one can strive for) was brought up many times throughout the interviews. That tension — between staying true to content and remaining open in form — is one that service design cannot resolve on its own. But it can make the tension visible. And sometimes, making something visible is the first step toward holding it well.

This research therefore set out to explore whether service design mindset and tools could be meaningfully adapted for a church context, and what that process might reveal about the spiritual lives of young adults in the Reformed Church. What emerged was more than a methodological experiment. Through the process of conducting faith journey interviews, developing a first journey mapping template, and reflecting on what was heard, this research produced a set of contributions that span methodology, concept, and practice. They are not all equally finished — some are starting points rather than conclusions — but together they point toward a way of knowing and accompanying communities that feels both necessary and underexplored. The following outlines what this research contributes, and where it believes future work should continue.

5.7.7. What can change (forms vs content)

In church leaders' opinion, the distinction between form and content was one of the most consistent themes across the interviews. Pastors held it as a foundational conviction: "the form can change but the content cannot. The essence must not change." One pastor illustrated the form/content distinction through a communion dispute in his congregation. When some members requested to drink from a chalice rather than the small cups introduced during Covid, he had two options: win the theological argument — which he could easily have done, noting that "even in Jesus's time they didn't drink from one chalice, but everyone from their own" and that "it is not the external form that determines whether it is now for the

salvation of your soul or not" — or listen to what the attachment was actually about. He chose the latter, because "the person comes in, let's say psychology" — recognizing that behind the request was something the person could not even consciously articulate: a connection to ancestors, to memory, to continuity across generations. The solution was practical and generous: both a chalice and small cups, side by side. "I think this is how a community should work, that they don't bang the table saying it only works this way or that way, but be flexible in this, but only as flexible as — the form can change but the content cannot." The same logic applied to congregations that serve grape juice for members with alcoholism or gluten-free bread for those who need it. The question is always the same: "What is more important?" The church, one pastor said, "would need to think in a completely different structure" — moving from program-centered to relationship-centered presence. When young adults are given flexibility in form and real ownership, "that enormous energy can unfold." What must never change is what actually holds community together — not the quality of the music or the beauty of the building but the shared need for Christ: "I need Jesus and I have no life without Him — well this is what would form us into a community. This is what gives Christian communities their true cohesive force. This is the mortar truly."

5.8. Conclusions

The pastoral attitude towards young adults and relationship appears to be genuine towards mentoring, in case of participants I interviewed. What is largely missing is maybe the structure that would allow it to take root. This gap — between mentoring as a sincerely held value and mentoring as a sustained, institutional practice — is one of the more telling tensions that emerges from the data.

Accountability within the church still tends to measure activity in numbers. One pastor described a frustration with the annual report: "The numbers are what matter more, not that it would be a real report about the congregation, about how the pastor lived that year, how they experienced it according to certain criteria, what difficulties and joys there were... instead, we are still at the point of how many took communion, statistics, numbers. It bothered me that these are what you have to focus on." What this kind of reporting leaves out — the quality of relationships, the weight of what is carried, the slow invisible work of accompaniment — is precisely what defines pastoral care in practice. Barna Group's research points in a similar direction, urging leaders to move away from numerical metrics and toward

attention to the genuine spiritual well-being of those they serve. This is not an easy task to do, if just thinking about the complexity behind what spiritual health has been described to encompass in the understanding of terms.

The structural gap becomes visible in how contact with young adults actually happens: “membership card” distribution, family visits, youth group announcements, the occasional pastoral initiative. These share a common fragility — they depend on pastoral intuition and availability rather than on any consistent framework. "From here either a process starts, or it doesn't," one pastor remarked, and there is honesty behind this observation. Much is left to chance.

This is compounded by a particular moment of institutional abandonment. The most intensive pastoral investment tends to stop at age 18 to 20, which is precisely when young adults most need individual accompaniment. The youth group ends (especially at the countryside), and what follows is rarely an absence, a difficulty for young adults to find their place somewhere else. Not even talking about the situation if they were never part of a healthy youth group before. There is no dedicated relational space for this age group within congregational life, and so mentoring is asked to function without the soil it requires.

Underlying all of this is a deeper organizational habit that was raised by not only one pastor, when being asked about what they would change if they could. The church think primarily in programmatic terms — services, Bible studies, women's groups, youth evenings — rather than in relational ones. "The church would need to think in a completely different structure," one pastor observed, naming the shift clearly. Individual pastors may personally embrace a relational way of being present, may reach naturally for the language of walking alongside, may genuinely prefer a coffee conversation to a structured event. Yet the system around them keeps organizing itself around occasions and attendance. As long as the institutional frame defaults to program delivery, mentoring culture will remain aspirational.

What persists through all of this, though, is something that institutions cannot manufacture: the human longing for belonging. "People have always needed to be at home somewhere, to be taken in, to be loved, accepted, to be an active member." Even those who drift away carry this. The structural work matters therefore, then, not as an end in itself, but because it is the means by which that longing might actually be met.

6. CONTRIBUTIONS

A less obvious aspect of this research is its shift from quantitative to qualitative data within a church context, a practice that Barn Group, a prominent Christian organization, strongly endorses. They advocate for a transition to a more truly relational approach. This change is particularly relevant in the Reformed Church context, supported by both young adults and pastors with different levels of experience.

As Barna suggests, attendance and giving are not wrong measures, but they are incomplete. A healthier scorecard would include participation in discipleship, stories of life change and spiritual resilience, and engagement in prayer, service, and community — not just numbers. It would ask about spiritual practices, relational health, and sense of belonging. The approach developed in this research brought up aspects related to these themes, and not only. It is slower, maybe messier, and more challenging to replicate than an attendance register, but it is closer to the truth of what is actually happening in a community. And as Barna puts it, “listening first helps ensure you’re measuring what your people truly need—not just what is easiest to track.” (Jensen, 2025)

Methodological Contributions

- To my knowledge, it is the first attempt to adapt service design tools — specifically the thought around journey mapping — for researching faith journeys in a Reformed Church context, maybe in a religious context as well;
- It demonstrates that qualitative, narrative-based research is not only possible in a church setting but necessary, and offers a starting approach for further research;
- It shows that SD tools can work in settings that many people considered as being outdated or closed, and can serve as awareness tools in communities that have historically relied solely on quantitative measures.

Conceptual Contributions

- It introduces and develops the distinction between using SD tools for awareness versus using them for decision-making in a church context — and argues clearly why that distinction matters;

- It connects Simone Weil's concept of attention to the practice of pastoral listening and qualitative interviewing — which is not a common connection and is genuinely original;
- It brings Barna's five shifts into conversation with the Reformed Church context, specifically, giving those ideas local and theological grounding;
- It presents a deep level of understanding for human flourishing studies, directly between religious communities and meaning-making, which is also bringing up other ideas into discussion, especially towards close relationships;
- It offers a working definition of the relationship between faith, religion, and spirituality, concluding in spiritual health, via faith journeys, which brings a different nuance that is grounded in lived experience rather than only theory.

Practical Contributions

- It produces a first journey mapping template for faith narratives — imperfect, but real and testable
- It identifies a gap in the org structure of the Reformed Church — between local and institutional, between pastoral leadership and young adults — and makes it visible
- It opens the conversation about SD within church contexts and proposes collaboration for supporting the spiritual health of young adults, and not only;
- It offers context and nuance for spiritual care workers, nurses, psychiatrists, counselors, multicultural educators on the importance of the topics discussed.

Based on my experience in this research, I would recommend using service design tools in a church context — but with a clear understanding of what they are and are not for. They are *for awareness*. For getting to know who you are serving, what people are carrying, where they are in their faith journey, and what the community actually looks like from the inside. They are for communication, for systemic reflection, and for creating the conditions in which personal relationships can grow. What I would not recommend is using these tools as a basis for making changes to message or content. *A community should be open to changes in form, but not in content* — and that distinction needs to be held carefully, especially when research starts producing results that feel urgent or actual. The temptation to act on findings too quickly, or too literally, is real. These tools are for raising awareness, not for prescribing direction.

Anyone working with young adults *in multicultural settings—such as international study programs*—should be aware of the variety of spiritualities that might be present in a room. (Providing students with spiritual support is crucial, as highlighted in student affairs literature.) I have experienced moments during my studies where something said or done by professors or classmates, although I know it was not meant to be disrespectful, it felt that way. I also recognize that I have made similar mistakes when communicating with people of different spiritual backgrounds. The good news is that we can always learn and grow, including awareness. Because the gap between intention and impact highlights the importance of awareness, as grace allows space for adjustments. If discussing faith-related topics is becoming taboo, and every discussion involving different faith systems triggers an immediate reaction of “it is not respectful to talk about different perspectives, knowing we are coming from different cultures,” one may never feel truly part of a community, as their basic values are not welcomed for sharing, practising, or even talking about.

Facilitated workshops at the beginning of a program — similar to what we had during introduction week in SDSI — could create early sensitivity without making anyone feel singled out or exposed. Not necessarily using this tool as it stands now, since it still needs further development, but something along those lines. Something that initiates the discussion before it turns into an issue, an unconscious barrier built gradually.

The interviews and journeys collected in this research point toward the possibility of developing *personas* —of members, of pastors—or *faith trajectories* that would make it easier for church leadership to understand who is in the room and who is not. The *organizational structure representation* that emerged from this research also made something visible that is sometimes hard to notice only by discussing it: there is a gap. Between the local church and the larger institution. Between pastoral leadership and young adults. Between the people who show up every week and the ones who stopped coming, and have not been asked why.

SD tools will not close those gaps on their own. But they can make them visible, and that is where change usually has to start —with being interested, wanting to see more clearly. And SD tools, for sure, could also help facilitate the next steps, when co-creating and prototyping alongside the field of practical theology.

Finally, I see this tool as a *potential foundation for mentorship within the church*. It's not meant as a formal assessment but as a starting point — a way to initiate genuine

conversations, maybe even replacing those often-feeling “mandatory” family visits. A mentor who has guided someone through their faith journey, even in part, knows something about that person that can’t be assumed or guessed. This makes the relationship more personal. They have a foundation to build on in reality, adding intentionality to the challenge of balancing their responsibility, as pastors of the souls they have been entrusted with, with what must be entrusted to God’s will and must be left to Him alone. In this process, the person who is listened to carefully also learns they are truly worth listening to. And that’s no small thing.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

This thesis, along with the contextual depth it has built, is understood as a *foundation for next steps rather than a finished answer*. The hope is that it becomes a starting point for a tool that helps understand spiritual health in a more relational and intuitive way — one that serves the mentoring of young adults in their faith journeys.

The most immediate need is straightforward: *more interviews and more faith journeys need to be analyzed* before this can become a comprehensive and replicable tool. What exists now is a first template, and it did not work equally well across all cases. A larger and more diverse body of narratives would allow patterns to emerge more clearly, questions to be refined, and a journey mapping framework to be developed that is both flexible enough to honour individual experience and structured enough to be taught and used by others without the researcher present, reducing the possible results on unchecked emotional heaviness of participants.

Future research could build on this work by bringing young adults and church leaders into conversation with each other, moving beyond description toward more interpretive and strategic engagement. *Co-creation workshops in local church contexts* — particularly in communities where young adults are largely absent — could be a meaningful next step. Beginning in phases, building one-to-one openness gradually, and establishing trust before going deeper could create genuine cohesion and give people a real reason to be in the same room. The goal would be to hear directly what young adults in that community are looking for — not assumed, but named by them. This is also where the approach shows particular promise for breaking through cultural walls. Via design, that kind of opening can take many forms — through ideation, prototyping, and testing — and the contextual foundation this thesis provides makes that work more grounded and more honest than starting from scratch.

Co-creation and prototyping for scalable solutions should involve practical theology, not just design. *I believe design and practical theology as the right home for this work*. Without understanding the liturgical context, some things would not be recommended to produce. Without knowing a person's faith stance, there is a real risk that interventions could be shaped solely by personal preference rather than theological grounding. Future research should explore how collaboration between design and practical theology unfolds in practice — who

should be involved, and how findings like these can be incorporated into theological reflection without being reduced to simple recommendations.

A related question this research raises but does not answer is the role of the pastor's own posture and theological grounding in shaping the health of a community. Future research would benefit from exploring how to assess not only the needs of a congregation, but the orientation of its leadership. One pastor expressed something that stayed with me: that ultimately, a community is led by the Holy Spirit. That conviction points toward something future research and practical theology should take seriously — how to cultivate the kind of *spiritual awareness* and discernment that belongs not only to pastoral leadership, but to the whole community.

One pastor described this as an opportunity to refill the word religiosity with positive meaning, as it connects to faith and spirituality, and ultimately health. For this, literacy around the terms is needed. Researchers (Long et al., 2024) also call for greater investment in spiritual and religious literacy within public health training, stronger trust-building between public health and faith communities. That reframing deserves its own research attention — not only as a linguistic question. Public workshops and open community events around these themes could be a starting point for creating that kind of conversation, particularly in contexts where the gap between institutional religion and personal spirituality is very real.

Future research should also *attend to where people are spiritually outside of a church context* — not to evaluate or measure, but to understand. How do those who consider themselves spiritual but not religious think about their meaning-making? Belief does not disappear simply because institutional structures do. Understanding where people locate meaning, and what it comes from, would help the church know how to meet people where they actually are and help them as much as they are let to, in their journeys.

Any future development of this tool will need to think carefully about boundaries, as conditions for it. Future research should address directly what training is needed, what ethical frameworks apply, and how participants are protected and cared for throughout the process.

In conclusion, service design is understood here not as an external methodology imported into a faith context, but as something that fits — genuinely and organically — the community dimensions and relational dynamics of such communities. Its emphasis on listening, on lived

experience, on co-creation and iteration, resonates with what healthy communities are already trying to do. The work ahead is to develop that fit with the theological seriousness and practical humility it deserves.

8. DISCUSSIONS

This research set out to explore how Hungarian young adults within the Reformed Church in Romania narrate their faith journeys, how religious community shapes their meaning-making process, and how a service design mindset might help faith communities become more intentionally responsive to the young adults in their midst. What emerged was richer and more complex than a set of answers.

Parks (2011) observes that in a cultural climate where formal definitions of what matters have become increasingly rigid, there emerges a desire for more expansive and relational ways of understanding shared human life. It is in this context, she argues, that the language of faith and faithfulness recovers its resonance as an expression of trust, loyalty, and relationship (p. 23). The narratives gathered in this study reflect exactly that longing. Participants were not simply reporting religious activity or absence — they were reaching for language to describe something that mattered deeply and had not always been met.

What was equally noticeable, however, was what emerged from the pastoral side of these conversations. The pastors who participated brought with them a genuine openness and a deep heart for the young adults in their communities. Care, although often complicated by structural inefficiencies. While being very aware of and knowledgeable about the context in which young adults operate, they also showed an attitude of openness and curiosity, which was evident in the resources they mentioned and the attitude they shared. This attentiveness and willingness to genuinely consider young adults' experiences, while emphasizing shared identity and the importance of trustworthiness and authenticity, is a key finding. It makes future research and co-creation not just feasible but truly welcoming.

Narrative serves both transactional and developmental purposes; sharing stories with others fosters the growth of insights and social understanding. It is fundamentally communicative and vital for spreading information (Mello, 2002). This was evident throughout the research process itself — the act of narrating a faith journey was not merely data collection but something that held meaning for participants, and that dynamic is worth taking seriously in how this work is interpreted and carried forward.

There is also something present in the data that can be felt but not yet named with full precision. Across very different backgrounds and experiences — loss, grief, bullying, being

forced into religious practice, not having space to question — something is still moving in people. That movement resisted easy categorization. It points toward dimensions of spiritual experience that existing frameworks only partially account for, and that deserve more careful attention.

It is important to name a key methodological boundary of this study. Service design approaches here did not focus on co-creation. They were used primarily as tools to gather, organize, and interpret people's experiences — not to build solutions together. As a result, the research remained largely descriptive, mapping out perspectives rather than bringing them together through shared practice. This reflects the appropriate scope of a first study in an underexplored space; what has been produced is a foundation, not a finished structure.

Long et al. (2024) argue that spirituality cannot simply be added onto existing health frameworks as an afterthought, but requires a genuine reimagining of what whole-person, whole-community care truly means. This argument holds within congregational life as well. A community that takes the spiritual health of its members seriously cannot treat that concern as secondary or supplemental — it must become structural, relational, and intentional. The findings of this study suggest that young adults are acutely aware of when that intentionality is present and when it is not, and that its absence leaves a gap that is not easily filled elsewhere.

The conversations this research made possible were vulnerable ones. That vulnerability is part of what made them valuable. It also raises honest questions about what it means to hold that vulnerability responsibly — for researchers, for pastors, for communities — and about the kind of accountability that genuine accompaniment requires. Although God can bring something good out of every situation, that does not remove the question of human responsibility. There is a point at which we have to ask: what is ours to do?

8. CLOSING REFLECTION

Ellis et al. (2011) argue that autoethnography is most generative when it moves between the personal and the analytical, using individual experience as a lens rather than merely a subject. What I did not anticipate was how necessary that movement would prove to be, ethically and for transformational purposes.

My experiences across eight Christian denominational contexts were not uniformly positive. Each community provided both transformative and heartwarming experiences, but some also left unresolved wounds, which does not mean they were not transformative. In reflecting more deeply — and clearly being transformed by different church-related interactions ever since, through prayer, the Word of God via church services, events and personal devotion, worship songs, community and relational influences — I also became aware that I had, at times, lost sight of a central theological understanding of the church. I often looked at it from a wounded place, expecting a gathering of perfect individuals, thinking that in a local church nothing should hurt you, not realizing that we are a collection of experiences which we bring from outside the local church as well. We are all people with our own faith journeys, each at different stages, not everyone consciously wanting to become more like Jesus, with varying challenges, struggles, gifts, capacities, and levels of maturity. In this sense, I came to understand the church as a community of those in need of healing, rather than a space free from imperfection. My earlier expectations and judgments, coupled with a personal fragility shaped by other wounds — often unrelated to church contexts — made me more susceptible to being hurt within any community. The autoethnographic process revealed that my initial research impulse was partly motivated by unresolved issues and a very selfish, egoistic desire, from an "I know it all" place. Had this dynamic remained unexamined, it could have compromised the integrity of any subsequent inquiry.

I maintain that it is neither methodologically sound nor personally sustainable to conduct research without reflexivity, from a place of unprocessed pain, regardless of positive intentions. Over an extended period, I engaged in prayer, seeking clarity about whether I was prepared to undertake this research. In this way, the autoethnographic work — and what came after — became a form of my formation as a researcher in this context as well: a process through which unprocessed frustration was gradually healed and replaced by gratitude, a genuine desire to contribute, and increased humility. And there is still so much work to do.

In our pace. It felt like the same kind of change I went through in a different context, where I began my SDSI studies with frustration towards public services in Romania, and the programme turned me into a version of myself that understands how important empathy is towards all actors in a system, not only users. That change happened in the first year of studies. This was the same situation, in a different context. The transformation I was going through within the context of this master's thesis was not immediate either. As you know, after completing the initial visual autoethnography, I paused the thesis for several months.

It is only now, in the act of reflecting and writing this section, that I recognise something I had not previously seen clearly. I did not consciously choose this topic because of my experiences — if anything, I tried to avoid it. When my supervisor and other academic advisors encouraged me to narrow my focus further, I attempted to let existing research lead rather than my personal biography. This is how I encountered literature on Gen Z's landscape, on health, religion and spirituality, and eventually on faith development theory itself. It was the literature that drew me back toward the subject. And yet, as I write this, I understand that I had in fact returned to something I had already been working through — not intellectually, but experientially. Ellis (2009, p. 12, as cited in Adams et al., 2022) writes on the importance of questioning and challenging earlier versions of events in one's life, revising and rethinking what was written from the perspective of the present. This is precisely what writing this section has required of me: a rethinking, from the present, of a process I lived through without fully understanding it at the time.

I had to open my autoethnography again, after months of pause. If back then I felt my research was neither needed nor supported, today I feel that people, situations, and resources — books, podcasts, available conferences, new connections — came to me, out of “no-where”. I find God's care and grace in all of this, and I cannot express that enough.

What I also recognise, with some relief, is that this proximity to the subject did not compromise the research as it was conducted. The autoethnographic process and the reflexive moments that followed did their work in advance, creating sufficient distance between my own experiences and those of the participants. Marshall and Rossman (2016) argue that qualitative research design unfolds in response to what the researcher discovers — in the field and in themselves. The months of reflection, the visual mapping, the encounter with faith development theory, and the gradual shift from a well-intentioned yet wounded orientation to a

curious and humble one: all of this, I now understand, constituted the actual beginning of what I now call my research area. By the time I sat with participants, I was not carrying questions that needed them to answer on my behalf — or at least not consciously. One of my most significant reflexive moments in this thesis came when I noticed a clear and visible shift in how I enter a church building I had previously been very critical of. I understand this as a shift and growth in my own faith journey — as development.

I know this is becoming long (you can see I am at the beginning), but there is one thing I still did not want to leave unspoken in this research, and that is that I experienced myself what pastors and some of the young adults also mentioned. That faith is a decision. Not a feeling, not a cultural inheritance, not something that happens to you passively. It involves questioning, deciding, and then acting on what you have decided — and that sequence matters. As one of the pastors mentioned and I quoted before, we can critique institutions, but not God. People are not God. And I think that distinction is both freeing and clarifying — because it means that being hurt by a church, or by someone in a church, does not have to be the end of the story. It means we have to do our research, look carefully, and understand. Or at least try.

In a Christian context, you will find people who are actively living out their faith — trusting, striving, in a personal and growing relationship with God. And you will also find those who hold a more passive connection to Christianity, where faith is more cultural than chosen. Both are real, and both deserve to be understood. They are also on their journey, which we are not aware of. I believe we are all searching. But I do think there is a difference between searching and settling, and I believe — drawing from theology, psychology, and what I understood from pastors about spiritual health — that growth begins when we strive, when we move from passive belonging toward active seeking.

And now, after this research, maybe for adding to that positionality lens of the thesis, I can state with clearer vocabulary shaped by participants that for me, faith is a personal decision to trust. And then it is a lived experience — through different forms, some I sought and some that found me. It is connected to religion, because that is where my understanding of God, the world, hope, and the future was formed. This is what gives me community. And it is spirituality, because there are things that have moved in me things I cannot fully explain. For example, there was a moment in this research when I did not have the courage to approach

someone, I considered for a possible theological supervision. Months later, that same person appeared in a small village where I also happened to be, knowing we live far away from each other (hours away). What were the odds? The time and circumstances did not allow for supervision anymore, but today, their thoughts are expressed in this thesis. Was this faith? Religion? Spirituality? In this case, I think my spirituality moved me into free prayers about the need for guidance and help; my faith trusted in the One I had started to discover more and more personally; and religion gave the base of my understanding about whom I trusted, and the context for the meeting to happen. I find myself in awe, very often. And it is not because I deserve it. Faith is a gift.

After questioning, I decide what I declare to be true. And then I question again — but different things, not my identity anymore. That may change. Who knows? But I decide — it is free will. This time I had to decide to lose the "I" — my desire to control, my tendency towards perfectionism, my fears, my chaotic thoughts, my imperfections —and trust. In this trust and relationship, I always find freedom and I am very thankful for everyone who supported me in actually sending this thesis, in all its imperfections. Because condemnation is not something God brings. Thank you for being part of it. Be Blessed! 😊

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5-6)

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APPENDICES