Quality Missions

Talk It Out

How Christian Converts Experience Verbalizing the Faith

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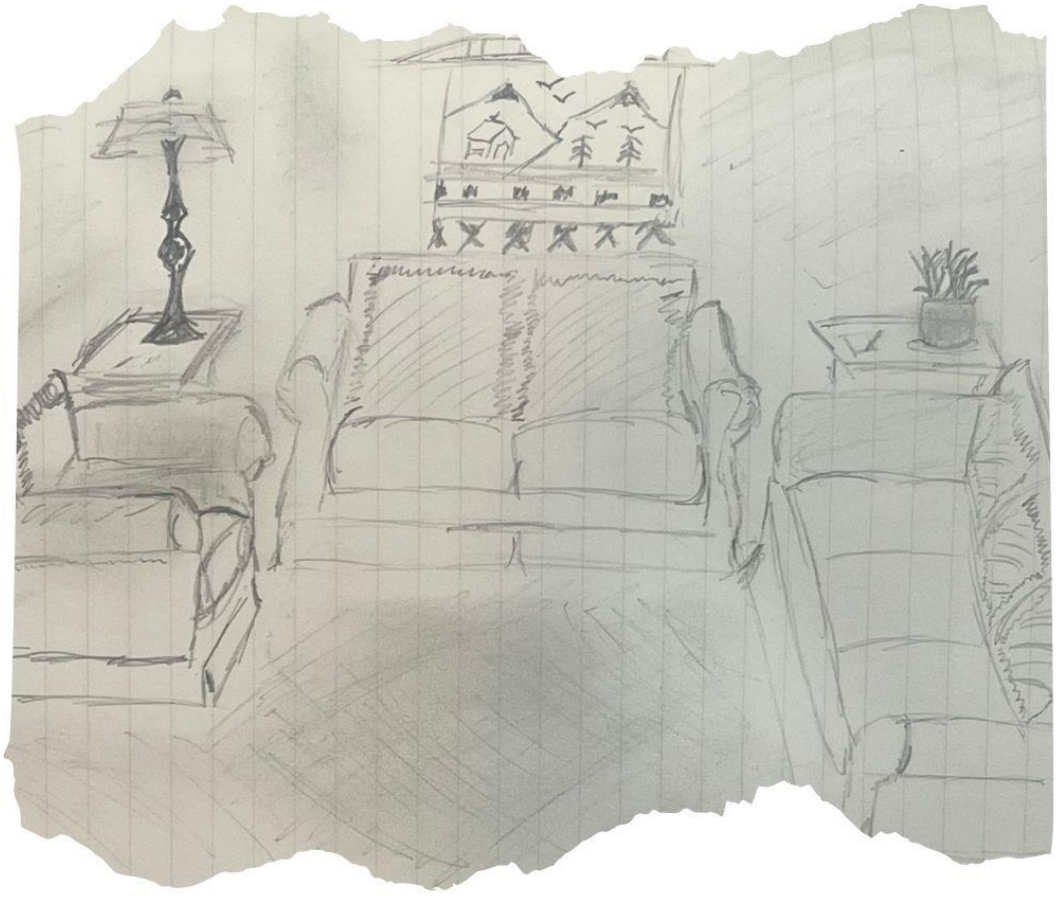
I am excited to present Dr. Timothy Peabody's work, *Talk It Out*. When I read the original research, I immediately felt it was applicable to so many missionaries and pastors today. People, more than ever, are coming from far places to find God, and Dr. Peabody's contribution reminds us that one of the greatest tools in our arsenal is our living room and listening skills to help them navigate the journey. May God increase the tribe of those who will listen.

-Dr. Ben Ward



About the Author

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The purpose of the current qualitative study is to assist church leaders and Christian educators in accomplishing the Great Commission by helping them understand how people who convert to evangelical Christianity as adults experience the process of verbalizing their faith. The current study described this experience from the perspective of adult converts to evangelical Christianity. The results of the current study may guide church leaders and Christian educators to improve training for adult converts and for Christians in general (Peabody, 2021).

Qualitative phenomenological research is appropriate for the research question because spiritual growth, learning, and language acquisition are complex phenomena that may vary depending on the learner, the teacher, or the church tradition. Using a qualitative study to explore the experiences of adult converts could provide insight into the lived experience of adult converts that quantitative research may not reveal. Better understanding the phenomenon from the perspective of those who experience it may provide church leaders insight into ways to improve this component of spiritual formation.

Significance of the Study

A survey of church history and educational psychology demonstrated verbalizing Christian concepts is a component of spiritual formation. Yount (2010) argued group participation and discussion are crucial for education (p. 385). Bruner's (1983) landmark study described extensive field observations of language learners which led him to assert that, as humans learn language, they

also adopt the values of a culture (p. 120). Yount (2010) urged Christian educators to "encourage learners to make informed guesses based on what they know, and to pose problems to solve, or ask conceptual questions for students to consider" (pp. 272–73). However, few scholars have focused on religious talk as a component of adult discipleship.

Sociological research has focused on religious talk, including Wuthnow (2011) who surveyed the social science literature from 1980 to 2011 and found an increased interest in the topic of religious talk (p. 4). He recommended further qualitative research on the subject:

> Scholars who think they are being "scientific" by doing surveys and running multivariate statistical models are unlikely to be convinced that studying talk is worth their time. But scholars who are truly interested in understanding religion know that talk cannot be ignored. How else can we understand the reshaping of self-concepts in prayer groups? How else can we study the ways in which conversion narratives are constructed? (Wuthnow, 2011, p. 15)

Furthermore, Beard (2015) called for more research to "explore what role language plays in spiritual formation, and how the usage of language reflects on spiritual formation experiences" (pp. 279–80). However, research on the intersection of language and spiritual formation is still lacking. Bruehler (2018) used discourse analysis to explore the adoption of Christian language or "Christianese" among first year students at an evangelical university (p. 52). Son (2020) studied the conversion experiences of adults in El Salvador, but the study did not focus on verbalization, and only four participants were adults at the time of their conversion (p. 473). Christian education research on the topic has tended to focus on the quantitative effects of group discussion (Gourlay, 2013, p. 17;

Guseman, 2006, p. 55) or on religious talk from a sociological perspective (Bruehler, 2018, p. 89).

The current study offered insight to help researchers and Christian ministry leaders better understand how adult converts experience verbalizing their faith. The findings led to recommendations for researchers and church leaders interested in spiritual growth and equipping for ministry.

Summary of Verbalization in Leadership

Studies have focused on the experiences of believers related to conversion (Attebery, 2017; Son, 2020). However, the current study will focus on one specific experience of adult converts: verbalizing their faith. Verbalization and the corresponding leadership skill of listening appear in the theories of transformational leadership, servant leadership, and ministry leadership. For example, Stetzer and Geiger (2014) found adult learners expected their small group Bible study leaders to be good listeners (p. 120).

Listening is a valuable leadership skill according to the theories of transformational leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994, pp. 3–4; Burns, 1978, p. 117) and servant leadership (Greenleaf, 2002, p. 31).

Transformational leaders, servant leaders, and Christian ministry leaders celebrate the importance of listening, not only for the sake of the leader's learning, but also for the sake of the follower's personal development. The current section will explore the role of verbalization and listening in transformational leadership, servant leadership, and ministry leadership.

Verbalization and Listening in Transformational Leadership

Verbalization and listening play a significant role in transformational leadership because transformational leadership is a relational interchange. In his classic study, Burns (1978) proposed a theory of transformational leadership that would become a foundation for the next four decades of leadership research. Burns sought to disenthrall leadership theorists "from our overemphasis on power" (p. 11). For him, leadership was a relational interchange between leaders and followers that could "arouse, engage, and satisfy the motives of followers" (p. 18). The goal of this interchange was a relationship in which "leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (p. 20).

For Burns (1978), the skill of listening was crucial to the task of self-actualization for both leaders and followers. He wrote "one talent all leaders must possess—the capacity to perceive the needs of followers in relationship to their own, to help followers move toward fuller self-realization and self-actualization along with the leaders themselves" (p. 116). In order to achieve self-actualization for both the leader and the followers, Burns (1978) prescribed listening. "I suggest that the most marked characteristic of self-actualizers as potential leaders … is their capacity to learn from others and from the environment—the capacity to be taught. That capacity calls for an ability to listen and be guided by others without being threatened by them" (p. 117).

Bass and Avolio (1994) also found listening to be a key skill for transformational leaders. They listed four characteristics of transformational leadership, the third of which was intellectual stimulation. According to Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leaders stimulate followers to "be innovative and creative by

questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways" (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 3). Intellectual stimulation meant, "Followers are encouraged to try new approaches, and their ideas are not criticized because they differ from the leaders' ideas" (Bass & Avolio, 1994, p. 3). In summary, although follower verbalization was not a primary focus for Burns (1978) or Bass and Avolio (1994), they identified listening as a skill of transformational leaders who wish to lift followers to a higher level of motivation, morality, and self-actualization.

Verbalization and Listening in Servant Leadership

Listening is a key skill, not only in transformational leadership, but also in servant leadership. In *Servant Leadership*, Greenleaf (2002) wrote, "Only a true natural servant automatically responds to any problem by listening" (p. 31). Like Burns (1978) and Bass and Avolio (1994), Greenleaf (2002) identified listening as a skill that servant leaders must practice. Furthermore, his emphasis on listening was not just for the sake of leader learning, but also for the sake of follower growth. According to Greenleaf (2002), "true listening builds strength in other people" (p. 31).

Frick (2011) explored the theme of listening in Greenleaf's theory. He found listening requires a leader to ask the right kinds of questions and seeing oneself as a facilitator whose task is to bring out the combined wisdom of the group. Through dozens of interviews with people who knew Greenleaf, Frick (2011) found "Greenleaf's preferred way of listening and teaching was to summarize and ask questions, not to always give answers" (p. 6).

Greenleaf learned listening skills as a clerk in the Society of Friends. He applied the skills he learned to his work at AT&T where,

according to Frick (2011), "His favorite strategy was to get appointed to a secondary role on committees—like recording secretary—sit in the corner, and restate positions until there was general agreement on the preferred course of action" (p. 8). Greenleaf's passion for listening led him to develop a listening course for AT&T managers which ended up training over 100,000 employees (Frick, 2011, p. 11). In summary, according to Greenleaf (2002) and Frick (2011), servant leaders listen in order to bring out the combined wisdom of the group.

Verbalization and Listening in Ministry Leadership

Learner verbalization and the corresponding practice of listening play a significant role in ministry leadership as well. Yount's (2010) model of Christian education included three pillars, each of which required learner verbalization. The goal of the first pillar was learner understanding, or "helping people think" (p. 12).

Understanding, according to Yount (2010), means helping learners develop the ability to "explain fact-based concepts in their own words," "give correct examples of what words mean," and "create fresh examples and illustrations to clarify meanings" (p. 14).

The goal of Yount's (2010) second pillar was "helping people value," a process that "addresses emotional aspects of Christian growth and maturity" (p. 15). This type of growth requires an environment of openness and willingness to share. To foster emotional freedom, Christian educators build trust with learners by "caring for them, listening to them, and responding in kind ways" (p. 17).

Yount's (2010) third pillar, "helping people relate" (p. 19) aimed to help people grow in their relationship with God and with

others. He warned against learners who "remain aloof from others" and encouraged teachers to prompt learners to "share with each other," "affirm each other," and interact using "frequent, small group discussions as well as longer-term group projects" (p. 21).

Many contemporary small group ministry practitioners have emphasized leader listening and learner verbalization. When Stetzer and Geiger (2014) asked small group attenders to describe their leader, nearly three fourths selected "makes people feel comfortable sharing in the group." When they asked nonattenders what they wanted in a group leader, their top answer was the same (pp. 120–21). When Gladen (2012) offered 15 guidelines for small groups, eight of them had to do with the leader encouraging the learners to talk, discuss, or participate (pp. 47–51). Poole (2003) encouraged small group leaders to listen in such a way to meet group members' needs to be understood and encouraged (p. 152). Doing so would free learners "to focus on solving problems, making discoveries, or taking steps of spiritual growth" (Poole, 2003, p. 152).

Research also suggested encouraging new converts to discuss the Christian faith was a factor in the recent global spread of evangelical Christianity. Garrison (1999) described the church planting movements that exploded around the world in the second half of the twentieth century, including the movement among China's pseudonymous Yanyin people group that resulted in over 850 new church plants between 1993 and 1998 (p. 16). Among the Yanyin and other groups, he found participative cell group meetings and worship services to be a factor. He described five principles that guided the strategy coordinator who worked among the Yanyin—the first of which was participative Bible study/worship groups (p. 16). Such participative groups often had multiple leaders, naturally

corrected extremes of Bible interpretation on their own (p. 18), included non- Christian seekers (p. 30), and drew new believers into leadership roles quickly (p. 34).

Burns (1978), Greenleaf (2002), Stetzer and Geiger (2014), and Garrison (1999) agree that listening and verbalization are important for both leaders and followers. Church leaders would benefit from a study that explores how adult converts to evangelical Christianity experience verbalizing their faith.

Summary of the Study

The primary research question for the current study was, "How do adult converts experience verbalizing their evangelical Christian faith?" To answer this question, the study employed the method of phenomenology, using the empirical phenomenology of Moustakas (1994) as a guide. Interviews were conducted with 18 participants who converted to evangelical Christianity as adults. Following Moustakas' three phases, the current study constructed a textural description through phenomenological reduction, a structural description through imaginative variation, and a composite description which combined the textural and structural descriptions to give the essence of the phenomenon of verbalization for the participants in the current study.

Participants believed speaking about their faith was an act of service to others and to God. Furthermore, participants believed discussing spiritual matters provided benefits to both the participant and the listener.

Spiritual Formation

The review of literature implied learners might find the experience of verbalization to be positive in terms of emotional experience and results (Beard, 2015, p. 270; Yount, 2010, p. 385–86). However, it was noted that participants were surprisingly consistent in their positive attitude toward the verbalization experience and its results, regardless of the mode of verbalization described.

Participants in the current study recounted many types of verbalizations including classroom discussion, dialog with a mentor, witnessing, asking questions, and praying.

The word "wholesome" applied to each mode of verbalization. The word wholesome was selected not because participants supplied the word—participants supplied the word "good" most often when describing the experience of verbalization. The word wholesome suggested not only the positive emotional experience of verbalization, but also the positive results participants believed verbalization caused for themselves and those they spoke with. These positive results included growth, fellowship, encouragement, reminders, and reassurance. Furthermore, the wholesomeness of the experience extended to the participants' conviction that, by verbalizing their faith, they were fulfilling God's calling on their lives. Hence, the word wholesome applied to the emotional experience, the perceived results, and the spiritual value of verbalization.

Desire for Verbalization

The literature on small group ministry suggested adult learners would desire to speak about spiritual things. Gladen (2012) trained small group leaders to encourage learners to talk (pp. 47–51), and Poole (2003) urged leaders to listen (p. 152). The current study

confirmed participants had a desire to speak about spiritual things in classroom environments and with other believers. However, their focus gravitated toward verbalization with non-evangelical listeners. Some participants called this type of verbalization witnessing, and others called it sharing. This focus could be explained by the wording of the interview questions. When participants heard the phrase "verbalizing your faith," they may have assumed "sharing your faith" was the focus of the interview. However, in seven of the 18 interviews, the only phrase used was "verbalizing your faith." In 10 interviews, the focus of the current study was clarified as the experiences of putting spiritual concepts into "your own words." The phrases consistently used to describe the type of experience the study focused on were "talking about spiritual things," and "a conversation about your faith." Thus, the eagerness of participants to discuss witnessing was not explained by a misunderstanding of the topic or by social desirability bias alone.

Participants were eager to speak about their faith because they believed verbalization, especially with those who were not believers, was an act of service to God and to others. In this regard, participants conformed to Bebbington's (1989, pp. 1–17) description of evangelicals. They were strikingly crucicentric, conversionist, biblicist, and activist. On the one hand, this is to be expected because participants were selected based on these criteria. However, their unanimity and passion made them, not simply evangelicals, but exemplary evangelicals who embodied the values of evangelicalism to an extraordinary degree. Participants were passionate activists in the sense they felt an obligation to share the message of Jesus with those who did not believe. They did this in the hope they too might be converted. This passion was fueled not only by their conviction

witnessing was an act of service to God, but also by their conviction the Bible was true, and others would benefit from hearing the message of Jesus.

Furthermore, participants showed eagerness to share their faith even early in their post-conversion life. Ministry leaders might assume believers who were recently converted might need years of training before they are ready to share their faith. However, the current study aligned with Garrison's (1999) finding that explosive church planting movements often drew new believers into leadership roles quickly (p. 34). Regardless of how long they had been converted, the participants in the current study were eager to witness, to share their testimony, and to discuss the Bible with mentors, peers, and those who did not believe.

The zeal for witnessing demonstrated by participants in the current study might be explained by what Beider (2021) called, "A long-standing premise in the sociology of religion … that newcomers to a religion are more zealous than are cradle members" (p.6). The current study certainly found that the participants' conversion experiences fueled their desire to witness. However, Beider's (2021) work cautioned researchers against concluding that adult converts are more zealous than those who retain the faith of their childhood (p. 21).

Constructivism But Not Relativism

Participants did use terms like "my truth" or "true for me"—terms that suggest the belief truth is relative or subjective. Constructivism teaches that the job of a teacher is to "lead the learner to construct a reality on his own terms," (Bruner, 1962/1999, p. 2).

However, the participants in the current study did not seem to believe they were constructing reality. Their experiences aligned with Yount (2010) who insisted "mental representations, personally created by each learner, should correspond to real world events" (p. 264).

Participants 2, 3, 6, and 17 spoke not about "my truth," but about "the truth." Participant 4 described his conversion as "when I realized it was true." Participant 3 was the only participant who used a phrase that seemed to imply a belief in relative truth. He paraphrased his message to hostile unbelievers saying:

> I can tell them: This is what happened to me. You want to accept, or you don't want to accept it. I know for me it's true. I know this changed my life, and I have more peace, and I have more happiness.

However, context revealed Participant 3 did not use the phrase "for me it's true" as a concession that Christianity did not correspond to objective reality. On the contrary, Participant 3 believed, "The actual, true God came in my life." Furthermore, he demonstrated his view of truth was anything but subjective when he urged church leaders to preach that:

> Hell is hot, and hell is real. And God is a just God. . . There's gonna be at a certain point in time that God is just gonna say, okay, this is what you want, and that's what you're going to get, you're going to get my separation, and I wish we would have more of people, or pastors or preachers that would literally preach about that: hell. That there's a, there's a real place called hell, and [the Bible] is clear about it."

Those whom Yount (2010) would call "radical constructivists" (p. 261) might not be surprised the learners in the

current study were convinced the truth that changed them corresponded to objective reality. Christian educators might judge that participants in the current study were convinced their faith was objectively true because they had not advanced beyond Fowler's (1995) third stage of spiritual development (p. 181). However, like Downs (1994) and Yount (2010), the participants in the current study would have judged that abandoning a belief in the objective truth of Christianity is to abandon an essential part of their evangelical faith.

Wuthnow (2011) predicted qualitative research into religious talk would reveal insight into the therapeutic dimensions of verbalization. When he called for such research, he asked, "How else can we understand the reshaping of self-concepts in prayer groups? How else can we study the ways in which conversion narratives are constructed?" (p. 15). The current study confirmed qualitative study can reveal the therapeutic dimensions of verbalization.

Therapeutic

Participants described comfort, relief, and reassurance as results of verbalization. For example, Participant 5 described her feelings after sharing the Gospel with a family member:

> Just a massive relief. I mean I probably slept good that night for the first time in years, you know, because when you have a burden [chokes up] for someone you love. And I mean, to forgive [sighs] all the pain of growing up … and have the privilege of knowing Christ, and wanting them to have that privilege too is nothing short of miraculous to me. I mean it's like, I honestly felt like if I die tomorrow, I've done what I'm supposed to do.

For Participant 5, verbalization was not only therapeutic in the sense that it brought her emotional relief. She also found the result of the experience, her relative's receptiveness, to be

therapeutic as well. The participant described her reflections on the veracity of the relative's conversion:

> I've asked God, you know, 'Did he really? Did he really? Did he really?' and, 'Give me a sign.' And I know this is stupid … but cardinals are my thing. I mean, when I talk to God, it's like BOOM, all of a sudden there's a cardinal that I haven't seen in six months. … So that time when I did cry out to God and say, 'Did he really? Is he gonna be there [in heaven] when I get there?' Whole bunch of cardinals [laughs]. Back here...right then and there, I mean it's like, it's happened so many times I can't—I'm sorry, I won't know till I get there if it was really him, but I can, I believe it.

Even when participants did not use overtly therapeutic terms to describe verbalization experiences, the act of recounting the experiences often took the mood of a therapy session. The emotional nature of the verbalization created a dialog between participant and researcher that often brought tears to the eyes of participants.

Importance of Location and Programs

The study found that, for adult converts, verbalization often happened outside of church buildings. However, these conversations were often occasioned by a ministry activity. Meaningful verbalization occurred in relationship with a church leader or mentor, but not always during the official programs of the church. Church leaders should also note some participants who wanted to verbalize their faith in a church context feared sounding unintelligent.

Findings 14 and 15 could be interpreted as support for the trellis and vine metaphor Marshall and Payne (2009) used to describe the role of church programming and organization in the work of the Great Commission. According to their metaphor, "trellis work" was the framework of "structures, programs, activities" that gave

support for "vine work" (p. 8). For Marshall and Payne, the trellis of church programming should support the vine work, which they defined as "speaking the truth of God to other people" in love and in dependence on the Holy Spirit (p. 49).

Participants in the current study experienced some meaningful verbalization experiences during the scheduled programs of the church. However, many of the transformational conversations they described happened outside of the church and before or after church events. Church services, small group meetings, classes, and conferences were the trellis that made the vine conversations possible.

The trellis and the vine merged in very small groups. Participants found one-on- one mentoring meetings or weekly meetings with very small groups to be meaningful. When participants had a mentor or group of Christian friends that met in groups of five or fewer, they expressed appreciation for the emotional, spiritual, and cognitive growth they experienced during these meetings.

Ministry Implications

The current study provided many findings that may strengthen Christian educators and leaders. The following recommendations are written for Christian leaders including small group leaders, Sunday school teachers, professional educators, and pastors.

Speaking During and After Scheduled Activities

The results of the current study make sense in light of Garrison's (1999) assertion that missionary movements spread

rapidly when church meetings were participatory and group members were expected to speak up (p. 16). Group leaders who find their groups reluctant to speak during Bible study should not conclude that group members have no desire to speak. The participants in the current study desired to listen and ask questions of those in positions of spiritual authority, but they also valued church leaders who would listen without judging and spend time in conversations about spiritual things.

This finding conforms with Stetzer and Geiger's (2014) finding that the characteristic adults valued most in a small group leader was listening (p. 120). The participants in the current study valued conversations with their small group Bible study leaders. In order to encourage in-class discussion, leaders should remember that participants in the current study felt nervous about the possibility of rejection or embarrassment.

Because Christian educators have historically and recently found speaking to be a component of learning and spiritual formation, small group leaders and teachers should not give up on creating an interactive learning environment. The current study challenges group leaders and curriculum writers to continue finding ways to use discussion as a component of learning. Qualitative research should study small group Bible study meetings and mentoring conversations to better understand the conditions that result in verbalization and the cognitive, emotional, and spiritual changes that accompany verbalization experiences in learners.

For those teachers and leaders who find themselves unable to create an interactive learning environment, the current study offers hope. Even when the learning environment itself did not involve interaction, participants in the study found great value in the

informal conversations that happened when leaders offered opportunities for conversation and questions outside of class.

Train Ministry Leaders to Listen

Egli and Wang (2014) recommended churches spend less time on training small group leaders to lead discussion (p. 149). The current study aligned with Egli and Wang's emphasis on caring relationships as a factor in small group success. The current study suggests church leaders should train teachers and group leaders to facilitate discussion in a way that invites group members to speak up without fear of embarrassment or rejection.

Listening to adult converts means being careful not to make a learner feel rejected when they speak up or ask a question. Christian educators (Poole, 2003; Yount, 2010) have written on the importance of facilitating discussion without embarrassing learners. The current study affirmed the importance of this practice for ministry leaders. Many participants expressed fear or anxiety over speaking up during ministry activities. Church leaders should remember the words of Participant 18 who was scheduled to share his testimony at a small group meeting. The night of the meeting he forgot his notes and his portion of the meeting "ended up goin' from about a 30-minute testimony to a 5-minute testimony." Even though he did not mention any negative feedback from others, he still felt so embarrassed that he said, "It ruined my whole week, really."

Evangelical group leaders can field questions and discussion from learners without compromising their doctrine. Participants 12 and 18 felt free to speak about spiritual things because their group members and leaders did not judge. Church leaders should note, to embrace this approach is not to compromise

what they believe the Bible teaches. Participant 6's experience illustrated that it was possible to have "an open discussion about the Bible" that included both members and leaders who speak up when "a doctrine comes up, or I may have an opposing view of an interpretation."

Listening to adult converts also means creating time for conversations outside of class. Small group Bible study leaders and Sunday school teachers might choose to use more discussion questions or include a question time in meetings. Participant 7 reported talking during Sunday school about his pre-conversion religion. However, he feared his discussion might be "off-topic a little bit." Intentionally crafted discussion questions combined with skilled listening might encourage more verbalization from learners like Participant 7.

However, group leaders should remember that meaningful experiences of verbalization often happened outside of class. Ministry leaders may provide verbalization opportunities by being available to ask questions for discussion and to hear the questions asked by adult converts without passing judgment.

Support and Debrief Through Intense Experiences

Participants in the current study not only wanted to verbalize their faith, but they even felt called by God to share their faith with others. Church leaders who fail to provide witness training and shadowing opportunities for adult converts would not only disappoint this group; they may even hinder them from carrying out what they believe to be their calling from God. Although Participant 1's first experience of sharing his faith was

"kind of a bad experience," he "felt passionate" about the experience and said it was "like a mission trip."

Several participants used intense emotional terms to describe the time leading up to a witnessing opportunity, the experience itself, and the time after witnessing. Both Participant 5 and Participant 17 described attempts to discuss spiritual things with a close relative. While Participant 17 got no response, Participant 5 saw positive results. She told the story saying:

> He started to cry. And I said, "Would you like to pray with me right now?" … "I'm gonna go pray when I go to bed." I said, "For real?" And he goes, "Yep." And I said, "Okay." I'm like, "If that's as far as you can take me God, okay...the rest is up to you."

Ministry leaders could learn from these stories and encourage adults in their congregation to learn from each other. If Participant 17 had heard Participant 5 talk about her patient preparation for the witnessing encounter, he might have learned how to approach a sensitive subject in a way that resulted in openness.

Participants maintained without conflict the belief God controlled the results of their verbalization experiences, and the belief tact was important in approaching spiritual topics. Therefore, to encourage tact and thoughtful strategies in witnessing would not necessarily threaten the belief God was in control of the results of a witnessing encounter.

Finally, church leaders can support the spiritual formation of adult converts by debriefing with them after an intense witnessing experience. Participants in the current study often teared up as they recounted spiritual conversations with loved ones. They also experienced shock when people they loved rejected their witnessing

attempts. The interviews themselves at times seemed therapeutic for participants.

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