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Pepperdine University  
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

ELEMENTS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING IN SMALL GROUPS  
OF AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Richard Simpson

July, 2018

Michael Patterson, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

Richard Simpson

under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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## VITA

### **Education**

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this grounded theory research study was to discover the transformational learning elements of a small group experience at an Evangelical Christian church that fosters personal transformation. Given the lack of Evangelical Christians experiencing personal transformation within small groups, leaders and teachers could learn much from transformational learning theory that continues to be the predominant framework for research in the area of adult education. The source of data for this study was interviews with small group leaders, teachers, and participants who had experienced a personal transformation while attending a small group. Analysis of the data found that participants faced a variety of circumstances that were personal, meaningful, and transformative, revealing 8 elements, mostly relational, within the small group experience that fostered personal transformation. The concluding theory for this study is that the relational elements of small groups, such as love, care, prayer, and connection create a transformative learning environment where personal transformation is likely to take place through the transparency and development of close relationships with others in the group. Implications of this study include pastors and leaders incorporating relational elements into small groups by taking intentional steps to match individuals, set expectations, set an example, be open and honest, know members, focus on the Bible, be ready to learn, and assess throughout. Creating a life-changing small group experience is an essential mission of Evangelical churches and by incorporating these elements churches can make great strides in fostering spiritual growth and personal transformation in individuals' lives.

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Background of the Study**

Learning in Evangelical churches takes place in various forms. While Sunday morning gatherings and activities are the core of most American church ministries, learning also takes place in smaller groups that meet within homes, at various times during the week, and in everyday circumstances. Small groups encompass a substantial part of church life (Walton, 2011). These small group ministries serve as the essential teaching and training activity for churches, yet evidence points to a personal transformation problem of significant proportions, eroding church health, as fewer Evangelicals participate in learning and those that are participating find the learning environment to be less than transformational (Barna Group, 2015; Shirley, 2008).

Fewer than half of Evangelical Christians who attend church regularly are participating in some sort of learning activity that promotes personal transformation. The Pew Research Center (2015) on Religion and public Life conducted a Religious Landscape Survey in the U.S., composed of more than 35,000 interviews with Americans age 18 or older. Among Christian religious groups in the U.S., Evangelicals make up the largest segment at 25.4% followed closely by Catholics at 20.8%. According to the survey, 44% of Evangelicals that believe in God with absolute certainty participate in scripture study or religious education groups at least once a week. Among the same group, 33% seldom or never participate, with another 22% in the middle. Even though religion is important to them, over half of Evangelical Christians are not attending some sort of study or education group regularly.

Fewer active Evangelical Christians are interested in learning outside of normal service

attendance. Another study conducted by the Barna Group (2010) examined Americans expressions of faith through small group participation. The study found that Evangelicals were the most significant share of involved believers in small groups and that small group attendees were more likely to read the Bible. However, in a more recent study by the Barna Group (2015), only two of 10 Christians were involved in some sort of Biblical learning activity, such as small group Bible studies. That is even fewer people attending than evidenced by the Pew Research Center study.

Additionally, there appears to be a lack of spiritual wellbeing even among those Evangelical Christians who are participating in some sort of study or educational experience at least once a week. The Pew Research Center (2015) found that even though 52% of those Evangelicals that participated in a learning activity at least once a week felt a sense of spiritual wellbeing at least once a week, the other 48% attending a study at least once a week had feelings of spiritual wellbeing once or twice a month or less. An alarming 11% of those attending learning activities weekly felt a sense of spiritual wellbeing seldom or never.

Given the lack of participation and the evidence pointing to Evangelicals' lack of spiritual wellbeing and transformational learning, small group leaders and teachers could learn much from the transformative learning process (Fleischer, 2006). With a better understanding of transformational learning from the individual and group perspectives, leaders and educators in Evangelical Christian small groups would have an instrument to better equip learners and inspire greater levels of participation. The Barna Group (2010) proposes, "vision and purpose is crucial to providing relevant and transformational settings where people can grow spiritually" (para. 14). Shirley (2008) states, "The health and strength of a local church hinges on her effectiveness in making disciples" (p. 212). Additionally, any church is only as strong as their adult teaching

ministry (Melick & Melick 2010).

Attendance and participation in small groups is an important aspect to spiritual growth for the Evangelical Christians. The current lack of personal transformation among Christians would likely be of concern to the Apostle Paul, who exhorted early to believers in Rome, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Romans 12:2, English Standard Version). Christians are instructed to be transformed, yet there appears to be less than half actively pursuing transformation through learning and an even smaller amount being transformed.

### **Problem Statement**

There is a lack of Evangelical Christians experiencing personal transformation within church sanctioned small groups. According to the Barna Group (2015), 52% of churchgoers believe the church does a good job of helping people grow spiritually. Among pastors of those churches, only 1% believe that churches are helping people grow spiritually. Some pastors and leaders lack significant clarity and ability to design and implement adult learning programs within the church that are effective at shaping and transforming lives (Gorman, 2001). Shirley (2008), observes, “local churches are not achieving stellar results in transforming the lives and worldviews of their members” (p. 207). Nevertheless, learning that takes place in Christian Evangelical small group settings, such as Bible Studies, Sunday school, and other church sanctioned gatherings are meant to be transformative, yet little transformation appears to be taking place in American churches (Barna Group, 2010, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015; Shirley, 2008). Therefore, there is an opportunity to discover the transformational learning elements of the Evangelical Christian small group experience that foster personal transformation

in adults, helping individuals grow and experience all that God has for them.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover the transformational learning elements of an Evangelical Christian small group experience that foster personal transformation in adults. Elements that can be incorporated into Biblical teaching and group meetings are identified to assist leaders and teachers in their planning, execution, and assessment of learning. Incorporating transformational elements will help learners “uncover truth and acquire skills resulting in life-change that leads to the fulfillment of personal goals” (Melick & Melick, 2010, p. 113)

### **Importance of Study**

Transformative learning theory and the findings from the research that follows can be used to create a more transformative learning environment in evangelical small groups. According to Taylor (2007), there is a need to explore transformational learning in a context where teaching is “more informal, less controlled by the instructor, and more susceptible to external influences” (p. 186). Transformative learning, when used in the context of Christian small groups, will greatly benefit leaders, teachers, and the general assembly of believers to increase spiritual growth.

Church leaders and small group teachers will benefit from the outcomes of this study by being able to better understand how people learn, what environment best works for their groups, and how best to integrate learning methods with Biblical teaching. Christian believers and regular small group attendees will benefit from this study by having a clearer understanding of the learning process, the importance of learning in a spiritual, faith-based context, and a fuller understanding of how transformation occurs in everyday environments.

The resulting transformational learning elements may be applied in a variety of settings, including churches, home group ministries, recovery groups, and community learning groups. Applicable theory on how best to influence transformational learning along with practical guidelines for teachers and learners will greatly increase positive results to include thinking through circumstances in a new light, ridding oneself of a bad addiction or habit, and rekindling relationships with others and with God, to name a few.

This study adds to existing research and theory by specifically applying the principles of transformational learning, andragogy, and group learning to Evangelical Christian small groups. For a person to change, both a rational and intuitive learning experience must be provided (Gorman, 2001). Few studies have examined the cross-section of transformative learning and Christian small group learning (Elias, 2012; Fleischer, 2006; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Formal concepts of learning can take a person so far and adding transformational learning practices to the teaching methods and guides will be of great impact to teachers and learners.

The findings of this study are important because of the need for better-equipped leaders and teachers in Evangelical churches to meet the teaching and training needs outside of the regular Sunday morning ministries. Powlison (2017) notes that personal transformation is found in linking our troubles, struggles, friendships, and the active *self-revealing* nature of our soul. Additionally, results of this study offers specific guidelines, principles, and curriculum strategies to meet needs of individuals in groups where greater personal transformation is needed or desired.

One of the principles of Evangelical Christianity is the power and authority of Scripture. Believers often point to statements like, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teachings, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be



thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3: 16-17), to assert this authority. Further, “teaching for transformation makes one far more aware of the necessity of God if anything of value is to happen” (Gorman, 2001, p. 29). Consequently, systems and structures of the biblical learning process will be strengthened so the power of Scripture can be fully realized in the lives of small group members. The results of this study will offer a more holistic approach to leading and facilitating small group transformational learning.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions provide a common understanding of terms that will be utilized throughout the study.

**Adult learning.** “Adult learning occurs in many settings for many different reasons” (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2015, p. 74). According to Knowles et al. (2015), there are two distinct ways to view learning, either as a “process by which behavior is changed, shaped, or controlled” or “in terms of growth, development of competencies, and fulfillment of potential” (p. 14). Within the context of Evangelical churches, informal and formal adult learning occurs through sermons, small group Bible Studies, discussion groups, and various annual events/conferences (Elias, 2012).

**Andragogy.** Andragogy is a philosophy of learning that places the learner’s assessment, expectations, and readiness at the forefront of the planning and execution of learning. There are three dimensions to the practice of andragogy: (a) goals and purposes for learning build the design of the education experience, (b) individual and situation differences are filters that influence learning, including subject-matter, situational, and individual differences, (c) core adult learning principles of andragogy construct the foundation for developing the learning experience (Knowles et al., 2015).

***Church.*** The church is “God’s primary way of working in the world, and [a place for] fellowship where most people find spiritual challenge, enrichment, and wholesome relationships” (Melick & Melick, 2010, p.8). The church was established by God himself through the work of Jesus Christ, and its very purpose is pulling people together, men and women, kids and students, singles and married, living in constant interdependence (Donahue & Robinson, 2012).

***Discipleship.*** The root word of discipleship, disciple, literally means learner (Shirley, 2008). Discipleship involves learning that is organically fostered through interaction with God, the Bible, and others in order to promote spiritual growth (Powlison, 2017; Terpstra, 2017). One of the primary purposes of the church is to disciple, and it is within the context of the local church that discipleship is most effective (Donahue & Robinson, 2012).

***Evangelical Christian.*** Individuals who have put their faith in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation for the forgiveness of sins. They claim this gospel message as truth and strive to know God and live meaningful lives for Christ (Gorman, 2001). A disciple of Jesus Christ and a Christian are synonymous. According to Shirley (2008), “Everyone who expresses faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior becomes a disciple and, by implication, begins a lifelong, Spirit-led journey of growth and formation in the likeness of the One whom they follow” (p. 210).

***Experience.*** Adult learner experiences provide the basis for learning activities (Knowles et al., 2015). Experiences can be past and present encounters one has personally and corporately that leads to changes in thinking, values, and behavior (Brown, 2006). For Christians, experience with others as they discuss the Bible, life struggles, and the culture around them facilitate growth (Melick & Melick, 2010).

***Small groups.*** Adult learning and life sharing groups primarily focused on studying the

scriptures of the Bible, prayer, and living life together through reflection of current events, problems, and needs (Elias, 2012). Through church sanctioned groups, teachers become facilitators, encouragers, and role models (Melick & Melick, 2010). Small groups are where spiritual growth is fostered as individuals come together to live, grow, and share their faith in focused discussions (Donahue & Robinson, 2012; Milacci, 2006).

***Sanctification.*** For the Christian, “Sanctification is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more and more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives” (Grudem, 1994, p. 746).

***Spiritual Growth.*** Spiritual growth is an essential part of a Christian exercising their knowledge through conversion that is not only a change in mind but also a change in action (Melick & Melick, 2010).

***Transformation.*** Transformation is considered to be the “hallmark of learning” where “some kind of change in understanding occurs that transforms cognition from an initial state to a modified state, and is also somehow observable in behavior, speech, writing, or other forms of production” (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011, p. 29).

***Transformative Learning.*** The process of learning involving critical self-reflection that results in a change in the frames of reference we use to make sense of life (Mezirow, 1990). These frames are how we form the ways to interpret meaning in our experiences. Frames guide our actions and provide rationale. They define our worldview and shape our expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings (Mezirow, 1997a).

## **Theoretical Framework**

As a theoretical framework, Mezirow’s (1990, 1991, 1997b, 2000) transformational learning theory and Knowles’ (1970) andragogical principles are used to establish how, first,

adults learn and, second, how adult learning can be transformational. This foundational learning theory will provide the basis for enhancing the Evangelical Christian small group learning experience. Jack Mezirow was the founder and major proponent of transformational learning theory. Mezirow's theory materialized from a large qualitative study of women who had returned to community college after being away from formal education for an extended period (Fleischer, 2006; Kitchenham, 2008).

The focus of Mezirow's (1990) research was on the change in roles and self-concepts the women experienced after having participated in the college education classes. Mezirow found that as the women became aware of personal, historical, and cultural contexts, their assumptions or frames of references changed. Change in frames of reference, "often occurs in response to a disorienting dilemma through a three part process: critical reflection on one's assumptions, discourse to validate the critically reflective insight, and action" (Mezirow, 1997b, p. 60). Based on his research, Mezirow (2000) identified 10 phases of learning that occur during the transformative process:

- A disorienting dilemma.
- Self-examination.
- A critical assessment of assumptions.
- Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation.
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action.
- Planning a course of action.
- Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
- Provisional trying of new roles.

- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)

The major elements of transformative learning are a critical reflection or critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 2006). Transformation occurs by self-reflection or critical reflection of meaning perspectives, “sets of beliefs and premises that we take for granted” (Fleischer, 2006). There are three types of reflection that can potentially transform meaning schemes and perspectives (Cranton, 1994; Kitchenham, 2008), content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. During critical reflection, the difficult questions are considered.

The term *andragogy* has been used for well over a century. Since 1970, Malcolm Knowles (1970) and the research that followed have shaped the definition and practice of andragogy. Used to describe the education and learning of adults using specific methods and strategies, the andragogical approach applies to different disciplines and settings (Cooper & Henschke, 2001). Because of the widely applied principles and methods, andragogy is an ideal match for Evangelical Christian small group learning, changing the orientation of adult education from teacher-directed to student-directed (Melick & Melick, 2010).

The core principles established by andragogy enable leaders and teachers designing and conducting adult learning to be more effective in the learning process (Knowles et al., 2015). Traditionally used by educators to differentiate the practice of teaching adults versus the practice of teaching children, through the work of Knowles, andragogical principles have become the foremost guide to adult learning (Lightfoot & Brady, 2005). One key differentiator is that instead of a passive transfer of knowledge found common in classroom settings, effective adult learning encourages active participation and application from learners. This learning model

places the student's assessment, expectations, and readiness at the forefront of any planning and execution of learning. While the humanistic origins of andragogy can be off-putting to Evangelicals, excluding God and emphasizing the good of man, the humanistic focus on change in values and attitudes aligns with God's purpose that our lives be transformed (Melick & Melick, 2010).

Both transformational learning theory and andragogy learning methods assume some aspects of group learning. There is emphasis placed on learner and teacher/facilitator relationships along with learner-to-learner interaction. Transformative group learning promotes transformative learning by empowering individuals to revise their expectations, assumptions, or perspectives through exploring different ways of viewing the world around them (Cranton, 1996).

For a group setting to be transformative, individuals must take responsibility for their learning and challenge themselves and others during the change process (Cranton, 1996). Learners must be willing to share in the community experience (Shirley, 2008). It is in the openness and vulnerability of community that learning can be transformational. According to Shirley (2008), the church must provide nourishing, influential, and developmental experiences along with teaching that includes both formal and informal experience, study, and application from a biblical worldview foundation.

### **Research Questions**

The following research question and sub-questions were used to guide the study in an attempt to form a theory of transformational learning within Evangelical Christian small groups:

- What transformational learning elements in an Evangelical Christian small group experience foster personal transformation in adults?

Sub-questions:

- What elements contribute to transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements deter transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements contribute to a growing and deepening relationship with God?

### **Limitations**

Given the nature of qualitative research and the relatively small sample size of small group participants, the ability to generalize more broadly will be limited. Additionally, the gathering of background data of each participant was limited, even though background may have a significant impact on the personal transformation process. The focus of this study was mostly on current events and elements influencing the process. The qualitative data analysis was generalized to find themes and could be highly subjective which may lead to unintended researcher bias.

Although there is potential for results to apply to other small group environments outside of the church, certain themes and settings are specific to Evangelical groups and not easily applied to outside groups. Much of the theory around small group learning is Christian and Biblically grounded. Although certain aspects may be able to apply to groups outside the church, the methods are grounded in a biblical worldview.

### **Delimitations**

This study focused on the discovery of transformational learning elements within an Evangelical Christian small group setting that foster personal transformation. The experiences of individuals who are actively involved in small groups in a local Evangelical Christian church were sought. The study used the theoretical framework of Mezirow's (1990) 10 phases of

learning that occur during the transformative process. As experiences are shared these elements that foster transformative learning are highlighted and the results noted. Those phases that are associated with Evangelical Christian small groups that resulted in personal transformation as reported by the individual determined the outcomes.

This study was conducted at one church located in the southern California area over a short period of 2 months. Only regular and active leaders, teachers, and participants of small groups at the church were interviewed. The results of the interviews determined which elements are most predominant and impactful in the transformation process for individuals in Evangelical Christian small groups.

### **Assumptions**

Evangelical Christian adults attend small groups voluntarily and do so to develop a better understanding of the Bible, grow in their faith, and foster relationships with others. Small group participation is a relatively small portion of the total congregational population. Participants expect to take something away from the small group meetings and expect to give something away, such as participating in discussions.

### **Organization of Study**

This research study is presented in five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the introduction, theoretical framework and the overall research question and sub-questions for the study. Chapter 2 presents a review of the literature. The first review includes the history of transformational learning, defining transformational learning, and the relationship dynamic within the transformational learning process. Second, the history of andragogical learning, along with its definition are explored. Lastly, the review concludes with the history of Evangelical small group learning, the theology behind small groups, and a brief overview of small group strategies and



models. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology. The setting and data collection process will be discussed. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study including the primary elements that foster personal transformation in Evangelical Christian small groups. Chapter 5 concludes with a summary of the entire study, a discussion of the findings, and the future research needed to understand further the transformational learning process in Evangelical Christian small groups.

## **Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

This literature review focuses on the foundational learning theories of transformative learning and andragogical learning, as well as Evangelical small group learning and its role in church life. The church, more specifically, small groups are a primary avenue for Evangelical adults to learn and grow. Small groups were foundational to the early church and Biblical small group ministries remain a critical piece to church life (Gladen, 2011). Understanding transformative learning theory, the practice of andragogy, and how they both can enhance the small group experience to promote personal transformation, will benefit leaders, teachers, and participants. Transformative learning theory was chosen because of the findings by Mezirow (1990, 1991, 1997b, 2000) and others that follow on how individuals experience transformation through change in their frames of reference. Given that this study focuses on adults being lead and taught within small groups, andragogy was chosen for its guiding principles and theory around adult learning. Additionally, small group learning is explored to better understand the overall purpose of such groups in Evangelical churches and how they can be most effective for congregants.

Several studies connect transformative learning to theological education (Fleischer, 2006; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010; Spear, 2005). Additionally, andragogy has become a proven way of conducting adult learning as distinctions are drawn between teaching adults and the practice of adult learning. Both transformative learning and andragogy can supply the critical aspects of learning within Evangelical Christian small groups and by addressing the unique needs of adult learners. Adults learn best through their own experiences and the experiences of others. Specifically, transformational learning theory and the 10 phases of learning discovered by Jack Mezirow will serve as the basis for enhancing the Evangelical Christian small group learning

experience. Transformative learning theory and the findings from the research that follows can be used to create a more transformative learning environment in Evangelical small groups.

Transformative learning, when used in this context, will greatly benefit leaders, teachers, and the general assembly of believers.

The goal of this literature review is to discover the ways transformational learning theory and the practice of andragogy can have a significant impact on Christian Evangelical small group learning. Evangelical small group leaders and teachers could learn much from the transformative learning process (Fleischer, 2006). Despite secular presuppositions within adult education theory and methods, Christian educators can gather principles that will enhance adult learning within small groups (Melick & Melick, 2010). With a better understanding of transformational learning from the individual and group perspectives, leaders and educators in Evangelical small groups would have a proven approach to better equip learners.

This review of the literature will begin with exploring the history of transformational learning, including the major influencers of the theory. A definition and detailed explanation of transformational learning will be provided, along with an observational look at how the theory has been applied in various settings as well as how it can be applied to groups to foster transformation. Then, the history and defining attributes of andragogy will be presented, including the six assumptions of motivation for learning. Additionally, observations of how the practice of andragogy relates to small group learning will be made. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a summary of the history and theory behind Evangelical small groups.

### **Transformational Learning**

Mezirow (1990, 1991, 1997b, 2000) was the founder and major proponent of transformational learning theory. Mezirow's theory materialized from a large qualitative study of

women who had returned to community college after being away from formal education for an extended period (Fleischer, 2006; Kitchenham, 2008). After almost four decades, Mezirow's conception of transformative learning continues to be the predominant theoretical framework for research in the field of adult education (Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor, 2007). Mezirow's theory has been studied and applied to a variety of adult, higher and continuing education settings. Taylor (2007) states, "[Transformative learning] continues to be the most researched and discussed theory in the field of adult education" (p. 173). Moreover, "Present research continues to affirm Mezirow's conception of transformative learning, through its stability over time, its relationship to expanding the self and pursuit of autonomy, and the applicability for informing classroom practice" (p. 185). When it comes to adult education, transformational learning is an important theoretical framework to consider.

Creating a life-changing learning experience by fostering transformation through Biblical teaching and training of believers is an essential mission of Evangelical churches. Fleischer (2004) advocates that in order for these experiences to be truly transforming, Christian believers must participate corporately in regular discussions with one another, reflecting on the Christian story and engaging in action together in the world. There is a movement for re-imagining how we teach and learn in Christian Evangelical churches (Fleischer, 2006; Nichols & Dewerse, 2011; Spear, 2005). Transformative learning researchers and theorists, including Mezirow (1991, 1997a, 2000, 2006), offer leaders and teachers of Evangelical small groups a new perspective on learner engagement and the significant impact relationships have on transformational learning (Baumgartner, 2002; Carter, 2012; Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor, 2007). This literature review begins with a brief history of transformational learning. Then moves to the observations discovered from Mezirow's conception of transformational learning, including

additional findings from other sources. Next, the concept of transformational relationships is examined. Lastly, guidelines are given for fostering transformational learning in small groups.

**History of transformational learning.** Jack Mezirow (1990) is the founder and major proponent of transformational learning theory (Cranton, 2002; Fleischer, 2006; Gorman, 2001; Taylor, 2007). The focus of Mezirow's research was on the change in roles and self-concepts for women in college education classes experienced having returned to community college after being away from formal education for an extended period. Mezirow found that as the women became aware of personal, historical, and cultural contexts, their assumptions or frames of references changed. The findings resulted in what Mezirow called perspective transformations (Fleischer, 2006). After the original study in 1975, Mezirow conducted a nationwide follow-up survey of 24 programs in 11 states and determined that respondents had gone through some transformation (Kitchenham, 2008). Based on this research, Mezirow (2000) identified 10 phases of learning that occur during the transformative process:

- A disorienting dilemma.
- Self-examination.
- A critical assessment of assumptions.
- Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation.
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action.
- Planning a course of action.
- Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
- Provisional trying of new roles.
- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.

- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (p. 22)

Mezirow's theory was largely influenced by Thomas Kuhn (1970), Paulo Freire (1970), and Jurgen Habermas (1971).

***Kuhn.*** Kuhn's theory emphasized the importance of paradigms, which became Mezirow's (1970) frames of reference. Through his investigation into the source of disagreement between social scientists and natural scientists of what constituted scientific inquiry, Kuhn discovered it was necessary for a common set of problems and solutions to be shared while still pursuing their interests (Kitchenham, 2008).

***Freire.*** Freire (1970) was also a major informant of Mezirow's theory. To Freire, traditional education used mostly a *banking of information* approach. Teachers would deposit information to those students deemed worthy. The knowledge shared and obtained was at the sole discretion of the teacher who had complete control. The students were completely dependent on the educator for information and did not learn to think on their own (Freire, 1970; Kitchenham, 2008). Freire's (1970) solution to this problem was *conscientization*, which he defined as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions—developing a critical awareness—so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 19).

***Habermas.*** The last of Mezirow's major influencers was Habermas (1971). Mezirow adopted Habermas' domains of learning; the technical, the practical, and the emancipatory in his development of his critical theory of adult learning and education. The domains of learning led to Mezirow's description of perspective transformation. Mezirow "sees the educational processes of helping adults engage in critical reflection on their meaning perspectives as

emancipatory because such reflections can free them from the constraints and limits that unquestioned meaning perspectives can create” (Fleischer, 2006, p. 150).

**Defining transformational learning.** According to Mezirow (2000), perspective transformation or transformative learning, involves a change in the frames of reference we use to make sense of life. These frames are how we form the ways to interpret meaning in our experiences. Frames guide our actions and provide rationale. They define our worldview and shape our expectations, perceptions, cognition, and feelings (Mezirow, 1997a). To put it another way, transformational learning is “the process of learning through critical self-reflection, which results in the reformulation of a meaning perspective to allow a more inclusive discriminating, and integrative understanding of one’s experience” (Mezirow, 1990, p. xvi).

Mezirow’s theory considers three types of learning, instrumental, dialogic, and self-reflective (Fleischer, 2006; Kitchenham, 2008). Instrumental learning is learning how to perform a task or how to do something (Fleischer, 2006). This type of learning is done through empirical testing while dialogic or communicative learning “involves understanding purpose, values, beliefs, and feelings” (p. 6) and is less subjected to experiential testing (Mezirow, 2000). The focus of dialogical learning is to understand another’s meaning comprehensibly (Fleischer, 2006). A critical reflection of assumptions in intentions, values, beliefs, and feelings is essential to communicative learning (Mezirow, 2000). Through discourse, there is a critical examination of evidence, arguments, and alternative points of view that help in the assessment process. According to Mezirow (2000), “We learn together by analyzing the related experiences of others to arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves” (p. 7).

The major element of transformative learning is critical reflection or critical self-

reflection (Mezirow, 2006). Transformation occurs by self-reflection or critical reflection of meaning perspectives, “sets of beliefs and premises that we take for granted” (Fleischer, 2006, pp. 148-149). There are three types of reflection that can potentially transform meaning schemes and perspectives (Cranton, 1994; Kitchenham, 2008), content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. During critical reflection, the difficult questions are considered. Questions are what guide the learning process (Apte, 2009).

Content reflection involves thinking about the problem itself. It is to think of problems and transcendently about them (Fleischer, 2006). Kitchenham (2008) adds that it requires looking back at what had been done. Process reflection is talking with others, which causes a person to consider other factors they may not be considering. Lastly, premise reflection moves the person to see a larger picture of what is operating in his or her value system. This combined reflection is what brings about a transformation in our meaning schemes or frames of reference.

When engaged in critical reflection of understanding of the world around, one is moved into the realm of transformation (Fleischer, 2006). In other words,

Learners can transform an individual meaning scheme by examining previous actions or where the actions and their related factors originated, but when they consider a more global view, the reflection is much deeper, more complex, and involves transforming a series of meaning schemes. (Kitchenham, 2008, p. 114)

There are two types of transformation according to Kitchenham (2008). There are the straightforward approaches through the content and process reflection, and then the much more profound transformation through critically reflecting on premises.

**Transformative learning observations.** Mezirow’s theory has informed much of the research on transformational learning. Mezirow has revised his original theory over the years,



but much of what he originally theorized has been left intact by the scholars and their research that followed. Although Taylor (1997) initially criticized the accepted practice and discussions around transformative learning for the lack of empirical evidence and insufficient exploration, studies have further refined and introduced the concept to different contexts. Carter (2002) states, “transformative learning is an adult’s ability to revise and form new perspectives through critical reflection on the mental frames of reference and habits that function as filters for making sense of experience” (p. 59). Later Nichols and Dewerse (2010) defined transformation as holistic, representing a change that is cognitive, affective, and behavioral. “Transformative learning breaks the cycle of habitual thought in ways that release broader perceptions of reality” (p. 47). Foote (2015) further adds that transformational learning is a re-evaluation and re-story of prior learning where learners can make sense of the experience and in that process find a new identity.

*Adults.* The goal and condition of transformative learning, according to Cranton (1994), is learner empowerment. Transformative learning is a form of education different from learning that takes place in elementary and secondary schools (Mezirow, 1997a). Attitudes and beliefs formed early in life become the basis for action and integration of learning, but they can be barriers to meaningful learning. For adults later in life the attitudes and beliefs often constrain thought and interpretation of new information (Fleischer, 2006; Mezirow, 2000).

“Transformative learning is an adult’s ability to revise and form new perspective” (Carter, 2002, p. 59). Because adults have already well-established mental frames of reference and habits, a different approach to learning is what is needed. Transformative education for adults goes beyond knowledge gathering and regurgitation. It is the critical reflection that transforms. Adults take responsibility for their learning by “seek[ing] out new perspectives, challenge commonly held views, question themselves and each other, and often work toward change

outside of the group or program” (Cranton, 1996, p. 30).

**Value.** As with most learning experiences, students will get what they put into the transformation process. Frames of references are the concepts, feeling, and values we hold (Mezirow, 1997a). The process of challenging these perspectives can be difficult for the learner. Because of the discomfort created, students can decide that what they already know is where they want to remain. Nichols and Dewerse (2011) in their study that assessed how students in a theological course engaged Mezirow’s 10 stages of perspective transformation found that the students all “experienced similar teaching and encountered the same concepts; however, the degree of transformation differed sharply across individuals” (Nichols & Dewerse, 2011, p. 55). They found that opportunities to learn could be valued by some, but perceived as negative or restricting by others. Similarly, Kitchenham (2008) remarks that a student’s value system is at the core of the reflection process. Those students that experienced transformation valued the experience more extremely than those that did not (Nichols & Dewerse, 2011). The potential for transformation is the burden of the student. Transformational learning is only going to as valuable to someone as the value, time, the effort they put into the process.

**Change.** Adult learning is typically an additive to what already exists in student’s current frames of reference (Apte, 2009). New information may be gained, skills may improve, but all within the student’s current perspective. Transformational learning entails helping students become self-aware which can be discomfoting and challenging (Taylor, 2007). The transformation process goes beyond grasping concepts and confronting objections (Nichols & Dewerse, 2010). According to Apte (2009), Adults often experience challenges that require them to do things differently. The process encompasses asking the hard questions while considering the very problem itself (Fleischer, 2006). Further adding to the process of change,

questioning assumptions and one's perspectives can be painful (Cranton, 1996). Talking about the problem and examining the premises can not only bring about change but understanding. Valuable and reasonable discourse through the pain of questioning such as this can be a vehicle for transformation (Fleischer, 2006).

*Christian.* Transformative learning theory has significant application to the area of Evangelical Christian education and faith-based learning groups (Fleischer, 2006; Nichols & Dewerse, 2010; Spear, 2005). Spear (2005) suggests Jesus himself used transformational learning during his earthly ministry. Fleischer (2006) further adds:

In the language of transformative learning theory, Jesus as teacher was in large measure a provocateur who created a host of "trigger events" that would lead to his listeners' re-evaluation of their current meaning schemes and perspectives, broadening them and reshaping them to encompass a larger vision of life, God, and love. (p. 154)

Learning and growing in faith can be considered a transformational learning process. Tolliver and Tisdell (2006) suggest spirituality is partly about meaning making. In other words, Mezirow's meaning schemes are at least in part about faith for the Evangelical Christian. Gorman (2001) additionally points out that spirituality is a key ingredient to be confronted in the transformational learning process. Transformational learning is personal, but there is significant importance to relationships, especially when it comes to Evangelical small groups.

**Transformative relationships.** Mezirow's (1991) early work referred indirectly to other ways of knowing through relationships in the context of discourse (Taylor, 1997). More recent studies have focused on the aspect of transformative relationships. Although little could be found on the importance of interpersonal connections as it relates to transformative learning theory at one point (Carter, 2002), several theorists and researchers have presented how

significant relationships are in the transformational learning process. Mezirow's (2000) later work, and those that followed, emphasized discourse or dialog as a key ingredient to transformational learning. According to Carter (2002), "Wherever people have an opportunity to collaborate, exchange ideas, and engage in the talk of business, learning can occur" (p. 83)

Mezirow (2000) defined discourse as "the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better understand the meaning of an experience" (p. 14). It is discourse that generates conversation and stimulating reflection, exposing contradictions of popularly held beliefs or traditional thinking (Johnson, 1995). Mezirow's work implies the use of small intentional communities for reflection and action (Fleischer, 2006). The major elements of transformational learning, critical self-reflection and critical discourse (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2006), aim to understand what others mean or make ourselves understood through communication (Carter, 2002). Apte (2009) asked what do relationships, or learning groups do to contribute to transformative learning? As a result of Carter's (2002) research on women in the workplace and how relationships had influenced their life, career, and organization, four relationship categories were identified, revealing transformative learning to a greater or lesser degree.

***Utilitarian.*** First, utilitarian relationships are initiated to acquire useful knowledge and skills. In general, these relationships were non-transformative. Meaning schemes did not change, but the added knowledge did reinforce already held attitudes and beliefs (Carter, 2002). Although such a relationship may be trusting and share a commonality, it lacks the need for discourse or critically reflective dialogue others have found to be essential to transformative learning (Baumgartner, 2002; Fleischer, 2006; Mezirow, 1997a; Taylor, 2007). Further, those women who did encounter challenges in conversations with supervisors and colleagues did

indicate transformative learning had taken place (Carter, 2002).

**Love.** Carter (2002) also discovered a second relationship category, love relationships. The women experienced interactions where the line between personal and professional was blurred. These connections enhanced self-image, boosted confidence, and fostered friendships made of mutual trust, respect, and care for each other. Social interactions were at a peak in these types of relationships, prompting critical reflection and the realization that they were not alone (Baumgartner, 2002). Consequently, relationships that have the ability to give and receive love and support prove significant in the transformational learning process (Carter, 2002; Taylor, 2007). Additionally, Taylor (2007) explains that the “autonomous and formal nature” (p. 187) of transformative learning reveals the need for support, trust, friendship, and intimacy. Similarly, Eisen (2001), in his case study of peer-learning partnerships as a useful tool for professional development identified seven relational qualities: trust, non-evaluative feedback, nonhierarchical status, voluntary participation, partner selection, shared goals, and authenticity.

**Memory.** Third, Carter’s (2002) findings revealed the memory relationships category. For the women these were preserved and cherished relationships of the past. Meaning was constructed out of memories of conversations and experiences of one that was deceased. This leads to a greater understanding of legacy, appreciation for life, and the realization for action. It is important to note here that even if relationships are not in place to process experience, those determined to do so, forge on, recalling past relationships and experiences (Lyon, 2001). Relationships can leave such a deep impression that they can have lasting effects on the lifelong process of transformation. Additionally, Lyon (2001) found in her research of women that had disorienting experiences in a cross-cultural setting, that after the experience they sought continuously to seek relationships with others who had similar experiences. Even though the

transformational event had concluded, the transformational learning process continued long after the experience itself. Participants sought to recall or relive the experience, further continuing the process.

***Imaginative.*** Finally, Carter (2002) revealed a fourth relationship category, imaginative relationships. Imaginative is a relationship sustained by dialogue with ourselves. Periodically one engages in self-talk with fictional or spiritual beings. These would encompass listening to one's *inner voice* as a guide to action. This type of relationship further refines the understanding of purpose and self-awareness process. What better way to self-reflect? According to Lyon (2001), there is no conclusive end to transformation. Often, the conversation within can reveal consciousness, those underlining premises preventing us from moving toward a broader, more inclusive worldview (Baumgartner, 2002). As Freire (1970) remarks, we must move from a culturally dominated consciousness to an active, reflective consciousness. Thinking about why the problem is significant and critiquing the approach to the question (Fleischer, 2006) reveals the need for change in meaning schemes. Even social interaction with ourselves is important for the transformational learning process (Baumgartner, 2002).

**Fostering transformation.** An individual has to be receptive in a certain manner for transformational learning to be successful. Nichols and Dewerse (2010) emphasize that one of the most significant challenges to facilitating perspective transformation for learners occur around the nature of the disorienting student's experience, and their subsequent openness and ability to grow and utilize skills of self-reflection. If learners come with preconceptions or the particular forms experienced during, it hinders them from moving beyond the perspective of a spectator. The transformation may be limited or not occur at all. Different students all experience similar teaching and encounter the same concepts, yet the degree of transformation

differs sharply across individuals. Cranton (2002) observes that no one teaching method assures transformation, but there are certain factors that a leader or facilitator of a group can keep in mind as they prepare for the transformational learning process.

***Environment.*** Leaders need to be prepared to work and foster an environment conducive to transformation. Transformative learning is characterized by an internal shift in a frame of reference that can be facilitated but cannot be caused by a teacher (Nichols & Dewerse, 2010). For one to be receptive, they need to feel more than just welcomed. Each and every person must be embraced. Transformative relationships flourish in an atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance that challenges people without a fear of judgment (Carter, 2002). Expectations for transformation should be made clear from the beginning of the course, lesson, or teaching (Nichols & Dewerse, 2010).

***Participation.*** Conversations must go beyond instrumental learning. Leaders must challenge themselves and their own perspective to widen the focus of conversations (Carter, 2002). They must take part in the exploration with the learner, becoming a participant and a partner in discovering, recovering, and uncovering meaning and understanding. Teachers should listen to the student's stories and experiences, pulling out new thoughts and ideas while raising questions and bringing new possibilities to the table (Fleischer, 2006). "A lot of what happens is within the student, and the teacher just happens to say or do something that hooks into that person's thoughts or feelings" (Cranton, 2002, p. 66)

***Support.*** It is important for a leader of transformational learning to understand some students will see greater value in learning than others. Learners are stimulated to critical self-reflection by different teaching methods, such as a *provocative statement* from the teacher, a classmate's story, or an intriguing argument (Cranton, 2002). The perceived positive or negative

perception of learning will need to be considered as information is being shared and conversations are taking place. Students could very well lack the skills required for effective reflection (Nichols & Dewerse, 2010). Facilitating the process that leads to self-awareness and new understandings is essential.

**Transformational learning summary.** Transformational learning theory constructed by Mezirow (1990, 1991, 1997b, 2000) is an important theoretical framework in adult education. More specifically, this framework can be used in Evangelical Christian small groups. Research has shown that Evangelical churches could be doing a better job at small group learning and Mezirow's theoretical framework offers leaders and teachers of these groups insight into how one's meaning schemes are changed through the learning process. "At its core, transformative learning theory is elegantly simple" (Cranton, 2002, p. 64). The history and influence of the theory reveals the large extensiveness of transformational learning. Researchers and theorist who have built upon Mezirow's work uncover the various contexts transformational learning theory can be applied, including the significance of relationships in the transformational learning process. Finally, although learning is not at the sole discretion of the teacher, transformational learning can be fostered through the right environment that has clearly defined roles and support. More research is needed on the dynamics of transformative learning within the context of Evangelical groups. With a better understanding of transformational learning from the individual and group perspectives, leaders and educators in small groups will have an instrument to better equip learners.

### **Andragogical Learning**

The primary focus of this study will be applying transformational learning principles to Evangelical Christian adult small groups. Given this context, it is important to define and



understand the adult learning environment. Reviewing the literature of andragogy will help small group leaders and teachers understand how adults learn differently than children.

Additionally, while transformational learning offers new perspectives to leading and facilitating small groups, andragogy provides the foundation to a more effective adult learning environment.

Andragogy has been used for well over a century as a theory and guiding principles to describe adult learning. The term itself was largely unknown in the United State until Malcolm Knowles (1970) acquired and popularized it. His research that followed would shape the definition and practice of andragogy, as it is known for today. Researchers and scholars have struggled to establish andragogy as a theory and method for teaching adults (Chan, 2010; Cooper & Henschke, 2001; Henschke, 2011). Since 1970, researchers have responded to challenges and critiques while applying andragogy to meet specific contextual needs (Henschke, 2011). Consequently, establishing the necessity for specific principles for the practice of adult education (Zmeyov, 1998). Andragogy as a unique approach to meeting the needs of adult learners has been called a new field of human sciences and one of the new sciences of education (Chan, 2010; Zmeyov, 1998).

Andragogy describes the education and learning of adults using specific methods and strategies that are learner focused and teacher facilitated. The andragogical approach applies to different disciplines and settings, from the training of physicians to police officers to adult educators (Chan, 2010). Because of the widely applied principles and methods, andragogy is an ideal match for Evangelical Christian small group learning. Peer teachers such as those found leading and teaching small groups, although they may have a background in teaching at various levels, must learn to become adult educators (Lightfoot & Brady, 2005). “By and large, organizations ignore issues of adult and continuing education” (Jones & Hendry, 1994, p. 153).

Andragogical practice identifies and effectively resolves those issues. Henschke (2011) believes andragogy is a pillar of adult education despite the need for more empirical research. The core principles established by andragogy enable leaders and teachers designing and conducting adult learning to be more effective with the learning process (Knowles et al., 2015).

Andragogy is often used by educators to differentiate the practice of teaching adults versus the practice of teaching children (Lightfoot & Brady, 2005). According to Cooper and Henschke (2001), research on andragogy is limited, and many misunderstand the concept. Learning is conceptually described in more prescriptive ways as something that is passive and permanent (Jones & Hendry, 1994). Conversely, there is a need for more than a passive transfer of knowledge with adult learners (Chan, 2010). While organizations focus on formalized and prescriptive methods of learning, the needs of the learner are unmet (Jones & Hendry, 1994). Adults, instead, learn from being actively involved, making sense of the content, and applying what is learned in practical and tangible ways (Chan, 2010). Andragogy offers an alternative *process* model juxtapose to the more traditional *content* model (Knowles et al., 2015). Further, Zmeyov (1998) believes the principles of andragogy are not only needed in adult education, but in all forms of education.

**History of andragogy.** Henschke (1998) suggests that the principles of andragogy emerged much earlier than when the term was first used, as far back as the ancient times of the Israelites of the Bible. He notes that the meaning of the Hebrew words for learn, teach, instruct, guide, lead, and example describe methods of adult learning. Furthermore, Henschke suggests that the Hebrews perceived the process of learning as active inquiry and not passive, transmitted content. The Hebrew word for instruct, for instance, carries with it the idea of a proactive, self-directed learner being provided direction and feedback. Lai (1995) notes, Christianity, although

based on the canonized written text of the Bible, emerged primarily out of an oral Hebrew culture. He goes on to state that scripture readings were common in the temple or synagogue where meaning of the texts were openly discussed and debated among one another. Henschke (1998) considers the Bible and the Hebrew language to be an especially rich and fertile resource for andragogy. Subsequently, Sweetman and Ball (2002) based on their research of 125 distinct teaching situations of Jesus, concluded that while he utilized both pedagogical and andragogical methods, in the majority of situations Jesus used andragogical approaches to his teachings. Although such principles clearly emerged early on in human history and are apparent in Jesus' teachings, it was not until much later that adult education was discovered as a legitimate method of teaching.

Cooper and Henschke (2001) point out that the basis for adult education was formed in the late 18th and early 19th centuries in Britain and other European countries with the emergence of institutions that offered vocational training, extension courses, and correspondence education. Despite its early history, there is little doubt that andragogy was popularized in the 1970s and 1980s through the work of Malcolm Knowles (Cooper & Henschke, 2001; Henschke, 2011; Lightfoot & Brady, 2005; Reischmann, 2004; Zmeyov, 1998).

The term *andragogy* was first used by Alexander Kapp (1833) in a German publication describing Plato's impression that adults persist in learning into adulthood (Baumgartner, 2003; Cooper & Henschke, 2001; Reischmann, 2004). Zmeyov (1998) believes the origins of andragogy were influenced by philosophical and psychological theories of consciousness and the role they play in the individual's social and personal development. For many decades after Kapp, the term andragogy was unused even though adult education continued (Henschke, 2009). It was not until the 1920s that the term was resurrected by another German, Eugen Rosenstock-

Huessy, and it was his American contemporary, Eduard Lindeman, that brought the concept of andragogy to the United States (Henschke, 2009, 2011).

When Knowles (1984) first heard the term andragogy, he soon discovered leading European adult educators that had coined the term as a parallel to pedagogy were using it. The term andragogy comes from the Greek words, *andros*, meaning adult man and *ago*, meaning I guide. Combined, the terms literally mean *man-leading* (Melick & Melick, 2010). The meaning counters the term pedagogy, which means literally, *child-leading* (Melick & Melick, 2010). Knowles was a leading American adult education practitioner and theorist (Zmeyov, 1998). He originally saw pedagogy as a method of teaching only children and andragogy as the preferred method of teaching adults (Henschke, 2009). Initially, he constructed andragogy to oppose pedagogy (Reischmann, 2004). After his first book in 1970 was published, though, Knowles (1984) later learned teachers in elementary, secondary, and higher education had experimented with using his model and found that young people learned better with the andragogical model, as well. Additionally, he discovered teachers and trainers that worked with adults required pedagogical learning methods at times. Much of Knowles' work and experience was instilled into andragogy; so much so that it became his own. The learning theory as we know it today throughout the U.S. is primarily based on his work, and the concept of andragogy has taken on a much different meaning over the last century and a half. "[Andragogy] has a long and rich history that has shaped understanding of adult learning and continues to be a strong force in guiding the way adults learn" (Henschke, 2011, p. 34).

**Defining andragogy.** Andragogy is a philosophy of learning that places the learner's assessment, expectations, and readiness at the forefront of the planning and execution of learning. This approach offers students a life-centered experience that satisfies needs and

interests of individuals while appealing to a broad spectrum of people from various backgrounds and lifestyles. Andragogy is a concept that attempts to answer how and why adults learn (Harper & Ross, 2011). Labeled a practical approach, andragogy, enables learners to be self-directed and autonomous while teachers are the facilitators of learning (Reischmann, 2004). Zmeyov (1998) explains the teacher is another subject along with the students in the process of learning. Individuals are no longer passive objects in the process, but active subjects in his or her learning. Knowles et al. (2015) suggest that as a process model, andragogy is less concerned with transmitting information and more concerned with providing the resources one needs to acquire the information.

Much of Knowles' initial work focused on distinguishing andragogy from pedagogy. He defined pedagogy as the "art and science of teaching" and andragogy as the "art and science of helping others to learn" (Brown, 2006, p. 707). Rather than a learning theory, andragogy is an approach to learning, a set of principles, assumptions, or guidelines for practicing adult education (Chan, 2010). By examining the problems of adult education and learning, andragogy implies a scientific method examining all of the manifestations of learning, formal or informal, organized or self-guided (Henschke, 1998). The hallmark of Knowles' work is the six assumptions of motivation for learning that makes adults different from children:

1. Adults need to know the reason for learning something.
2. Experience (including error) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults need to be responsible for their own education and be involved in the creations of it.
4. Adults are most interested in learning those things having immediate relevance to them.

5. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.
6. Adults respond better to internal versus external motivators (Knowles et al., 2015).

Two very distinct aspects of andragogy are that it is learner focused and teacher facilitated.

***Learner focused.*** Andragogy is a practitioner's theory, both a respectful and engaging method that is learner focused (Henschke, 2011). Reischmann (2004) describes it as the "practical necessity of the education of adults" (p. 2). Knowles et al. (2015) found that adult students like being in charge of their own learning, do better when actively engaged, and achieve more when they understand to what end their learning is leading. Melick and Melick (2010) note, Knowles recognized adult experiences were different in both quantity and quality from children's and those individual experiences were some of the best resources for learning.

***Teacher facilitated.*** Andragogical learning happens more so through self-reflection, discovery, and experience than teachers lecturing (Reischmann, 2004). While adult learning is characterized as an individual exercise with some personal autonomy, it also requires facilitation. Adult learning happens through experience and people seeing connections between the different aspects of their lives, such as work, activities, relationships, and faith (Jones & Hendry, 1994). In adult education, the teacher takes on the role of facilitator, coach, and guide. The instruction is tailored to meet student interests while the planning, objectives, and activities involve not just the teacher, but the student, as well (Chan, 2010). Learning becomes relevant to both parties. It is not just about the content being conveyed, but how such content will be delivered. The learner takes an active role, working with the facilitator to communicate and plan down to the final delivered product, ensuring content, delivery, and end goals are met. In fact, Chan (2010) notes that andragogy improves communication between the student and instructor, promoting trust between them and enhancing student self-awareness.

Reflecting on Knowles' six assumptions and seeking to solve the low efficiency of learning among adults (Muneja, 2015), Zmeyov (1998) created his own list of fundamental principles of adult learning. Zmeyov (1998) considers education a service and these 10 principles provide further evolution to the theory and practice of andragogy (Muneja, 2015):

- Preponderance of self-directed learning: main mode for adult learners;
- Co-operative activities: adult learner, teacher, and other learners involved in the planning, realization, evaluation, and correction of the learning process;
- Experiential learning: the life experience of the learner that is used as a source of his or her own and others' learning;
- Individualization of learning: the learning in co-operation with the teacher and other learners creates an individual programme of learning, aiming for concrete objectives;
- Systemic learning: conforming objectives, contents, methods, and means of learning, including evaluation of results;
- Contextual learning: learning is organized within the context of the learners own anthroposphere, including occupational, social, and family activities;
- Actualization of the results of learning: learning of knowledge, skills, and qualities has immediate application in real life;
- Elective learning: the learner has freedom of choice in objectives, contents, forms, methods, sources, means, terms, time, place, evaluation procedures, and teacher;
- Development of educational needs: the learning process contributes to the creation of new educational needs and encourages the learner to pursue lifelong learning;
- Consciousness of learning: both the learner and teacher are aware of all elements and procedures in the learning process. (Zmeyov, 1998, p. 106-107)

Reischmann (2004) notes that there is a growing scholarly support for the conception of an andragogical approach to learning adults. “Andragogy contributes to the establishment of the democratic society in which learning is no longer controlled by educators but by learners” (Chan, 2010, p. 32). Andragogical learning is two pronged. It is both the science of understanding and supporting lifelong learning for adults (Reischmann, 2004). Adult learning is less about the passive transfer of knowledge from one person to another. It involves an active learning process where the student constructs their own knowledge, makes sense of their learning, and applies what they have learned (Chan, 2010). Henschke (1998) concludes,

[Andragogy is] a scientific discipline for the study of the theory, processes, technology, and anything else of value and benefit including learning, teaching, instructing, guiding, leading, and modeling/exemplifying a way of life, which would bring adults to their full degree of humaneness. (p. 8)

This discipline creates a unique and all-encompassing approach for the benefit of the learner and the teacher.

**Andragogical learning observations.** Evangelical small groups tend to follow an andragogy model of learning. For leaders of small groups, learning is about change. A central theme of small group learning is gaining knowledge and understanding of scripture and applying it to real life situations. It can often be assumed by teachers that students learn the same way they do (Melick & Melick, 2010). As with many adult education experiences, *how* learning in small groups is conducted is the assumed role of the leader, whether they want it or not. Like others who conduct adult education, small group leaders and teachers can take a more facilitative role in leading a group of adults.

The central figure in the learning process differentiates andragogy from other learning



models. Pedagogy is centered around the teacher, and the burden of learning (at least in appearance) is on that instructor to ensure the material is prepared, relevant, and delivered effectively to students who are less participatory and more passive in the learning process. Although the andragogical model includes pedagogical assumptions, it offers a set of alternative assumptions, speaking to the characteristics of each learning situation (Knowles et al., 2015). According to Chan (2010), it would be in the learner's best interest if teachers abandoned teacher-centered assumptions and applied learner-centered andragogical principles.

Many researchers and scholars have worked to establish andragogy as a proven theory and method for teaching adults (Henschke, 2011). The andragogy model puts the learner at the center of planning as the teacher becomes the facilitator. Attainment of knowledge then becomes the burden of all, and the learner is much more empowered and active in the learning process. The andragogy model possesses unique roles, sources, and environments for learning that produce distinctive results for adult learners. Bennetts, Elliston, and Maconachie (2012) conclude, "Learner involvement includes identifying their own training and development needs, formulating objectives and devising strategies to meet their learning plans" (p. 544).

***Roles for learning.*** Over the years, Knowles along with other researchers and theorists have tested and refined andragogy as a learning design. Henschke (2011) notes that andragogy is applied to a broad spectrum in various settings, such as the corporate workplace, industry, healthcare, government, higher education, religious education, and various levels of elementary, secondary, and remedial education. Andragogy is organic in that it takes place among learners in the context of learning in a wide variety of situations (Brown, 2006). It takes the individual away from what Zmeyov (1998) calls the obsolete rigidness of formal education.

Brown (2006) observes, activities and experiences naturally engage adults in learning that

leads to changes in thinking, values, and behavior. Zmeyov (2006) explains that the learning of an adult is determined by his or her life context. By taking the lead, the individual's experience and contextual elements organically contribute to learning. Rather than through formal and structured training, adults learn most effectively through the actual day to day jobs and routines (Jones & Hendry, 1994). Brown (2006) explains that one's perspective changes as they mature from one of delayed application to that of immediacy of application of knowledge. This results in a shift in learning orientation from subject-centeredness to problem centeredness.

One of the defining attributes of the andragogy model is that learners are self-directed and autonomous (Henschke, 2011; Reischmann, 2004). It serves adult learners well who are motivated to learn and according to Knowles (1984), a person's motivation to learn shifts from external to internal. Zmeyov (1998) observes that one of the crucial assumptions is that adult learners are different from child learners because as a person matures, his or her concept of self moves from being dependent toward being a self-directed human being. Consequently, a major theme of andragogy is to assist adult learners to decrease dependency and increase their ability to learn independently (Cooper & Henschke, 2001). Adult learners taking responsibility for their development begins with why learning must take place (Jones & Hendry, 1994).

Zmeyov (1998) observes that within andragogical learning individuals become the real subjects of learning. There is a change in the roles and functions of both the learner and teacher usually found in a traditional setting. Andragogy is best used when it is adapted to fit the individual learner's uniqueness and learning situation (Knowles et al., 2015). While the individual student is the principal performer, the teacher in adult education is primarily the expert in learning technology and the organizer of learning activities (Zmeyov, 1998). Rather than a presenter of content, the teacher is a facilitator of learning (Henschke, 2011; Reischmann,

2004). The teacher and the student cooperate in all stages of learning: planning, realization, evaluation, and correction (Zmeyov, 1998).

Cooper and Henschke (2001) suggest several steps educators can take to encourage self-directed learning in adult learners. First, educators must decrease learner dependency by helping them use learning resources and define learning needs. Second, facilitators must help learners take responsibility for their own learning. Third, the learner with guidance from the teacher should organize the learning that is relevant. Fourth, educators must foster learner decision-making and choices while encouraging learner judgment and integration of the material. Fifth, teachers must facilitate problem-posing and problem-solving while providing support. Finally, this all must be done in a safe learning climate that emphasizes experiential methods.

***Sources for learning.*** Andragogy is more than just adults being taught (Reischmann, 2004). Andragogy promotes relevant learning experiences (Chan, 2010). It provides learners with the tools and resources to acquire and decipher information. Learners utilize their own experiences to solve problems (Chan, 2010). Adults bring with them a wealth of knowledge and experience (Brown, 2006). That “growing reservoir of experience” (pp. 105-106) becomes a resource for learning (Zmeyov, 1998). Reischmann (2004) notes andragogy combines the education of a person’s inner personality or character and their competencies through not only teaching but self-reflection and life experience.

Andragogy is most effective when there is quality contextual learning. Adult education is successful and meaningful when an individual can connect general life events and activities to problem-solving (Jones & Hendry, 1994). “Unforeseen and random events in the problem-solving process create new learning experiences which add to the total learning value of the activity” (Jones & Hendry, 1994, p. 159). Foote (2015) states, “Humans innately look for ways

to interpret and impose meaning on experience, and learning is intricately connected to sense-making” (p. 85). The learners’ experience is their primary and richest learning resource (Cooper & Henschke, 2001; Knowles et al., 2015). Baumgartner (2003) emphasizes that educators must understand the significance of the context that shapes a person’s beliefs, ideas, and experiences.

***Environment for learning.*** According to Knowles et al. (2015), there is increasing concern over the quality of learning environments. Traditional learning tends to be more formalized and prescriptive, giving little attention to the needs and learning styles of individuals (Jones & Hendry, 1994). Conversely, andragogy creates an environment where learning needs and styles are developed. Andragogy facilitates cooperative learning, and as partners, student and instructor work together to determine content and methods to meet those learner needs (Chan, 2010). The andragogical method assumes the environment will support adult learning both physically and psychologically (Melick & Melick, 2010).

The Andragogical model establishes understanding and collaboration between learner and teacher, enhancing the relationship (Chan, 2010). Adults want to be active in the learning processes (Cooper & Henschke, 2001). Cooper and Henschke (2001) suggest the ideal adult learning environment includes conducive learning, cooperative learning, diagnosing needs, setting objectives, designing the sequence, conducting activities, and evaluating the progress. The ideal environment for adult education that andragogy establishes is a “climate of orderliness, clearly defined goals, careful explanation of expectations and opportunities, openness of the system to inspection and questioning, and honest and objective feedback” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 55). One major task of the facilitator is to ensure optimum learning conditions (Foley, 1992).

***Results of learning.*** Andragogic principles help the adult learner discover differences in where they are now and where they want to be. The practice of andragogy not only gives adults

the opportunity to learn what they want to learn; it creates a learning environment that could extend far beyond one session. Andragogy helps adults establish a pattern of lifelong, self-directed learning (Melick & Melick, 2010). The results of learning that is designed correctly, should “effect changes in the knowledge, skill, and attitudes of individuals, groups, or communities” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 11). However, “what people can do and what they end up doing are quite distinct” (Jones & Hendry, 1994, p. 158).

Christians emphasize God and man as his creation, focusing on change in values and attitudes that transform daily living (Melick & Melick, 2010). The critical element in determining the learner’s own gap between where they are and where they need to be is the learner’s own perception (Knowles et al., 2015). The Christian educator’s role as facilitators, encouragers, and role models is to help them self-assess (Melick & Melick, 2010).

**Andragogy learning summary.** Andragogy has become almost synonymous with adult learning. There are important distinctions between just teaching adults and the andragogical practice of adult learning. Andragogy can supply the very best aspects of learning in Evangelical Christian small groups and compliments the transformational learning process by addressing the unique needs of adult learners. Adults learn best through their own experiences and the experiences of others. “Crucial to effective learning is the richness and accessibility of resources—both material and human” (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 54). Peer teachers and leaders of small groups can benefit from knowing and understanding andragogy. The more they know how to organize and execute adult learning using such principles will increase the effectiveness of the learning environment.

### **Small Group Learning**

Both transformational learning theory and andragogy learning methods assume some

aspects of group learning. There is emphasis placed on learner and teacher/facilitator relationships and learner-to-learner interaction. There is a need in transformational and andragogical learning methods for objective, open, and equal rational discourse (Eisen, 2001). According to Foley (1992), adult students not only like being given the chance to work on issues that are of concern for them from their own experience, but they also appreciate the opportunity to learn from other's experiences. Small group learning promotes transformative learning by empowering individuals to revise their expectations, assumptions, or perspectives through exploring different ways of viewing the world around them (Cranton, 1996). Additionally, Donahue and Gowler (2014) acknowledge, that there is a substantial amount of Biblical instruction to Christians to practice faith and ministry together, supporting and regularly encouraging one another. Such statements as *love one another* and *serve one another* appear over 20 times in the New Testament.

Rynsburger and Lamport (2008) stress, churches have structured education of their congregation around small groups being effective in promoting growth. In order for a group setting to be transformative, individuals must take responsibility for their own learning and challenge themselves and others during the change process (Cranton, 1996). Learners must be willing to share in the community experience (Shirley, 2008). According to Shirley (2008), the church must provide nourishing, influential, and developmental experiences along with teaching that includes both formal and informal experience, study, and application from a biblical worldview foundation. Smith and MacGregor (2000) contest that bringing people together provides "chances to learn from and with one another, to practice communicating and working together to accomplish a common task, and to find out more about one another as people" (p. 77).

**Origins of evangelical small groups.** The use of small groups as one of the primary purposes for growth among believers has existed throughout the history of the church (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). Experience through group study comprises the primary method for learning in the church (Shirley, 2008). Common Evangelical group learning experiences include conferences, workshops, Bible study programs, Sunday School classes, home groups, accountability groups, gender groups, and special interest groups (Shirley, 2008). Each different group setting typically delivers some form of Bible teaching and/or community experience (Shirley, 2008). Donahue and Gowler (2014) note:

Over the last 40 years the use of small groups for building community and fostering spiritual growth has gained wide acceptance across North American churches of all sizes and theological persuasions. Indeed, the rapid growth of group life in churches has led observers to refer to the phenomenon as the “small group movement” in church ministry. (p. 118)

This movement sprouted in order to counter fragmentation and anonymousness within our society while renewing efforts to reunite spiritual growth in community with one another (Wuthnow, 1994).

***Early church group life.*** Jesus himself models small group learning as he encouraged regular fellowship with groups of his followers that included time with the larger crowds, the 12 disciples, and his three closest followers (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). After Jesus’ death and resurrection, we read in scripture that gatherings of groups both large and small for fellowship, prayer, and eating together were a regular occurrence for the early church (Acts 2:42-46). Donahue and Gowler (2014) observe that there were many small group ministries organized in the early days of the church for things, such as addressing complaints, prayer and fasting, and

commissioning missionaries. House churches and small gatherings was how Christianity spread because at the time buildings for churches such as these were nonexistent (Donahue & Gowler, 2014; Wuthnow, 1994). Once the Bible was canonized, regular people were dependent upon priests to read and interpret it (Lai, 1995). According to Lai (1995), people were mostly illiterate during this period of Christianity and written text was not widely available. Eventually the “government of the Church” came to rule over and control what was taught (Lai, 1995, p. 10). There was little room for small group learning.

***Western church group movements.*** Two significant events would shape small group life for years to come. The first was the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517 which would also set the stage for the practice of Christianity in the United States (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). According to Wuthnow (1994), “The seeds of the Reformation in the sixteenth century often grew in small gatherings that met in private homes” (p. 41). The second event was the teachings of John Wesley and his design for small groups in both Britain and the United States. Small groups according to Wesley’s model were purposed for spiritual formation and accountability set apart from and in addition to the regular church services each week (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). Wuthnow (1994) notes that those churches that increased in number most were ones that used small groups effectively. The post World War II era in America saw a number of ministries emerge that developed small group studies in order to promote growth among believers, including the Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and Inter Varsity Christian Fellowship (Donahue & Gowler, 2014).

***American small group life.*** The small group movement in the U.S. can be traced back to the 1960’s with American’s renewed interest in spirituality and the dismantling of conventional forms of community, such as families and neighborhoods (Wuthnow, 1994). According to



Donahue and Gowler (2014), churches in the United States predominantly began using small groups as an essential part of building community and encouraging spiritual growth in the 1980's. By 1991, 40% of adults in America belonged to some sort of small group, including civic groups, recovery programs, book clubs, Sunday school classes, and Bible study groups (Wuthnow, 1994).

In more recent years, small group ministries have begun being used by churches to reach people outside the church in order to engage a post-Christian society (Walton, 2011). In addition, small groups have served as a way to remedy the increasing growth of congregational size (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). In order to remain effective and relevant, a church with over 1,000 people can scale down to smaller pockets of people, making it easier for individuals to find a place to belong, a common theme among small group ministries today, especially in larger congregations (Dougherty & Whitehead, 2011). Donahue and Gowler (2014) concede, small group life is now “firmly woven into the fabric of the North American church” (p.121). Regular small group meetings are at least a small part, if not a significant part of a church's ministry, providing a means for people to encourage one another, pray, serve, and learn together (Donahue & Gowler, 2014).

**Theology of small group practice.** Small groups are one way the church fulfills its obligation to nurture the spiritual maturity of believers by equipping individuals for the work of ministry so that everyone may be presented mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28; Grudem, 1994). A group is two or more independent people united by shared expectations, interacting and influencing one another through social interaction (Forsyth, 1998; Rosado, 1998). Evangelical small groups are where spiritual growth is fostered as individuals come together to live, grow, and share their faith in focused discussions (Donahue & Robinson 2012; Milacci, 2006). There

are three general characteristics to any group:

1. Members are bonded socially.
2. Members share common beliefs, interests, and values.
3. Members interact in patterned and distinguishing ways (Rosado, 1998).

Small groups, by fulfilling the sense of community that God has created us for, shapes and changes people's lives (Cloud, Townsend, & Donahue, 2012).

Theories and principles behind the practice of Evangelical small groups vary extensively. Howerton (n.d.) defines small groups as a micro-community of Christian followers doing life together. The ministry of small groups is a foundational teaching of the New Testament and should be considered and crucial component of biblical Evangelicalism (Bethel Grace Baptist Church, n.d.). "Small groups, unlike straightforward Bible studies, make disciples through the utilization of and processing of God's story as it intersects with our stories" (Howerton, n.d., para. 4). Jesus himself and the early Christian church modeled small group learning. Additionally, community learning is encouraged in scripture through the pen of Paul, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God" (Colossians 3:16). Further, the author of Hebrews states plainly:

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called "today," that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin... And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Hebrews 3:12-13; 10:24-25)

Howerton (n.d.) concludes that the experiential learning found in small group practice helps individuals in community with one another process biblical knowledge, utilize Scriptural truth to know God, and better understand life lived in relationship with Him. Cloud et al. (2012) urge that change requires community and group life brings about transformation.

**Strategy of small groups.** Specific models related to Evangelical small groups provide insight into how small group learning occurs. These models in general were birthed in a single church, shared, and eventually adopted by other churches through books and conferences. In addition, several group or team models that promote transformation offer insight for Evangelical small groups. The following theories and principles give rise to guiding strategies for Evangelical small group learning.

***Evangelical small group models.*** Many of the small group models and principles have some resemblance to either the cell church model or the meta-church model (Boren & Egli, 2014). Table 1 presents several of the mainstream models and their key principles. While there is clear applicability to small groups, not one model fits every group from one church to the next and in some cases from one small group to the next (Boren & Egli, 2014; Gladen, 2011; McNeal, 2011; Osborne, 2008; Searcy & Thomas, 2008; Stanley & Willits, 2005). Although many of these models take on a similar shape and may appear indistinguishable from each other looking in from the outside, there are distinctive marks.

Evangelical small group models offer leaders clear guidelines for implementing and successfully maintaining small group ministries within the larger context of the local and global church. Rosado (1998) notes that small group interest has generated a significant amount of literature based on theory. However, these models have been put into practice and the results disseminated through books, conferences, and seminars.

Table 1

*Mainstream Evangelical Small Group Models and Central Principles*

Evangelical Small Group Models	Central Principles
Cell Church Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Small groups exist for both edification and evangelism.</li> <li>- Meetings include not just Bible study.</li> <li>- Relational evangelism and serving needs of unbelievers is emphasized.</li> </ul>
Meta-Church Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Overall goal is the intentional experience of community.</li> <li>- Emphasis on a church of small groups rather than a church with small groups.</li> <li>- Variety of types of groups, including pastoral care, Bible knowledge, internal administration, and serving.</li> </ul>
Groups of 12 Model (G12)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Discipleship system that equips each member to start own small group within first year.</li> <li>- Emphasis on external multiplication by targeting specific people groups, such as businessmen, women, students, and couples.</li> <li>- Leaders of groups are also members of a leaders G12, and also a part of a G12 that encourages and equips leaders under them.</li> </ul>
Geographic Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Close geographic proximity is needed for community.</li> <li>- Small groups grow deeper naturally when people live closer.</li> <li>- Members join groups according to where they live.</li> <li>- Focus is on edification and evangelism.</li> <li>- Groups are encouraged to grow and multiply.</li> <li>- Weekly gatherings connect groups with other groups for teaching and equipping.</li> </ul>
Missional Communities Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Radical, more experimental model that has many variations.</li> <li>- Members are living out their faith in tangible forms, serving and sharing the gospel.</li> <li>- Organized in groups of 20 to 50 people.</li> <li>- Groups are subdivided into small groups for ministry and service.</li> </ul>
Semester Model – Multiple Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Groups are semester based with distinct begin and end dates that cycles three times a year.</li> <li>- Groups are organized around common interests.</li> <li>- People are free to join groups of their choice based on interest and need.</li> </ul>
Semester Model – Single Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A diversity of group types is encouraged.</li> <li>- Groups have distinct begin and end dates, typically 10 weeks.</li> <li>- Groups all study the same sermon-based content.</li> <li>- Focus of meetings is on Bible discussion and application, sharing needs, and prayer.</li> <li>- Primary goal is to assimilate members into the full life of the church.</li> </ul>
North Point Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People are methodically guided into groups.</li> <li>- Starter groups last eight weeks that allow people to try out group life.</li> </ul>

(continued)

Evangelical Small Group Models	Central Principles
Church-Wide Campaign Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– If successful, group members sign a group covenant and continue meeting.</li> <li>– Groups are closed for one and a half to two years.</li> <li>– Multiplication of groups is encouraged at the end of each cycle.</li> <li>– Small groups are embedded and integrated in everything the church does.</li> <li>– Groups are the primary delivery system for spiritual formation and fostering healthy lives.</li> <li>– Objective is to start as many short-term groups as possible.</li> <li>– A host for each group is identified and given all resources needed, including video curriculum and devotional guide.</li> <li>– Study is sermon series based.</li> <li>– Goal of all groups is to practice five purposes: worship, fellowship, discipleship, ministry, and evangelism.</li> <li>– The hope is a leader from the short-term group will arise and then receive training.</li> </ul>

***Learning communities model.*** Subsequent to understanding the popular Evangelical small group models, it is important to understand several secular group or team models that are applicable to transformational learning theory. Learning communities often refers to college student groups or professional development groups where learning takes place within community settings. Current social movements exist within higher education to reduce class sizes and introduce innovatively new ways to deliver curriculum in order to promote learning communities among students (Smith & MacGregor, 2000). On the other hand, corporations are seeking better ways to train and develop employees using learning communities. According to Hord (2009), professional learning encompasses “habitual activity where the group learns how to learn together continuously” (p. 40). Lambert (2003) points out that community is more than just a gathering of people in a social setting. Community involves a shared focus of purpose, caring that is mutual, and determination that everyone is truthful.

Learning communities are andragogical in nature. Fundamental to the practice is a shift from instructor-centered to learner-centered. Additionally, learners are self-initiative, working in

collaboration with other learners. The learning communities model offers several key principles for Evangelical small groups. First, learning is conducted for one another, by one another. Learning is a collective effort that intentionally addresses the needs of the students. Second, members work together to accomplish a common task. Power and authority among community members is distributed along with structured support of conditions, such as time, place, and resources. Lastly, participants of learning communities find out more about one another as people. Through collective learning, sharing, and feedback, there is individual and corporate growth (Hord, 2009).

***Group needs model.*** The group needs model comprises three pairs of six needs. These six related needs work together all of the time. Bellman and Ryan (2009) contest that groups are central to our existence and to meeting our needs as human beings. An extraordinary group, in particular, is defined as one which members achieve exceptional results while both individually and collectively experiencing a shift in how they view the world (Bellman & Ryan, 2014). Bellman and Ryan (2014) examined extraordinary groups and found eight observable actions members of the groups acknowledged as important to the success as a team. The performance indicators are:

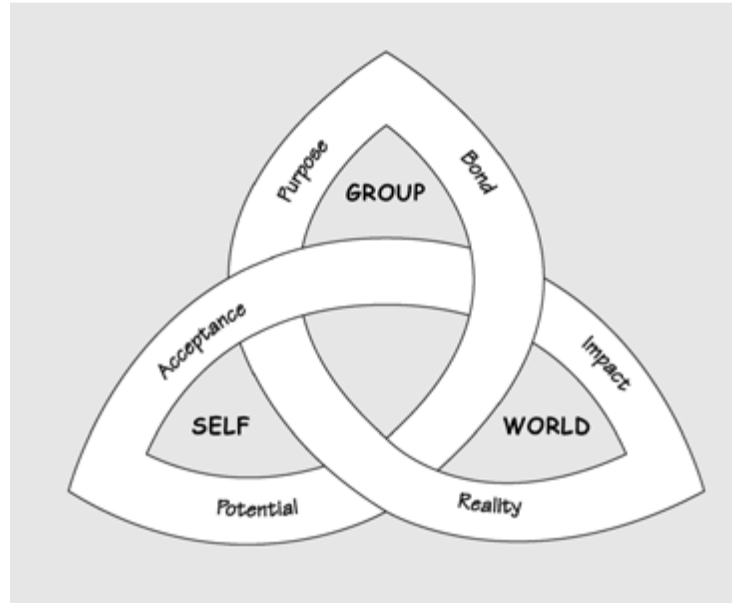
- *Compelling purpose* inspires and stretches members to make the group the top priority.
- *Shared leadership* shows that each member feels responsible for group success.
- *Just-enough-structure* is put in place to move the group forward.
- *Full engagement* shows in member energy and enthusiasm.
- *Embracing differences* pulls members to value and take advantage of their differences.

- *Unexpected learning* takes the group where they did not expect to go.
- *Strengthened relationships* bond members with each other.
- *Great results* usually are exceeded the expectations of the group. (Bellman & Ryan, 2014, p. 614)

Bellman and Ryan (2014) charge that groups of people that use the extraordinary performance indicators as a framework promotes open discussions that encourages phenomenal outcomes. Foley (1992) found that while people desire to work on their own issues from their own experiences, they also value the opportunity to listen and learn from other group members' experiences. Bellman and Ryan (2009) identified three pairs of group needs each individual desires to promote extraordinary groups. Figure 1 shows a representation of how all six needs in three pairs relate to each other. Forsyth and Kelley (1994) state, successful groups are made up of members who take more personal responsibility for the performance of the group while members of groups that fail take less responsibility. Additionally, people overall take more responsibility for group success than they do group failure.

***Reflexive practice groups model.*** The reflexive group learning model offers practical application to Evangelical small group learning. Reflexivity is used to critically examine our actions and the impact of those actions by identifying the underlying assumptions (Cunliffe, 2004). Gubi (2011) defines reflexivity as a way for individuals to process personal and spiritual development. Consequently, reflexive groups are a community of individuals critically reflecting and self-assessing their own development and growth, as well as the group. In other words, "Reflexive groups operate as a coming together of unique individuals with experiences of journeying to be one in a community of self-exploration and Divine revelation" (Gubi, 2011, p. 56). Small groups that are reflexive in nature offer an environment that specifically builds

relationships, facilitates growth, and increases our understanding of God.



*Figure 1.* Group needs model. Reprinted from “The Group Needs Model: A New Tool for Creating Extraordinary Groups,” by G. M. Bellman & K. D. Ryan, 2009, *OD Practitioner*, 41(4), p. 48. Copyright 2009 by the authors.

Gubi (2011) charges that although small groups are a significant part of healthy churches with clear directives and agenda’s, there is little opportunity for the *non-directiveness* of reflexive groups. Graf (2012) suggests that every facet of church life should include reflexive characteristics, such as warmth, authenticity, and intimacy. Gubi (2011) insists that reflexive groups enable a transformational experience and we can only reach our full potential if we are in community with one another. Reflexive practice groups do fit well with transformative learning model and andragogy. Both emphasize learner centered education and reflection, and as Foley (1992) emphasizes, healthy learning groups are self-directing organisms. Subsequently, Gubi (2017) recommends a systematic, yet fluid approach to implementing reflexive practice groups. He suggests reflexive groups:

- Should not be structured on content.



- Should consist of six to 10 participants who agree on confidentiality and practicalities.
- Should meet weekly.
- Should be facilitated by an external facilitator that keeps the group focused, embodying and exemplifying servanthood, service, and hospitality.
- Should encourage participants to listen deeply, share appropriately and facilitate each other.
- Should be mindful of aspects that may limit the group and do what they can to overcome them.
- Should be aware when the process might become unhelpful.
- Should keep the movement of the meeting as fluid as possible.

Such as is the intention of this study, Gubi (2017) concludes that reflexivity groups enable for a more holistic approach to spiritual development and personal well-being.

**Assessing small groups.** Assessing small group learning is not always natural, but essential and should be a part of the planning process (PursueGOD Network, 2016). Lamport and Rynsburger (2008) suggest that awareness of internal and external forces that may affect the group is important for any leader of small groups. Some of the internal forces that might influence group members include “individual life histories; information and knowledge each person possesses; personal attitudes, goals, values, and self-concept; individual motives such as the drive for security, affection, status, and belonging; a person’s sense of identity; and individual personality traits” (p. 392). Further, the external forces that most affect small groups include a clear purpose, group dynamics, and cohesion. Lamport and Rynsburger assert that leaders of small groups must thoughtfully plan for these forces then later observe and consider

how learning within the group can be accomplished appropriately.

Group learning can provide the optimum learning conditions, but it is important to assess small groups on two levels, individual group members and the group itself (Foley, 1992; PursueGOD Network, 2016). First, leaders must assess where the individuals in the group are at in their faith and relationship with God. This assessment will help to know how and when to share the right truth. Individuals will be at different stages of growth and maturity. Understanding everyone's level of knowledge and pursuit of God is essential for leaders of small groups. Additionally, leaders must examine the progress of the group itself (PursueGOD Network, 2016). This assessment will help leaders and remind the group member of purpose, goals, relationship, and the kind of environment they are trying to create. Real transformation among members of groups begins by examining expectations, assumptions, and perspectives through increased self-awareness and empowerment (Cranton, 1996). Assessment is essential to the transformational process.

**Small group learning summary.** The Biblical instruction is clear. People were created to commune with God and others (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). Walton (2011) observes that the value of small groups is found in the “deepening knowledge of God, building meaningful relationships and accountability for Christian living and outreach” (p. 103). Further, Donahue and Gowler state, small groups will be even more important to personal growth and development if Christianity is to maintain influence in the United States. Small group life remains an important aspect to American churches. Dougherty and Whitehead (2011) conclude people involved in small groups show higher rates of commitment and participation in the larger church than those not involved in small groups. They attend more frequently, give more of their time and money, and have an overall greater sense of belonging. Donahue and Gowler (2014) affirm,

“church-based small group ministries should become an even greater emphasis of their respective congregations based on their potential to cultivate the communal solidarity necessary to help men and women ‘keep the faith’” (p. 129). Even more is there a need for small group leaders and teacher of Evangelical small groups to create an environment that is transforming for the individual, the group, and the church.

## **Summary**

Small groups are an essential part of the Evangelical Christian churches with well-established roots in early church history and American church life (Gladen, 2011). Consequently, creating a life-changing small group experience by fostering transformation through Biblical teaching and training is an essential mission of Evangelical churches. The goal of this literature review was to discover the ways transformational learning theory and the practice of andragogy can have a significant impact on Christian Evangelical small group learning. “There can be little doubt that transformative approaches to learning are appropriate for theological education” (Nichols & Dewerse, 2010, p. 47). Understanding transformative learning theory, the practice of andragogy, and how they both can enhance the small group experience to promote personal transformation, will benefit leaders, teachers, and participants.

Mezirow’s transformative learning remains a predominant theoretical framework of adult learning (Kitchenham, 2008; Taylor, 2007). Changes in the frames of reference lead to new ways of interpreting meaning that leads to guiding our actions. Critical reflection of content, process, and premise guide the learning process. Through transformational learning adult learners are empowered, value the experience more, go beyond just grasping concepts, and truly grow in faith (Cranton, 1994; Nichols & Dewerse, 2011; Tolliver & Tisdell, 2006). Additionally, regular discourse has an impact on the transformative process. Common

relationships with self and others, utilitarian, love, memory, and imaginative can reveal the need for change (Carter, 2002; Fleischer, 2006). Although no certain factors assure transformation, leaders must be prepared to foster transformation by considering the learning environment, learner participation, and learner support. As a result, it is important to understand the adult learning environment.

Andragogy is a guiding philosophy of principles that offers teachers and facilitators specific methods and strategies for adult learning. Like transformational learning, andragogy can be applied to a variety of disciplines and settings (Chan, 2010). History suggests that andragogical roots go as far back as the Hebrew people. Additionally, Jesus while on this Earth clearly approached learning from an andragogical perspective. Andragogy places the learner's assessment, expectations, and readiness at the forefront of the planning and execution of learning. The two very distinct aspects to this method are learner focused and teacher facilitated. Learners are engaged rather than passive and teachers are guiding rather than lecturing (Henschke, 2011; Reischmann, 2004). Andragogical learning is self-directed by the students, organic, and experiential (Brown, 2006; Henschke, 2011; Reischmann, 2004). Subsequently, learners are given the tools and resources to acquire and decipher information themselves, using their own experiences to solve problems (Chan, 2010). Andragogy creates an ideal learning environment for adults that is conducive, cooperative, and diagnosing (Cooper & Henschke, 2001).

Community plays a significant role in the small group learning process. Equally, the transformative and andragogical process requires reflection and discourse in a group environment (Eisen, 2001). By seeing the world through others, small group learning empowers individuals to revise their expectations, assumptions, or perspectives (Cranton, 1996). While the

theory and practice of small group learning varies, there are clear biblical mandates for Evangelicals to gather together for learning and fellowship. Small group strategies that include ministry models and several secular models can be incorporated to provide optimum transformative learning conditions.

Because transformative learning and andragogy are so closely related, the 10 phases of transformation and the six assumptions of adult learning can be considered essential elements for various learning environments, including Evangelical small group learning. Christians are in a constant transformation process not only thinking and learning about their faith, but also doing what they learn, actively manifesting their relationship with Christ (Shirley, 2008). Andragogy is a proven way of conducting experiential adult learning and certainly is applicable to small group learning. By adopting an andragogical, transformative approach to learning, small group leaders and teachers, will be better prepared to create an experience that fosters transformation through Biblical teaching and training. In order for adoption of such principles to be successful, more research on how transformative learning, andragogy, and group strategy come together to create an ideal learning and transformational environment is needed.

### Chapter 3: Research Methods

This study focused on developing a theory on how transformative learning takes place in an Evangelical small group learning environment by interviewing individuals who regularly participate in a small group and report that they have experienced change within such an environment. “The researcher will seek to listen to participants and build an understanding based on what is heard” (Creswell, 2013, p. 29). These interviews uncovered the elements found in transformational learning theory that fostered transformation within small groups. This resulted in the development of transformational learning principles for small groups. This chapter provides an overview of the steps and process undertaken in the study. Included are the review of the problem statement, the purpose of the study, and the research questions. Second, a description of the research methodology and rationale. Third, a discussion of the setting, including the population sample, the research instrument, and the sample procedures. Lastly, an introduction to a data analysis technique is given.

**Problem statement.** There is a lack of Evangelical Christians experiencing personal transformation within church sanctioned small groups. According to the Barna Group (2015), 52% of churchgoers believe the church does a good job of helping people grow spiritually. Among pastors of those churches, only 1% believe that churches are helping people grow spiritually. Some pastors and leaders lack significant clarity and ability to design and implement adult learning programs within the church that are effective at shaping and transforming lives (Gorman, 2001). Shirley (2008) observes, “Local churches are not achieving stellar results in transforming the lives and worldviews of their members” (p. 207). Nevertheless, learning that takes place in Christian Evangelical small group settings, such as Bible Studies, Sunday school, and other church sanctioned gatherings are meant to be transformative, yet little transformation

appears to be taking place in American churches (Barna Group, 2010, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015; Shirley, 2008). Therefore, there is an opportunity to discover the transformational learning elements of the Evangelical Christian small group experience that foster personal transformation in adults, helping individuals grow and experience all that God has for them.

**Purpose of study.** The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover the transformational learning elements of an Evangelical Christian small group experience that foster personal transformation in adults. Elements that can be incorporated into Biblical teaching and group meetings are identified to assist leaders and teachers in their planning, execution, and assessment of learning. Incorporating transformational elements will help learners “uncover truth and acquire skills resulting in life-change that leads to the fulfillment of personal goals” (Melick & Melick, 2010, p. 113)

**Research questions.** The following research question and sub-questions were used to guide the study in an attempt to form a theory of transformational learning within Evangelical Christian small groups:

- What transformational learning elements in an Evangelical Christian small group experience foster personal transformation in adults?

Sub-questions:

- What elements contribute to transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements deter transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements contribute to a growing and deepening relationship with God?

### **Research Methodology and Rationale**

The primary research design was an analysis of interviews with small group leaders,

teachers, and participants. The questions asked focused on how each individual experiences the process of transformational learning in small groups. This qualitative study used Grounded Theory (Figure 2) and relied heavily on the coding of answers. Based on the data collected from individuals, a theory of elements that contributed to transformational learning is provided (Creswell, 2013). Grounded Theory was chosen because the study is seeking to better understand the elements of Evangelical small groups that contribute (or do not contribute) to transformational learning.

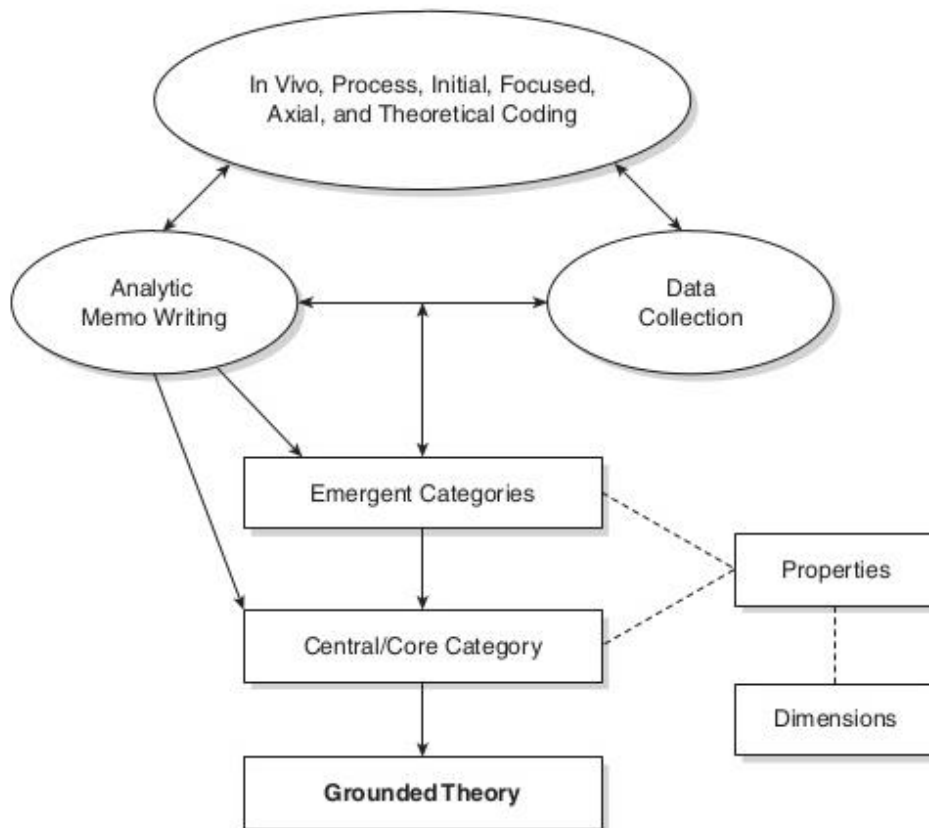


Figure 2. An elemental model for developing “classic” grounded theory. Reprinted from *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, by J. Saldaña, 2013, p. 53, Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications. Copyright 2013 by the author. Reprinted with permission.

Grounded theory is regarded as one of the first approaches to qualitative inquiry that is both methodical and systematic (Saldaña, 2013). According to Saldaña (2013) this approach



involves a series of cumulative cycles of coding that eventually leads to the development of a theory *grounded* in the data itself. Major characteristics of grounded theory according to Creswell (2013) and Saldaña (2013) include explaining a process or action with the end goal of developing a theory of the process or action. Additionally, analytic memoing is a major component of the major stages that lead to the theory. As Figure 2 illustrates, the researcher writes down ideas while data is collected and analyzed. Further, the constant comparing of data understood from study participants generates ideas that lead to the theory. The evolving theory process is characterized as a back and forth between participant interviews, the data collected, and filling in gaps or elaborating on how it works (Creswell, 2013).

### **Setting**

This study was conducted in an Evangelical church in the greater Los Angeles, California area over a short period of two months. Contact was made with the small group pastor at the church in order to gain access to individual group members. Group leaders were given a communication (see Appendix A) to send to small group members via email. The communication was sent to over 300 small group members describing the criteria for the study and inviting those that had an interest in participating in the study to contact the researcher to set up an interview. Using this purposeful sampling method helped identify and select individuals that have experienced a change while attending a small group (Palinkas et al., 2013). Additionally, the researcher requested an announcement be made at small group meetings.

Interviews were scheduled as contact was made with those members interested in participating. Interviews were conducted at the convenience of the small group members and took place on church grounds or in a semi-private place, such as a Starbucks. The nature of the study was driven by Evangelical Christian values and interviews were conducted in an open and

honest manner.

### **Population, Sample and Sampling Procedures**

Leaders, teachers, and regular participants of small groups were interviewed that indicated interest in participating and had experienced transformation while attending small groups. Small group members from the church were included in the study, but participants were asked to voluntarily participate in the interviews. Those that indicated they would like to be included in the interview process were contacted individually to schedule a time with the researcher. Leedy and Ormrod (2005) indicate that the general sample size of a qualitative study is typically five to 25 subjects. The researcher interviewed 16 individuals who had participated in a small group and claimed to have experienced transformation based on the responses from the communication.

A typical interview was more of an informal conversation. The researcher listened intently for meaningful responses, expressions, and subtle cues while the interviewee did most of the talking (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). This semi-structured interview process allowed for the conversation to flow naturally, following tangents as necessary, while maintaining a sense of protocol. After the interviews concluded, review and analysis of the data collected was conducted to discover common themes.

### **Human Subject Considerations**

This study involved interviews with an adult population. Participants were small group members from the church. Permission was obtained from the leadership of the church to send the communication (see Appendix A) soliciting potential interviewees and to conduct the interviews with those participants who indicated interest. Participation in the interviews was strictly voluntary and made clear to the individuals. Participants were emailed the informed

consent (see Appendix B) and a hard copy was signed before the interview began. Interviews were conducted individually and in a semi-private setting with only those participants that had received the communication and consented to be interviewed.

Participants were asked to describe their transformation experience and the factors within the small group learning environment that contributed to that transformation. This study placed participants at minimal risk of being identified. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant for reporting purposes. Interviews were recorded for data analysis and stored on the researcher's secured mobile phone in possession of the researcher at all times. The researcher made sure names and any other identifiable information was not recorded. Recordings were only shared with the transcriptionist and documents were kept secure on the researcher's password protected laptop. The recordings and documents were handled with great care. Once data analysis was completed, the stored interview recordings were destroyed. Confidentiality of participants was ensured by using data in aggregate form only. Findings from the study were provided to the church leadership in an aggregate form for distribution to congregants as they see fit, including those individuals who participated in the interview process. Individual requests for study results may be made in writing.

### **Instrumentation**

Qualitative research is exploratory in nature. Corbin and Strauss (2008) observe:

Perhaps the most important [aspect of qualitative research] is the desire to step beyond the known and enter into the world of participants, to see the world from their perspective and in doing so make discoveries that will contribute to the development of empirical knowledge. (p. 16)

Grounded theory studies require data collection from multiple individuals who have responded

or somehow participated in a process about a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research methods used typically include interviews, focus groups, and observational sessions (Richards & Morse, 2012). Creswell (2013) notes that for grounded theory studies, information is to be collected in as much detail as possible.

The initial response to the communication (see Appendix A) sent to at least 300 small group members describing the criteria for the study and inviting those that have an interest to participate determined the persons to be interviewed. An interview was scheduled with those individuals that report they have experienced transformation since they have been attending the small group and agreed to be interviewed. A minimum of 12 interviews was acceptable for this study. If the minimum number was not met, a second communication would be sent to small group members. A maximum of 20 interviews was desirable. Interviews were conducted on a first come, first served basis.

Interviews were conducted using original interview protocol to facilitate the interview process. The interview was semi-structured with the initial questions structured to gather demographic and small group attendance data. All interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded for transcribing later using a secured mobile phone. Transcription was completed by a professional transcriptionist that had volunteered their services. Participants were asked to describe the transformation process as they experienced it, including what specifically lead them to the understanding that a transformation had taken place.

Determining whether individuals had experienced transformation according to transformative learning theory was self-reported. The initial communication (see Appendix A) relied on Mezirow's 10 phases of transformation for reliability. An expert who has experience with the qualitative research process and familiarity with the topic reviewed both the

communication and interview questions (see Appendix C) in order to provide validation of the researcher's process. The researcher collecting and recording participant responses directly in face-to-face meetings validated data collected from the interviews. At least one pilot interview was conducted to gauge the interview questions and the appropriate timeframe needed to collect enough data. After the pilot interviews, adjustments to questions and timeframe were made as necessary.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Data collection was important throughout the study and required coordination with individuals to schedule each interview. The initial instrument was the communication (see Appendix A) sent in email form in order to solicit interest and select interview participants. The principal research instrument for this study was the personal interview conducted in two parts.

The first part of the interview included the following questions:

1. General demographic information including age, gender, profession, etc.
2. How long have you attended this small group?
3. Since you have been attending the small group, have you experienced a significant change in your faith or in the way you think about the world around you?
4. If so, what of the following scenarios below have you experienced:
  - a. A difficult dilemma that was resolved, requiring a significant amount of self-examination.
  - b. A time when you questioned your thinking on a certain truth or fact that resulted in a significant life change.
  - c. A discontent or stressful situation that was resolved by connecting new understandings with the situation.

- d. A moment when you had to explore options and set a clear course of action to overcome a problem or grow in some way, such as taking on a new role, developing new relationships, or taking significant steps to act.
- e. A situation where you had to acquire new knowledge or skills in order to move forward, such as increasing competence or self-confidence.
- f. A moment in your life that you felt you had to change or in some way reorient yourself in order to succeed.

After the initial questions had been answered the interview was more of a casual conversation to better understand the transformation the individual experienced and the factors that lead to such a transformation. The second part of the interview included the following questions:

1. Describe the experience you had (or witnessed) that changed, impacted, or transformed your life (or someone else's life) during the time you have attended the small group.
2. How did the experience change you (or someone else)? What was different from before you started attending the small group?
3. What about your small group experience led to the change?

### **Data Management**

Recorded interviews were stored on the researchers secured mobile phone that is password and biometrically protected. The researcher had sole access to recordings. Recordings were destroyed at the conclusion of the data analysis and once the findings were completed. Privacy and the identity of participants were protected by using a numbering system and assigning a code to each interview participant.

## Data Analysis

Grounded Theory research is a systematic approach that requires specific steps of data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Coding and memoing was the methods of data analysis. The primary goal of coding is to find repetitive patterns. Coding permitted the data collected to be grouped or segregated to consolidate meaning and explanation. Memos helped to create a hypotheses about what connections between categories mean (Saldaña, 2013). According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), “The analyst is not coding for conditions or consequences per se, but rather uses the tool to obtain an understanding of the circumstances that surround events and therefore enrich the analysis” (p. 90). The main grouping categories were the elements of the small group experience that fostered a change or transformation according to the participants. The categories then developed the theme that lead to the theory (Saldaña, 2013), elements that foster transformational learning in Evangelical small groups.

Recordings of the interviews were transcribed using a professional transcriptionist. Once recordings were transcribed, the following steps were followed:

1. Read all transcripts
  - a. Noted impressions
  - b. Noted any themes
2. Coded relevant themes
3. Selected most important codes
4. Created categories by grouping codes
5. Determined relevant categories and label each
6. Connected categories to elements of transformational learning
7. Determined what elements were of most significance

The following codes were used initially for review of the data:

1. Basic demographic and personal background information.
2. Length of small group attendance.
3. Transformative learning experienced.
4. Specific experiences.
5. Changes experienced.
6. Elements of the small group experience that fostered transformation.

Themes were then analyzed against Mezirow's 10 phases of learning that occur during the transformative process to determine what elements of the transformational process were most at play in the small groups. The 10 phases of learning are:

- A disorienting dilemma.
- Self-examination.
- A critical assessment of assumptions.
- Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation.
- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action.
- Planning a course of action.
- Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans.
- Provisional trying of new roles.
- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.
- A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow, 2000, p. 22)

Further analysis included interpreting the connection between change in individuals and



Mezirow's 10 phases of learning, then identifying the elements that foster transformation within small groups.

### **Positionality**

Creswell (2013) encourages qualitative researchers as the primary data collection instrument to be forthcoming with personal values, assumptions, and biases. This researcher has served in various paid and non-paid roles in several Evangelical churches for over 20 years. As a current regular church attender and member of a small group there are certain views of what church and small groups should and should not look like that influenced the study. The researcher's own experience with leading small groups of various ages provided both a significant amount of understanding and context for recording and analyzing the data collected. Although there was a high level of objectivity, it is difficult to imagine that a certain amount of biases shaped the way the data collected was viewed and understood.

### **Summary**

Donahue and Robinson (2012) conclude this about why small groups are so important, "You begin with theology because your small group aim has to be founded on a set of theological underpinnings that connect current and future plans, efforts, and outcomes to eternal truths that trump the merely clever, creative, or functional" (p. 24). This study was in no way attempting to undermine or discredit theological teaching and, more specifically, the work God does in spite of human efforts in the hearts and minds of those he has called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

This chapter sought to explain the research steps and process undertaken in this study in order to develop a theory on how transformative learning occurs in Evangelical small groups. Given the purpose of the study, answers from small group members provided the bases for

information. A grounded theory approach involved analyzing data while it was being collected through interviewing individuals who have experienced transformation while participating in a small group. After the interviews, data was coded, compared, and analyzed, generating ideas about the theory. Eventually, a theory emerged that explains what transformational elements contributed to change in individuals participating in Evangelical small groups. Results of this study will help equip leaders and teachers with principles to create a more conducive environment for transformation, or in other words, for God's word and purpose to penetrate the hearts and minds of individuals using proven learning methods.

## Chapter 4: Presentation of Findings

The purpose of this study was to discover the transformational learning elements of an Evangelical Christian small group experience that foster personal transformation in adults. Elements that can be incorporated into Biblical teaching and group meetings are identified to assist leaders and teachers in their planning, execution, and assessment of learning. The following research question and sub-questions were used to guide the study in an attempt to form a theory on transformational learning within Evangelical Christian small groups:

- What transformational learning elements in an Evangelical Christian small group experience foster personal transformation in adults?

Sub-questions:

- What elements contribute to transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements deter transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements contribute to a growing and deepening relationship with God?

Participants of the study were regular attendees of a small group at an Evangelical church in the greater Los Angeles area, including women's ministry, Bible studies, and support groups. The 16 individuals had participated in at least one of these types of small groups and experienced a personal transformation. Through this process the elements of a small group experience contributing to such a change were identified.

In this chapter the findings from the study will be provided. Key demographic data is first presented, including the years of participants' small group involvement. Second, the results of the six scenarios participants were asked to identify with are explored, including how they relate to Mezirow's 10 phases of learning and examination of the themes derived from

participants' description of their transformative experience. Third, the themes of the changes participants indicated that occurred as a result of their transformative experience are considered. Finally, the elements within the small group that fostered the participants' personal transformation are identified.

## **Findings**

All of the stories told were meaningful and personal to each individual. The questions asked of participants sought to gather key demographic information and small group participation history. Participants were asked to identify and explain the personal transformation they experienced while attending a small group. Based on Mezirow's 10 phases of learning, participants were queried to identify whether they had experienced any one of the six scenarios (see Table 4). Specific details on each individual experience were gathered, coded and placed into themed categories. Participants were then asked to describe the change they experienced and the factors within their small group that contributed to their personal transformation. The specific changes experienced were also coded and themed. Finally, the transformative learning elements within the small group experience were coded and themed into eight categories.

**Demographics.** Each individual was asked to provide basic demographic information along with the amount of years they had been attending their most recent small group and how long they had been involved in small groups overall as noted in Table 2. Many had attended several small groups over their lifetime, so for most this was not their first experience with a small group. Some had been attending some sort of church sanctioned small group for over 25 years. Additionally, a few participants were attending multiple small groups at the same time. For instance, P13 was attending both a women's ministry small group and a home Bible study group.

Table 2

*Demographics*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Profession	Years in Most Recent Small Group	Years in Small Groups Overall
P1	Male	34	Store Manager	3	5
P2	Male	49	Admissions Counselor	6	27
P3	Female	57	Ministry Director	6	25
P4	Female	42	Ministry Associate	9	16
P5	Male	40	Educator	4	20
P6	Male	52	Contractor	6	21
P7	Male	23	Ministry Director	3.5	17
P8	Male	43	Administrative Assistant	3	20
P9	Male	45	Law Enforcement	8	20
P10	Male	44	Law Enforcement	5	30
P11	Female	57	Ministry Associate	15	17
P12	Male	52	Project Manager	7	25
P13	Female	67	Retired	5	30
P14	Female	70	Retired	4.5	4.5
P15	Male	68	Retired	0.5	0.5
P16	Female	67	Teacher	4	4

The average age of participants was 51 with the youngest being P7 at 23 years old and the oldest being P14 at 70 years old. More males overall participated in the study than females. Individuals' professions ranged from store manager to educator to contractor to law enforcement officer to administrative assistant. A few of the participants were ministry directors or associates with the church and three had retired. Table 3 provides a breakdown of participants by age range, gender totals, and range of years participated in most recent small group.

Table 3

*Demographics Range (n = 16)*

Demographics	Participants
Age	
20-24	1
30-34	1

(continued)

Demographics	Participants
35-39	0
40-44	4
45-49	2
50-54	2
55-59	2
60-64	0
65+	4
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	6
Male	10
<b>Years in Most Recent Small Group</b>	
0-4	7
5-9	8
10-14	0
15-19	1

**Transformational experience.** All of the participants in the study had identified themselves as having experienced some sort of personal transformation while attending a small group. Six scenarios encompassing Mezirow’s 10 phases of transformative learning were given and participants were asked to state whether or not they had experienced each one. Table 4 displays how the scenarios align with the 10 transformative learning phases and summarizes how many participants’ identified having experienced each.

All of the participants with the exception of one, P5, had experienced more than one of the scenarios at some point in their life. Some were from the same event in their lives. Others had several events that took place over many years. For example, P3 grouped her personal transformation into three separate experiences that had an impact on her life. Her first transformative small group learning experience came while participating in an infertility group with five other women. Through that experience she realized the importance of self-

examination. P3's second transformative experience involved heavy involvement in ministry coupled with depression and a small group that criticized her lack of involvement. As a ministry leader, she struggled with participating in a small group community and became very closed off to others. This led to P3's third transformative learning experience where through making connections with other ministry leaders discovered that her struggles were their struggles, as well. She learned how to be a better leader by connecting new understandings with her struggles that she faced, coming to a renewed understanding of what it meant to be a genuine person.

Table 4

*Transformative Learning Scenarios (n = 16)*

Scenario	Transformative Learning Phase	Participants
A difficult dilemma that was resolved, requiring a significant amount of self-examination.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A disorienting dilemma.</li> <li>• Self-examination.</li> </ul>	13
A time when you questioned your thinking on a certain truth or fact that resulted in a significant life change.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A critical assessment of assumptions.</li> </ul>	11
A discontent or stressful situation that was resolved by connecting new understandings with the situation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognition of a connection between one's discontent and the process of transformation.</li> </ul>	14
A moment when you had to explore options and set a clear course of action to overcome a problem or grow in some way, such as taking on a new role, developing new relationships, or taking significant steps to act.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and action.</li> <li>• Planning a course of action.</li> <li>• Provisional trying of new roles.</li> </ul>	13
A situation where you had to acquire new knowledge or skills in order to move forward, such as increasing competence or self-confidence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships.</li> </ul>	10
A moment in your life that you felt you had to change or in some way reorient yourself in order to succeed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.</li> </ul>	10

P1 had experienced all six scenarios, but his focus in the interview was on one particular incident. His wife had confronted him about a sin issue that he eventually brought to the

attention of his small group leader. His leader immediately took action and began meeting with him to confront the sin issue in a loving and gentle way. For P1, this situation required a significant amount of self-examination and with the help of the group leader and other men in the group, he was able to come to understand the much larger issue was his own pride and the lack of ability to admit that he had messed up. Ultimately, P1 thinks:

The interaction that kind of transformed my thinking was dealing with pride issues, and realizing that I could be an island and keep myself closed off and not grow spiritually and not have any meaningful relationships and not have any help with anything in my life.

P9 faced a similar experience when he was confronted about his infidelity. Once the truth was brought to light and his wife found out, he left their house in the middle of the night, checking into a hotel not sure what to do. After his wife reached out to their small group leader, that leader immediately contacted P9 and out of love the leader continued to pursue him. The leader took it upon himself to help P9 and his wife restore their marriage and get to the heart of the issue. P9 knew he had a choice to make, he was either going to continue to run away, avoiding confronting his sin and addressing the issues at home, or confront his sin and selfishness with the help of others. He was at a point where he needed to plan a course of action and that course included his small group leader coming alongside him. The leader went as far as to confront the women P9 had committed infidelity with so that his marriage would not be under additional threat. This action had a lasting impact on the participant.

P7 also indicated that all six scenarios were experienced. He stated that there were several major life decisions in high school and early college that were decided during small group participation. Although he had been led by great mentors, there came a time in P7's sophomore year of college where he was asked to lead a small group himself. Having never led



a group before, P7 was in a situation where acquiring new knowledge and skill was necessary in order to be successful. With his mentor beside him, P7 thought, “This is that moment I have to figure out what are the skills I need to do this correctly, and at the same time, how am I going to succeed in doing this.” In another situation P7 experienced a discontent and stressful scenario when it was discovered that his mom had cancer. It was the first time in his life that he felt suffering and it was within a college small group that he found healing.

In a similar scenario, P6 faced the death of his mom while attending a small group. It was the first time he had dealt with death personally. To say the least, it was an emotional time for him:

Because on the one hand, I took great solace in the fact that I knew my mom was a believer and was with the Lord, so I was joyful over it. On the other hand, I felt like crap, and having those two, it was weird and hard to deal with, not understanding that, and very dysfunctional for me.

This juxtaposition of emotions led to a period of depression and throughout the next year P6’s small group followed alongside him with love, support and comfort, being attentive and cognizant of what he was going through. This process involved regular meetings, a lot of deep conversations, and praying with others. In the end, this brought healing and comfort to P6.

P14 came to the church and her small group after being excommunicated from the cult she had been a part of for several years. Although the leaders of this cult taught from the Bible, they were very much opposed to mainstream Evangelical Christianity and often discussed in meetings, using scripture, against Evangelicals. P14 began to question some of these teachings which led to her eventual dismissal and search for the truth. She knew what they were teaching was not quite right. After remaining on her own for some time and continuing to struggle with

the knowledge that had been disseminated to the cult members, she faced a difficult dilemma that required her to explore different options, including examining the truths of the Bible herself. Eventually, P14 was lead to the church she is currently at where her small group leader along with the other members came alongside her. She is especially appreciative of their sensitivity to her background and their encouragement during her search for the truth.

In a similar way, P16 came to the church and joined a small group after becoming very sick and being told she had a 50/50 chance of living. She faced difficult circumstances after one divorce and a second marriage that was not any better. P16 admits:

So I had to go before God so that he could show me how to get through this, how to get through my failure of life, what was wrong with me. So through that, through truly... women's study really helped me.

It was through her small group that she was able to strengthen her faith in God by acquiring new knowledge and skills to move forward and succeed, overcoming the guilt and shame of two failed marriages. Table 5 summarizes the themes of experiences participants faced during the period of personal transformation in their lives, including the number of participants that had each experience and the total amount of comments for each theme.

**Transformation.** For the majority of participants transformation was not immediate, but took place over time as they met and interacted with small group leaders and members, including time spent with individuals outside of regular meeting times. Table 6 provides a summary of the personal transformation themes participants experienced, including how many participants and the total number of comments made for each transformation theme. These themes were generated from many different changes experienced based on the specific situations each participant was involved in. Eight major themes arose out of the data.

Table 5

*Experience Themes (n = 16)*

Experience Themes	Participants	Comments
Marriage/family struggles	7	12
Sickness or death of spouse/family	5	9
Difficult situation/decision	4	5
Search for truth	4	5
Depression/sadness/anxiety	3	4
Confronted sin	3	3
Disagreements with others	2	4
Problems with work	2	4

Table 6

*Personal Transformation Themes (n = 16)*

Personal Transformation Themes	Participants	Comments
Focus/dependence on others	11	14
Increased love/view of God	8	8
Faith/spiritual growth	6	10
New understandings/knowledge	6	9
Relationships improved	4	7
Increased genuineness	4	5
Comfort	3	3
Healing	2	2

***Focus and dependence on others.*** This theme arose as individuals discussed how their focus changed from off themselves or their situation to others. Additionally, they realized that they needed to depend more on others and, in some cases, others needed to depend on them. As the leader of a small group, P4 realized over time that as her love of God’s word increased, her desire for others to know about the Bible increased. She realized in her small group meeting times how God’s love can be experienced through others. P8, through his participation in small groups, began to see the benefit of being “present” with others. He explained how important it is to prioritize meeting together to show that you care about others and are invested in building a relationship. According to P8 this dependence and focus on others is important because:

When opportunity comes that you have to confront sin, you can speak the truth in love, because you have built that equity. But if you don't show that person that you care about them and the things that are important to them, then when you need to confront them about sin in their life or areas that is a blind spot to that person, you can't bring that up because it's going to be more offensive, and they are going to be very defensive about those things.

***Increased love or view of God.*** This change for participants involved coming to a better understanding of who God is and the love He has for His creation. Those that experienced this transformation found significant new meaning in the truth of God's word. P11 over time became more disciplined in studying the Bible. Regular meetings in her women's small group allowed her to talk through the truth of the Bible with others and through her experience, she learned how to apply biblical concepts to her life, increasing her excitement about the Word. Although his personal transformation has been over several decades, P12, explains that his view and relationship with God would not be the same if it was not for his small group experience:

Being involved in a small group, especially as a teacher of the small group, has really driven me the most because there have been seasons in my 30 years of my walk with the Lord that I was not involved in small groups, and I saw in my own personal life, in my own personal walk, a diminishment of that closeness and that relationship with the Lord. So being involved in a small group has caused me to pursue my relationship with the Lord more aggressively.

***New understandings and knowledge.*** Change for these individuals came through understanding new truths or their perspectives changing on a certain topic or issue. For some, a smaller issue brought about the need to address a larger issue. Such was the case for P1, who

realized after being confronted about a specific sin issue, that his real struggle was with pride. He recognized that in order to grow spiritually he had to develop meaningful relationships with others. His new understanding led to much deeper and richer conversations with others about his and their struggles. For P6 it was through his men's small group time that he came to understand who God really was and how He works. It was those in his small group that helped him process through the death of his mom where he realized that we were all mortal people that must live for a purpose, "I think that really brought that kind of whole dimension into my life, just understanding that we have an end, and a hard time here is practice, and what we do with it matters."

***Faith and spiritual growth.*** Through this change individuals were strengthened by their dependence on God and became more sensitive to the Lord's leading in their lives. P10 observes, "Because it's not about a human relationship necessarily, but if you focus on the upward relationship, the horizontal ones just come into line because that's what Christ wants." It was through encouragement and accountability in his small group that P10 came to the understanding that growing in his relationship with Christ was essential to facing struggles so that he no longer needed to rely on himself just to eventually fail. P15 realized in the second session of the faith-based small group grief program he was going through that in order for his grief to be relieved, in order for true peace to come upon him, he needed to trust in God. He had believed in God, but never been a practitioner of the faith. So, having been led to attend this small group program after his wife's passing, he came to understand this. Though his small group experience, P15 was able to understand the grief he was experiencing and was given the tools to handle it, but even more than that, his faith was strengthened. He concludes:

I don't know how to explain that. I just opened my eyes, and I'm going, jeez, is this

really true, that the only way to get rid of your grief is to believe in God, and your depth of that belief? And I think, the facilitator, kind of led me down the path of the depth of her belief and where it stemmed from in 40 years, and she took a 20 minute dissertation and it just spoke to me [about] her and her husband and whatnot, and the relationship she had built from a young woman, and her husband she just married, he just turned himself to the faith, and I said, okay, it's possible. And I just started asking more questions, just started learning more about the word, and your faith just starts building. That's the only way I can explain it. Exposure, desire, all builds with that. And the small groups, it's almost like you can have a conversation like you and I are. It's very comfortable. You can talk. And that's the important part.

***Relationships improved.*** Participants that experienced this change went from being closed off to being more open and vulnerable in their relationships. P1 found in his small group experience that connections with others in the group built as they discussed his issue and others shared their related issues. He notes:

The other thing that happened that kind of changed behavior or changed transformationally was I started to learn more about the other guys, and specifically built stronger relationships. So for me being able to confess and say what I was dealing with, and then having specific questions asked of me, and then asking specific questions back, it revealed the darkness in the other guys' hearts, and made them more vulnerable and made it like a close relationship.

Not only was P1's experience transforming individually, but relationally as well. Because of the relational approach his small group took, meetings were not just about studying the Bible. They were just as much about living life together, learning more about one another and striving to

support each other. For P1, there would be no change without meaningful relationships.

***Increased genuineness.*** No longer guarded, but transparent and clear with others, the individuals that experienced this became more true to themselves and others. It was through the grief support small group as both a participant and a leader that P13 realized how important it was to be genuine and true to yourself and others, especially going through the loss of a loved one. This genuine attitude translated well into her women's small group where she discovered the importance of being softened and open to others:

I think just by the fact that you show up, and you have these people that care about you, and you feel comfortable, it softens you, and it makes you more open to give love because you feel like you are receiving love. And I think that the big key in any group, the people have to feel they are a part of something.

In a similar experience, P1 found that as he learned to be more genuine, others were encouraged to do the same. Being open and honest with others in his small group was a key part of his transformation:

We're all kind of in this together. We all have different kinds of issues, and being able to not feel excluded or feel like the only one and be transparent and clear, I think that's what the difference was, to be honest and not hide anything.

***Comfort.*** Comfort from others and from God played a role in the personal transformation that was experienced by three participants. P4, in particular, found that because of the way her small group loved her through a very dark time in her life, she came away feeling comforted. In a similar way, P6, found comfort in the fact that his small group kept him grounded and centered while dealing with his loss. He points out:

[Small group] is very comforting and it doesn't allow me to get too wrapped up in my

own end. And that's what I think was a lot of the stress with that, and what happened was pretty much in my own head. And small group has kept it grounded and real, and real life is going on just like it did before, and it's the same, it's very cohesive still.

In the same way, P15 has come out of his small group experience more at peace with death and his faith: "I am more at peace with death and religion. I am a believer beyond what I was before. [My small group experience has] impacted that significantly."

**Healing.** Although there was most likely healing in some way or another in all of the personal transformation experiences, only two participants specifically referenced healing as a change they experienced. For them healing meant that they needed to move on from the issue or problem they faced and move forward in some way. P6, after experiencing death of a close relative, found healing through the conversations he had with those in his small group. Although he admitted he cannot pin point a moment where he figured it all out and was healed, after experiencing deep pain from the loss of his loved one, he looks toward the future with a better understanding of what anxieties life might bring his way:

Being able to observe [God's work] I think is incredibly important, because I see my future, I have almost all of my daughters in college right now, getting ready to move out and going through that process, and it's going to be different, but I know it will be okay, and it will be exciting to see how God uses them and where it ends up, and knowing that I will probably end up somewhere. So it's kind of cool.

Similarly, P7 found healing in his small group without even talking much:

Because the community itself just gathered around me, I felt loved, felt cared for, refreshed. If I went to [small group] angry, upset, or even sad, I came out refreshed and thankful. And then there were a few small groups where I opened up and told everybody,



yeah, I was really struggling with this particular issue.

It was through the love and care of other individuals that these participants found healing and comfort. For every one of these transformational occurrences there were elements within the small group experience that participants noted as a contributing factor to their personal transformation.

**Elements.** During the interview process participants were asked to identify the elements or factors of their small group experience that contributed to the significant change that they experienced. In other words, what elements fostered transformation? Table 7 provides a summary of those elements. Many of the elements related to relationship building and community, such as establishing a loving environment, sharing experiences, feeling loved and cared for, relating God’s word, and having deep discussion about life’s struggles.

Table 7

*Elements That Fostered Transformation (n = 16)*

Elements that Fostered Transformation	Participants	Comments
Acceptance and love	11	22
Care and concern	10	22
Open and honest	10	20
Shared life experience	10	15
Deep relationships	8	17
God’s word	7	19
Leadership expectations	7	13
Comfort	5	6

**Acceptance and love.** One of the most popular elements from participants’ comments was the love and acceptance they received within their small group experience. Many stated how others were patient, encouraging, and non-judgmental to them while going through their struggles. After being judged by some in a previous small group, P3 struggled to find a purpose to join another group, but once she was able to see the results of a group that loves and accepts

instead of judges and rejects, there was hope:

Sometimes people hurt you, that's part of life. None of us are perfect and mistakes are made, whatever, but they were a huge part of God, so that I could imagine now if anything ever happened and I was in ministry, I would be looking for that relationship. If anything happened to this small group I would go find one, because now I know I need that circle of people who know me and love me.

P14 faced similar judgment from past groups because of her struggles with the truth of scripture. Now, in her current group she states there is no judgment, just encouragement. She has found the support she needs and it has made such a difference in her life. Specifically, in a recent small group meeting, P14, had a disagreement with one of the teachings. She was asked to share her thoughts and once she did share that there was a certain statement from the Bible she did not believe, rather than react in judgment, the ladies in her small group reacted:

In love. It was all done in love. And nobody was shaking their finger, how could you not believe this. And then afterwards a couple came up to me privately and were trying to be more helpful, and giving me a few more verses and stuff. So just their attitude is so Christ like.

Other participants noted the patience and compassion displayed by others in their groups. P9, in particular, had this to say about the love displayed to him and the real reason behind it:

So not an affectionate love, but to really love somebody, your desire for them is to honor God and to help them remove anything in their life that is a stumbling block or sin, or anything that is going to come between them and God. That's what love is. So to be able to sit and talk with somebody and see those things and try to help them think through them and work through them, and to do what you can to get rid of them so you can honor

God better, not that we can fix ourselves or save ourselves, but we are called to fight against sin and struggle with it, and to use the Holy Spirit and to move forward. And that's what the love is.

**Care and concern.** One interesting result was the amount of participants that noted how important it was to them that they knew they had people in their small group who cared about them and were praying for them. Those that felt this kind of care from their small groups were shown this through members of the group praying for them and with them during times of struggle. Care was also timely and sought out by leaders and members of the group. There were proactive efforts to meet the needs of these individuals. Several of the participants remarked that they were pursued and were comforted by the fact that others were praying for them.

Having the opportunity to pray together with other small group members and knowing they were praying for him and his family was a huge encouragement to P5 as he was dealing with the diagnosis and treatment of his son's cancer. He explains this about the impact care and prayer from his small group had:

When we had to see the doctor we let them know to pray for us, and when it happened. So we came and shared, so they prayed for us and we followed up with the updates and everything. Not just that, once he was admitted to the hospital, all the group members came and visited us in the hospital. This was huge, and they came to our home and brought us food and everything. And then this took a long time, a year for all the process. So we have received a lot of support emotionally and material[ly].

P5 wondered how his situation would have looked like if he did not have such a group of people to care for him and his family, "For the family it would be much more difficult. When you know there are other people who share your burden and you know every day pray for you, that's

huge.” Similarly, P6 acknowledged the impact the care and prayer he received from his small group had on his circumstances:

Doing “one another” together, I would say [is] key. Probably the biggest thing is my prayer life, and my prayer life as a group, and seeing God work in and through those prayers over a long period of time. That’s been super encouraging. It’s really big faith building and more, I think I’m more likely at this point than I have ever been in my previous history to turn to God and expect him to work this out.

His faith was strengthened by the way prayer was modeled in his group and the way God used those prayers to work through the issues he was experiencing.

*Open and honest.* Over half of the participants indicated that an open and honest small group contributed to their transformational experience. In particular, individuals emphasized being able to wrestle with a difficult situation or struggle while others in the group helped them think through it by coming alongside them. A few indicated that because others in the group had themselves been transparent and vulnerable, it encouraged them to do the same. Participants acknowledged that an open and honest environment like this requires trust and confidentiality among members. Being sincere and willing to listen to others was a key aspect to this element, as well.

P9 by far had to most to say about how much an open sharing environment contributed to the healing of his marriage. He describes from his own experience the way open and honest sharing should be in small groups:

So getting it, it’s just your whole mindset of people, and why we are interacting, what our goal is, and then just to be consistent and to bring up hard questions, and not take crappy answers, and to pursue, and to know someone enough to say, “Y’know dude, you’re not

being honest.” Or know there is more in it. Be willing to do that. It’s not easy, it’s uncomfortable, it’s out of our comfort zone, it’s awkward, or all the things in society you shy away from. It’s getting in someone’s personal space and actually asking those really tough questions that most of the time we don’t want the answer for, but when you really love somebody you do, because you want them to move past that.

He realized through his own experience how important it is to ask the tough questions and really get to the heart of the issue. An open and honest small group environment is essential to attaining these kind of results.

In a very similar infidelity situation, P10 experienced the same kind of open and honest conversations. He describes how the men in his group came around him to hold him accountable to his repentance:

In the midst of the crisis, [contacting my small group leader was] the only thing that came to mind. So because of the relationship that we had created through small groups, the openness, the honesty, the accountability in every aspect of your life, you knew that there was somebody there who you could be honest in difficult situations who wouldn’t be judging, was going to not necessarily understand, but like I said there wasn’t much thought that came in, I just ran and I called. I knew that I needed to change, I needed to do something now, and I knew that I would get support 100% from there, whether it was a slap upside the head, because when they needed to be tough they could. But also the loving embrace of a brother to know that you’re not alone in such a difficult thing.

It was to his small group leader that P10 ran to when he needed help with his sin issue and it was because of the already established open and honest environment that he felt comfortable doing so. In fact, according to P10, there was really no other option, but to reach out to his small group

for support, reconciliation, and accountability.

*Shared life experience.* Sharing life together, including past and present experiences was another significant element identified. Participants who stated that this had an impact on them mentioned that having others that experienced the same struggles they were going through or could relate to you in some way had a lasting impact on their transformation. Sharing life to these participants meant more than just sharing stories. It meant sharing in the burdens of life, coming alongside those that needed it, and going through the good and the bad together as a group.

Sharing life takes time and not all groups are able to have this as a strong aspect to their group. Several participants were able to describe the process better than others. P4, in particular, was a part of a well-established small group of men that he has been a part of for some time. So, when his college age son approached him about the academic struggles he was experiencing, P4 knew he needed to seek out a particular member of his small group to talk to his son. The member was able to share his past struggles with P4's son, relating what he had previously experienced as a young man himself with this young man. It was a moment P4 would not forget because the things the group member was telling his son was no different, but because he was able to relate his own experience to the son's, what he said next had so much more impact. P4 concludes:

Kind of neat, having him come along [side my son]. I don't know if that was the only thing, but the next day [my son] decided, "No, I have to try to finish out the semester and see what happens." That [talk] definitely helped him, and encouraged him. It was kind of validating some of the same things I [had] been telling [him].

P5 faced a very different problem when his two month old son was diagnosed with

cancer, needing both surgery and chemotherapy. He states:

So you can imagine what kind of situation that puts my family in—so stressful. So my small group was with me and my wife through the whole process, so being part of that small group and connected to this team of people and having that family relationship, them sharing my and my wife’s burden, was significant. We were very connected, which actually helped for us to be open and share. There is a very strong family relationship in that group, so we all know each other’s life, and when we were about to hit this problem with my son, they already knew.

There was something unifying for a group to come alongside members of the group going through crisis and according to P4:

The love and the care that I received from my Christian brothers and sisters helped me to learn outside of my home context that even if these are not my biological brothers and sisters, they were not even going to my local church, just because we have this fellowship because of our faith in Christ together, even if I didn’t know them before until I came to this school, that bond and that care, because we had fellowship.

***Deep relationships.*** Connection and familiarity with small group members played a significant role in participants’ transformational experience. Some were in well-established small groups that already possessed that connection and trust. Others through their transformative learning experience were able to build those relationships. Before being confronted about his sin issue, P1, was closed off to relationships and did not see the benefit of opening up to others. While dealing with the issue, he quickly realized that he needed more meaningful relationships in his life in order to grow. He made himself more vulnerable and opened up to the guys in his group about his struggles. As they met and discussed some deep,

intimate issues, stronger, more meaningful relationships were built. He says that having the kind of conversations he had with his group built connections and transformed his relationships with others.

Familiarity and trust are key factors to building deeper relationships. P3 came to understand through her experience how important relationships were in bringing her through the struggles in her life. She concluded, “I learned what it was like to fall and have people there who understood and who could walk by me and not let me stay down, but give a foundation.” As with several other of the participants, P3 found relationships to be such an important aspect of being able to work through issues and come to a point of resolve. In a similar way, P6, has seen the benefit of having close relationships built on trust within small group:

I think that being in a small group over time you are able to be more vulnerable because you have trust and things built up with people. They know the areas that you struggle in on a consistent basis, that you can be the one, or they can be the one, to say but remember when we prayed about [that] last time, how that all worked out. And so it’s really encouraging to be reminded by those that know you best that God is in it with you, and He is going to bring this to a resolution that is going to be good for you, because we have seen it already.

Building deeper, closer relationships within a small group also involves spending quality time together. Consistency and regular fellowship to create a sense of belonging were important to several of the participants. Regarding her women’s small group meeting, P13 observes:

During that time you get to say, this is who I am, this is what’s wrong with me, what do you have wrong with you? How can we relate, and how can we help one another? It’s a sisterhood. It’s like men would have a brotherhood. And it’s intimate.



She goes on to reflect on how important it is to have the feeling of belonging, that the people around you really know you and care about you.

***God's word.*** Although the results have shown the importance of understanding and knowing the people within small group, there is also the aspect of applying God's word along with examining oneself in light of the truth of the Bible that a few of the participants pointed out. While for the majority of the participants' small group was relational, it was also a time for biblical study and reflection. It was clear from some that a focus on God's word and how it relates to their lives was an impactful element of the small group experience.

When going through a difficult situation in life, P8, see's small groups as an important medium for individuals to seek answers from the Bible. He explained the many different sources of information that could provide seemingly good answers, but emphasized how important it was for him to rely on biblical truths when it came to shepherding his own son, "[Relating God's word is] enabled within the small group context instead of it's just myself and having one person. In the multiple people aspect definitely allows a greater accountability, and greater opportunities for the Holy Spirit to work." In a similar way, P9, explains how his small group leader would never just quote scripture, but always relate the Bible to his situation:

He was really good at asking questions [to] get to the heart of the issue. [He would take] the truths of the scripture and was able to formulate those into questions to bring out the condition of my heart, like he could see into [my] heart, and he could tell [something was missing].

Examining and understanding God's word is accomplished best through a small group setting.

While biblical study and reflection are encouraged on an individual level, it is in a small group environment where new meaning and application can come to light. It is a place where

issues can be confronted in a loving and caring way as we have seen, but even more so in a biblical and truth seeking manner. P12 observes how important it is to address the issues that come up in his small group. He has learned that when it comes to helping people better understand God's word it is best to ask questions:

I have learned over time, shut up and ask questions. Just shut up and ask questions and listen, because they are going to expose the need. They are going to expose the problem. They are going to expose their misunderstanding. They are going to expose their philosophy, whatever...I think I can take us to a place that will address where you are off here, but do it in such a way that's not, "you're wrong, buddy. " And, let's read this passage. What this passage talks about is this, and that, and the other, and listen to what it says here, and then let the Lord bring it to him. Because it's not my job to break your heart, it's God's job. But it's my job to bring you to the well, to the seed here, the word of God.

P8 believes that small group allows for the ability to lovingly and biblically confront issues of sin. He points out:

One of the big concepts I was thinking, even through this, was that scripture says to speak the truth in love. So in a big church or a big group setting without small groups, you can speak the truth, but where is the love? The love comes from having this relationship. You meet, and you bond, and you share struggles. Then you can speak the truth in love, because you gain that equity because you have gone through stuff. You have invested in one another's life.

Examination of God's word is more than just knowing it. Understanding and applying it to one's life is key and participants' responses show that the small group has been an ideal place for that

to occur.

*Leadership expectations.* Leading small groups and meeting the expectations of each member is not an easy task. Several participants indicated the strong leadership, fairness, and consistency the leaders of their small group possessed as a contributing element to personal transformation. Additionally, setting clear expectations at the formation of a small group was particularly important to some. P10 has found in his own experience as a member and leader of small groups that importance that all members have the same expectations to help foster personal transformation. He advocates:

If you know you are coming to a group because you are struggling in your marriage and it's laid out from the beginning what is going to be expected and the level of accountability, you are there for that purpose, it's wide open. But if you just go to an evening Bible study to just kind of dig into God's word a little bit more, it's a slower process.

While biblical study might be the main purpose of most small groups, participants indicated that it is important for the leader of any group to set expectations when it comes to sharing prayer requests, fellowshiping, and eating. Small group leaders must be able to keep the group on task while maintaining the purpose and expectations that have been established. P16 reasons that a good leader is one that not only regularly prays for and reaches out to individual group members, but always brings the group back to focus during the meetings.

Further, participants indicated that small group leaders should be prepared and fair. According to P4, leaders should be prepared to answer the hard questions about scripture. Not always knowing the exact answer is fine, but leaders ought to know their group well enough to anticipate questions on a given passage or teaching. Most importantly, P10 has found through

his own experience that preparation as a leader of a small groups must always begin with prayer.

He states:

Because it's not our actions or our abilities that can make heart change, number one it's God's. So God will soften the callused heart, the hardened heart.

P10 goes on to emphasize that a good leader does set an example and meets people where they are at in their walk with God. Leaders also must be able to read the people of the small group, while guiding the group in a unified and balanced manner. P11 notes this about her experience:

So that might be something where the leadership needs to have that training on reading, who are your analytical biblical, or who are your people who don't share and are quiet, and who don't talk, and how to pull them out, versus that one guy who just won't stop talking. How do you work with that? So there is a balance of sharing, and a balance of caring, and a balance of fun.

***Comfort.*** Comfort and confidentiality add up to a feeling that small group is a safe place and a refuge for the members. This was the eighth and final element that participants identified as contributing to their transformational learning experience. Individuals indicated the gentle approach leaders and others took with them and how there were an encouragement, contributing to a sense they were at home when with their small group.

In particular, P12 says this about how small group leaders ought to approach members on issues in a gentle, yet straightforward way:

So I was very gentle and tried to just bring them through the passages that I had brought, and other ones that people brought up, and we looked up, and I tried to land it with scripture clearly talking about God's sovereignty. God is in control of all things, but scripture seems to suggest we have a personal responsibility and a will here in the matter.

Conversely, after negative past experiences with small groups, P14 states how much she appreciates the encouragement and support she received from her current small group:

The love, the encouragement, the support that a small group brings. All the other times when I went to churches, and some of them I would attend for a while, but none of them ever felt like home. So I wouldn't get involved in small groups, because I knew it wasn't my home, and I didn't want to get tied up in a friendship and not want to leave because of people. So I avoided that. But the first day at [this church], and I know it's just what God was doing, and I would tell people.

For those that indicated the comfort they felt contributed to their change, it was about the kind and sincere interactions they had with the leaders and other members of the groups. This all contributed to a greater connection and level of intimacy that allowed these participants to open up about their struggles and seek real, life changing help.

### **Summary of Key Findings**

Participants faced a variety of circumstances that were personal, meaningful, and transformative. All experienced transformative learning in one form or another, some multiple times over the years. Most of the participants indicated relational elements of their small group that contributed to their transformative learning experience. Although there was an underlying significance of how God would work in their lives through His word and the Holy Spirit, much emphasis was on the love and care they received from other individuals in their small groups. Further, sharing life and growing deeper in relationships with group members had a significant impact on how participants dealt with their difficult situations. This all leads to the development of a theory grounded in the results, elements of an Evangelical small group that fostered personal transformation in adults.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

This chapter will discuss the key findings and conclusions of this study. There is an overall lack of Evangelical Christians experiencing personal transformation within church sanctioned small groups and given the lack of ability to design and implement effective adult learning programs within the church, there is a need to learn more about transformational learning and the elements that contribute to such an experience (Barna Group, 2010, 2015; Fleischer, 2006; Gorman, 2001; Pew Research Center, 2015; Shirley, 2008). The purpose of this study was to discover the transformational learning elements of an Evangelical Christian small group experience that fosters personal transformation in adults. A qualitative approach utilizing Grounded Theory was the method used to conduct the research. Coding and memoing of participants' detailed responses were heavily relied upon, bringing about categorical themes of the elements that fostered a change or transformation for the individual within the small group experience.

The resulting grounded theory will identify these elements that can be incorporated into Biblical teaching and group meetings to assist leaders and teachers in their planning, execution, and assessment of learning. Findings will first be discussed relative to the research question and sub-questions. Second, significant findings will be linked to the literature. Third, conclusions about the results will be identified along with the potential implications for churches and recommendations for continued research in this area.

### **Discussion of Key Findings**

The following research question was used to guide the study in an attempt to form a theory of transformational learning within Evangelical Christian small groups:

- What transformational learning elements in an Evangelical Christian small group

experience foster personal transformation in adults?

To assist in answering this question three sub-questions were created:

- What elements contribute to transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements deter transformative learning in adult members of small groups?
- What elements contribute to a growing and deepening relationship with God?

Findings of the research will be discussed in relation to the research questions and the literature.

**Transformational learning elements.** The main research question asked overall what elements within the small group experience fostered transformation. This question is best answered by exploring the three sub-questions of the study. The three sub-questions help better understand the elements of the small group experience that most contributed or did not contribute to participants' personal transformation.

***Contributing small group elements.*** The first sub-questions asked, "What elements contribute to transformative learning in adult members of small groups?" During the interview, participants were asked what about the small group experience led to the change they had experienced. Each participant's experience was unique, with many participating in different small groups of the church, each one unique. Most were in a small group Bible study that met in someone's home regularly. Others were in a men's only or a women's only groups, and a few were in a topical group for individuals that had lost a loved one. Additionally, the backgrounds and experiences outside the small groups varied substantially. Given all of the variables and variations of each group and individual, participants frequently indicated relational factors as the elements that most contributed to their transformative learning experience.

The content or study the small group was currently going through was not as relevant as

the connection participants had made with the leader and other members of their group. Ten out of 16 individuals indicated at least once during the interview that the love, care, concern, and open conversations exemplified in their small group meetings were a huge factor in the change they went through. Interestingly, the knowledge that someone was caring and praying for them gave participants a strong sense of comfort. Leaders played a significant role in not only setting the tone and expectations for the group but also being an example members followed when it came to reaching out and caring for others in the group. While the study of God's word was a central purpose for many of these small groups to gather, there was an underlying focus on sharing life together.

Connecting relationally meant group members being open and honest to share what was going on in their lives and that being reciprocated by others in the group. Being able to share and relate to personal experiences was essential to participants. Five of the identified eight elements that fostered transformation in individuals could be categorized as relational in nature. Quality time spent as a group and sub-groups was critical, as well, giving members ample opportunity to get comfortable with one another. Nearly all participants indicated how important it was for them to make connections with others in the group that would allow for regular support and encouragement from people that were sensitive to their struggles and were not quick to judge.

The feeling of being loved and belonging to the group was crucial. Participants indicated that attributes, such as love and compassion exuded by individuals within the group contributed to their transformative experience. Additionally, participants attributed accountability they at times needed as love. Although their groups accepted them for who they were, members did not accept the sin, and the love shown to these individuals was the love Christ would show to those



in sin he confronted. Jesus' interaction with the Samaritan women at the well is a great example of this kind of love. He showed compassion to her as she approached the well, while even talking to her would have been culturally unacceptable at the time. Through their dialogue, Jesus lovingly and compassionately pointed to the sin the Samaritan women was currently committing, keeping her accountable.

Participants pointed out that along with love and acceptance came understanding from others and opportunities to give love because they had received love. In this sort of cooperative, life-sharing environment participants' healing came by listening to others' struggles and helping them through theirs, as well. This led to deeper relationships being built as people let down their guards and became vulnerable to others in the group.

Although the age range of participants varied, the majority interviewed were over the age of 40. For many of these individuals, they had a long history of small group involvement, and they had been long-time Christians. While there were certain moments of personal transformation in their lives participants pointed to during the interview, many of the individuals had been a part of a small group for a substantial length of time. The lifelong involvement in small groups for some of the participants had an impact on their lives and could have affected the findings. While there were definite moments of transformation, several experienced changes over time. While not the case for all of the participants, the familiarity and comfort found in small groups that were well established was significant. Knowing those in their group and having those close relationships already built most often would help in a difficult situation. Over time, within the group, as a member experienced a dilemma, a need to re-orientate their lives, or one of the other transformative learning phases, the group would be ready to assist that individual. Most often transformation described by participants happened over time, but their

small group played a significant part in fostering it. Longevity of small group involvement, even if it was not in the same small group, that involved strong, trusting, and authentic relationships developed over time contributed to personal transformation

***Deterring small group elements.*** The second research sub-question was, “What elements deter transformative learning in adult members of small groups?” During the interview process factors that deterred or decreased the likelihood of personal transformation were deduced from participants telling their stories and discussing their past and present small group experiences. Although participants were hesitant to share anything negative about their small group experience, factors that deterred change were revealed and some insights can be drawn from their responses. Several participants indicated discontentment and bad experiences with previous small groups.

Disunity and non-cohesiveness were two factors that participants stated as a problem they had with past groups. Several indicated the lack of focus in groups created the opposite of a loving and compassionate environment. Disunity also opened the door for members to create different agendas and establish conflicting expectations. Further, there were some groups where individuals were not matched well at the onset of formation that deterred growth. In several of the instances described there was the lack of clear leadership, where either multiple members were trying to lead at the same time, or the designated leader was trying to please everyone to the satisfaction of none. Personal transformation was less likely to occur within small groups when there was not a strong and authentic connection between people. Coincidentally, some participants indicated the discontentment from previous small groups was what led them to an eventual transformation while attending a new small group.

***Growing and deepening elements.*** The third research sub-question was, “What elements

contribute to a growing and deepening relationship with God?” Participants were asked how the personal transformation experience changed them and most responded with more dependence on others and an increased love of God. One of the primary purposes of the church is to disciple, and that learning is fostered through interaction with God, the Bible, and others to promote spiritual growth (Powlison, 2017; Terpstra, 2017). For the church, a transformation problem is a growing problem.

Recognizing God’s design for community within the body of believers, several participant responses indicated that there was a dependence upon their small group for their spiritual growth. In other words, left on their own, they would have failed to grow in their faith, at least to the extent that they had. As one participant indicated, the focus must first be on the upward relationship with God and then the horizontal ones will fall into line with God’s will. In particular, being able to study and understand God’s word is a crucial factor to spiritual growth. Participants indicated that seeing what other member’s growth was like and being able to relate to God’s word from multiple perspectives in a group setting was essential. Although, it can and should be done on a regular, independent basis, examining God’s word is accomplished best through a small group setting as the results of the study show and the literature supports.

**Transformational elements and the literature.** The major elements of transformational learning are critical self-reflection and critical discourse (Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 2006). Relationships and dialogue between members of the small group were key elements identified as contributing to the transformative learning experienced by individuals interviewed. Consequently, the conversations and reflection taking place within the small group was a means of participants processing and finding meaning in their specific situations. Mezirow (2000) defined discourse as “the process in which we have an active dialogue with others to better

understand the meaning of an experience” (p. 14).

***Acceptance and love.*** The second relationship category in the four relationship categories Carter (2002) identifies is love relationships. Carter found in her research that these connections enhanced self-image, boosted confidence, and fostered friendships made of mutual trust, respect, and care for each other. The love and acceptance described by participants fit well in this category and results show that regular discourse has an impact on the transformative process.

Donahue and Gowler (2014) acknowledge that there is a substantial amount of Biblical instruction for Christians to practice faith and ministry together, supporting and regularly encouraging one another. Such statements as *love one another* and *serve one another* appear over 20 times in the New Testament. It is clear to see that such biblical instruction being acted out is essential to transformative learning. After all, stirring “one another to love and good works” (Hebrews 10:25) is what Evangelical Christians should be working towards.

***Care and concern.*** Closely associated with acceptance and love is the care and concern participants received. As a model of learning, andragogy fits well within small groups. Countering the more formal, traditional models of learning, andragogy facilitates cooperative learning. According to Melick and Melick (2010), the andragogical method assumes the environment will support adult learning both physically and psychologically. Care and concern for individuals within the group noted by several participants fit within this model of learning. Leaders and members can create a more optimal learning environment by displaying care and concerns for others in the group.

***Open and honest.*** Nearly all participants acknowledged how important open and honest conversations affected change in an individual’s life. Some observed that before a crisis

occurred the already established open and honest small group environment made it much easier to go to others with their problems. Conversely, it was the difficult situation itself that allowed other participants to become more open and honest with themselves and others. Nichols and Dewerse (2010) emphasize that one of the most significant challenges to facilitating perspective transformation for learners occurs around a student's experience of disorientation, and their subsequent openness and ability to grow and utilize skills of self-reflection. Additionally, the ideal environment for adult education that andragogy establishes is a "climate of orderliness, clearly defined goals, careful explanation of expectations and opportunities, openness of the system to inspection and questioning, and honest and objective feedback" (Knowles et al., 2015, p. 55).

***Shared life experience.*** Sharing life together and learning from other's experiences is conducive to the andragogical model. Andragogy is organic in that it takes place among learners in the context of learning in a wide variety of situations (Brown, 2006). Small groups bring together individuals from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences. Through the sharing and discussion of these experiences comes engagement that brings about new understanding in one's life. Feelings, thoughts, and behaviors that are shared create a learning environment that is engaging and relational. Brown (2006) observes, activities and experiences naturally engage adults in learning that leads to changes in thinking, values, and behavior. By seeing the world through others, small group learning empowers individuals to revise their expectations, assumptions, or perspectives (Cranton, 1996).

***Deep relationships.*** Deeper relationships are built on making authentic connections with others. The more familiar participants were with other group members, the more comfortable they were sharing their struggles. Building deeper relationships is the culmination of acceptance

and love, care and concern, open and honest dialogue, and sharing life experiences. According to Nichols and Dewerse (2010), transformative learning is characterized by an internal shift in a frame of reference that can be facilitated but cannot be caused by a teacher. It is through these deeper relationships that participants find the capacity to change. This change is not caused by a teacher, nor by one particular individual in the group. It is Holy Spirit working through the collective members of the group that can bring about transformation. For one to be receptive, they need to feel more than just welcome. Every person must be embraced. Deeper, transformative relationships flourish in an atmosphere of mutual respect and acceptance that challenges people without fear of judgment (Carter, 2002).

***God's word.*** Small group learning is about change. A central theme of small group learning is gaining knowledge and understanding of scripture and applying it to real-life situations. While participants indicated other elements contributed to their transformative learning within the group, it appears that biblical knowledge or the ability to recite facts or relate to stories of the Bible had little to do with their change. However, it was evident in speaking with participants that God's word was always upheld, at least in their current small groups, as the truth and the source for answers to life's most significant issues. What participants indicated, though, was that the small group experience enhanced that truth and helped them better understand how that truth could be applied in their situations. So, while factual knowledge of God's word might not have had a direct effect on participants' change, it was the foundational truths found in His word and the biblical actions by others in the group that did. It was the presentation of God's word, His love, and His grace that contributed to an individual's transformation.

***Leadership expectations.*** In many cases, participants relied heavily on the leader of their

small group to set an example and be the facilitator of the transformational process. The Evangelical small group models noted in Table 1 offer leaders clear guidelines for implementing and successfully maintaining small group ministries within the church. Such models define, for instance, purpose, subject, and length of the group. Yet, while these models offer leaders curriculum and process to be implemented within small groups, there is no clear model for how small group members are to relate to one another. Participant responses indicate the need for leaders to be relational, being aware of what is going on in member's lives, reaching out regularly, and preparing study and discussion around the needs of the individuals within the group.

Cranton (2002) observes that no one teaching method assures transformation, but there are specific factors that a leader or facilitator of a group can keep in mind as they prepare for the transformational learning process. Leaders must challenge themselves and their own perspective to widen the focus of conversations. They must take part in the exploration with the learner, becoming a participant and a partner in discovering, recovering, and uncovering meaning and understanding (Fleischer, 2006). Students could very well lack the skills required for effective reflection (Nichols & Dewerse, 2010). Facilitating the process that leads to self-awareness and new understandings is essential.

***Comfort.*** A safe and confidential place to share and discuss their struggles was important to participants. Small groups must be a place where members are stimulated to critical self-reflection using different teaching methods (Cranton, 2002). The telling of personal stories or debating on an intriguing topic can have a significant contribution to personal transformation, but a comfortable and safe environment must be procured for such sharing and debate to take place. Knowles' (1970) work emphasized the importance of learner safety and comfort. An

environment that is welcoming, comfortable, and respectable is best for adult learners (Spigner-Littles & Anderson, 1999). Similarly, as a process model, andragogy is less concerned with transmitting information and more concerned with providing the resources one needs to acquire the information (Knowles et al., 2015). Comfort should be one of those resources. When it comes to helping members feel comfortable within the group, the perceived positive or negative perception of learning will need to be considered as information is being shared and conversations are taking place (Nichols & Dewerse, 2010).

## **Conclusions**

The Evangelical small group learning that has been explored is transformative adult learning. Along with Mezirow's (1990) 10 Phases of Transformative Learning, Knowles' (1970) andragogical principles apply to the results of this study. We have seen in the previous transformative learning research and this study that connection and discourse between individuals enhance and promotes personal transformation. Further, Knowles' six assumptions of motivation for learning correlates to the relational elements that fostered transformative learning in participants:

1. Adults need to know the reason for learning something.
2. Experience (including error) provides the basis for learning activities.
3. Adults need to be responsible for their own education and be involved in the creations of it.
4. Adults are most interested in learning those things having immediate relevance to them.
5. Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented.
6. Adults respond better to internal versus external motivators (Knowles et al., 2015).



First of all, adults needing to know the reason for learning can be corroborated by other group members. Secondly, because living life together and sharing is so important in transformative learning, participants' and other's experiences provide the basis for learning activities. Third, Evangelical small group transformational learning explored was self-initiated where participants took responsibility for their own education. Forth, this small group learning addresses the immediate needs of members and is relevant. Fifth, we have seen that small group learning is problem-centered rather than just focused on content. Finally, the small group transformational learning that has taken place in participants' lives has been a response to internal motivators rather than external. Overall, as with Andragogy, transformative Evangelical small groups promote relevant learning experiences. For most participants, it was the experience of the small group, living life together, and sharing experiences that lead to learning more about God, themselves, and others.

The concluding theory for this study is that the relational elements of small groups, such as love, care, prayer, and connection create a transformative learning environment where personal transformation is likely to take place through the transparency and development of close relationships with others in the group. Jesus himself models small group learning as he encouraged regular fellowship with groups of his followers that included time with the larger crowds, the twelve disciples, and his three closest followers (Donahue & Gowler, 2014). Further, the early church is given the explicit instructions in Romans 12:9-13 to do what this study's findings reveal:

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in

tribulation, be constant in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

It is no surprise that Evangelical Christians doing what God has commanded them to do has a transformative impact on people's lives.

Many of the participants shared instances of meeting with the leader of their small group, then meeting with a smaller group of just men or women, and finally, with the whole small group. Each of these meetings was unique and offered participants different avenues to face their situations and bring them to resolve through transformative learning. After Jesus' death and resurrection, we read in scripture that gatherings of groups both large and small for fellowship, prayer, and eating together were a regular occurrence for the early church (Acts 2:42-46). That regular occurrence of meeting together as Christians, Christ followers, continues today, but there is a need for improvement.

### **Implications for Practice**

Deep relationships, the ability for Evangelical Christian believers to authentically connect and love one another as Jesus loves them, is just as important as small group curriculum and process. There is a need for pastors and leaders of small groups to look beyond just study materials when it comes to planning and implementing small group learning within churches. Results of this study show that relational factors are the elements that most contributed to participants' transformative learning experience. Consequently, leaders must be equipped to be relational facilitators. Training of leaders and teachers of small groups should include instruction on how to foster these relational elements that were so predominately important to participants of the study. Leaders need to understand that they must set the example and expectations for the rest of the group. Although the study of God's word should be the central focus of small groups,

there must be a significant emphasis on building relationships and connecting with individuals in the group. In no particular order, these are steps small group leaders can take to incorporate or increase emphasis on relational elements based on the findings of this study.

**Match individuals.** When forming groups or asking someone to join an existing group the needs and desires of each individual must be considered and matched accordingly. Some people just want to study the Bible, discussing questions and digging deep into context and meaning. Others are inclined to focus on prayer or living life together. While balance and diversity within a group are important, if leaders have a better understanding of what individual's expect to get out of the group and how those individuals can contribute to the group, the stronger the group will be.

**Set expectations.** Establishing expectations should be a priority for leaders at the onset of any small group formation and at regular intervals throughout the life of the group. Expectations to consider setting are the overall purpose of the group, how much time should be spent studying the Bible, how much time should be spent in discussion or fellowship, and how much will be expected of members outside of the regular meeting time, such as preparing for the study or participating in additional gatherings. The emphasis small groups place on each one of these areas will vary, but it is important for all in the group to understand and agree on the expectations. Additionally, expectations around safety, support, respect, listening to others, and confidentiality should be defined. Leaders must clearly communicate the expectations and ensure the group is in agreement, leaving room for adjustments as the group progresses.

**Set an example.** Small group leaders must set an example of love, respect, and care for every individual in the group. The behavior of leaders should be consistent with all members of the group, showing respect and meeting each one where they are at. Additionally, leaders should

display to others the importance of digging deep into the lives of others, gaining familiarity and harmony. As conflict and disagreements among members arise, the leader should moderate with clarity and understanding for everyone involved.

**Open and honest.** Leaders must create an open and honest dialogue. This is accomplished initially by being vulnerable and open themselves. It is at that point that leaders can then encourage others to open up, as well. Helping the rest of the group understand the importance of honest dialogue will greatly assist members in their learning. Conversely, leaders must facilitate sharing and discussion during meetings to ensure everyone has the opportunity to open up and share.

**Reach out.** Reaching out regularly to group members, especially those that are struggling beyond just regular meeting times is greatly beneficial and conveys to members that you care about them as a person. Leaders need to understand that regular, meaningful connection with individuals will go a long way in establishing and growing relationships. This becomes particularly important when members are going through a difficult experience. First, reaching out regularly, ensures leaders will be aware of individuals' situations. Second, it warrants the additional contact that may be needed during a crisis. Third, because a relationship is already developed through regular contact, seeing a difficult situation through to resolution is more natural.

**Know the members.** In addition to regular contact, leaders must get to know the members of their small group. Discovering what their interests and struggles are will help leaders know better how to serve them. Similarly to reaching out regularly, knowing members, helps small group leaders ask the right questions and know what to say at the right time.

**Focus on Bible.** Focusing on how the Bible can be applied rather than just understood

will help small group members see the relevance of God's word in their lives and others.

Leaders that are able to relate their own experience to the truth of the Bible and encourage others to do the same, can especially be of help to individuals going through a transformational period in their lives.

**Be ready.** Leaders must be ready to learn and be challenged themselves. Small group leaders do not have to be the most knowledgeable or most experienced one in the group. More often than not, leaders need to be the most teachable one in the group. Consequently, displaying an attitude that is eager to learn will help encourage others to do the same.

**Assess.** Assessment is probably one of the least desirable and most difficult elements to implement. Yet, by asking the hard questions and ensuring member's needs are met and that they are growing in some way through the small group experience will help maintain the momentum and purpose of the group. Regular and thorough check-ins with group members should be built into the meetings.

Overall, there must be small group learning intentionality within the church. Coming together as God intends is freeing and essential to spiritual growth and personal transformation. Taking these steps to incorporate relationship management into the planning, execution, and assessment of small group learning, will greatly assist pastors and leaders in creating an environment that is more conducive to personal transformation.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The theory needs further testing and this study could be replicated in other Evangelical Christian churches and denominations. This study was limited to one Evangelical Christian church in the greater Los Angeles area and could be expanded by interviewing individuals from additional churches with similar small group experiences. Additionally, more formal questions

about background and past experiences that lead to transformational learning could be asked to formulate additional themes. A future study might include exploring the transformational learning process over an extended period, showing how strong, trusting, and authentic relationships developed over time contribute to transformation.

## **Summary**

Through small groups, God works in a dynamic rather than narrow way. Creating a life-changing small group experiences by fostering transformation through Biblical teaching and training is an essential mission of Evangelical churches. Given the lack of Evangelical Christians experiencing personal transformation within the church, there is an opportunity to design and implement effective adult learning programs that promote transformational learning. Implementation and emphasis on the elements discovered in this study can contribute to creating such an experience within small groups.

Small groups are one way the church fulfills its obligation to nurture the spiritual maturity of believers by equipping individuals for the work of ministry so that everyone may be presented mature in Christ (Colossians 1:28; Grudem, 1994). The findings of this research have found that by fulfilling the sense of community that God has created us for, small groups shape and change people's lives (Cloud et al., 2012). Rather than doing it on their own, people grow and deepen their faith better through small group participation, giving reason for churches to invest in small group learning. While the relational elements identified are not easily applied, requiring a significant investment from leaders and members of small groups, some steps can be taken to create an environment conducive to transformation. Through the setting of expectations, living as an example of love and acceptance, and the applying of God's word in a relevant, and timely way, pastors and leaders of small groups can make great strides in fostering

spiritual growth and personal transformation in individuals' lives.

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## APPENDIX A

### Invitation Communication to Participate

Dear Growth Group Member,

My name is Rich Simpson. I am a member of Northpoint and a doctoral student under the direction of Dr. Mike Patterson in the Organizational Leadership program at Pepperdine University. I am conducting a research study on the elements of an Evangelical Christian small group experience that foster personal transformation in adults.

You are invited to participate in the study if you have experienced a personal transformation while being an active member in a small group. Some examples of personal transformation would be:

- A resolved difficult dilemma that required a significant amount of self-examination.
- A time when you questioned your thinking that resulted in a significant life change.
- A stressful situation that was resolved by new understandings you acquired.
- A moment when you had to explore options and set a clear course of action to overcome a problem or grow in some way.
- A situation that you had to acquire new knowledge or skills in order to move forward.
- A moment in your life where you felt you had to change or in some way reorient yourself.

If you think you meet this criteria in anyway and agree, you are invited to participate in the interview process.

The interview is anticipated to take no more than 90 minutes and will be recorded. Participation in this study is voluntary. Your identity as a participant will remain confidential during and after the study.

If you would like to participate or have any questions, please contact me at [REDACTED] or call/text [REDACTED]. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, you may also contact my dissertation chair, Mike Patterson, at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Thank you for your consideration,

Rich Simpson  
Doctoral Student  
Pepperdine University

## APPENDIX B

### Informed Consent for Participation in Research Activities

#### **PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY**

#### *Graduate School of Education and Psychology*

### **INFORMED CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

#### **ELEMENTS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING IN SMALL GROUPS OF AN EVANGELICAL CHRISTIAN CHURCH**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Rich Simpson, Ed.D. candidate and Michael Patterson, Ed.D., Dissertation chair, at Pepperdine University, because you indicated that you have experienced a personal transformation while being an active member in a small group at Northpoint Evangelical Church. Your participation is voluntary. You should read the information below, and ask questions about anything that you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate. Please take as much time as you need to read the consent form. You may also decide to discuss participation with your family or friends. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form. You will also be given a copy of this form for your records.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to discover the transformational learning elements of a small group experience in an Evangelical Christian church that fosters personal transformation.

#### **STUDY PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to describe your experience of personal transformation while participating in a small group. A personal semi-structure interview will be conducted in two parts.

The first part of the interview will include the following questions:

1. General demographic information including age, gender, profession, etc.
2. How long have you attended this small group?
3. Since you have been attending the small group, have you experienced a significant change in your faith or in the way you think about the world around you?

The second part of the interview will included the following questions:

1. Describe the experience you had that changed, impacted, or transformed your life during the time you have attended the small group.

2. How did the experience change you? What was different from before you started attending the small group?
3. What about your small group experience led to the change?

Answers to these questions and any subsequent discussions during the interview will be audio recorded. In order to participate in the study, participants must be willing to be audio recorded.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in this study.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

While there are no direct benefits to the study participants, there are several anticipated benefits to society which include equipping leaders and teachers with proven learning principles to create a more conducive environment for transformation that allows for God's word and purpose to penetrate the hearts and minds of individuals.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

I will keep your records for this study anonymous as far as permitted by law. However, if I am required to do so by law, I may be required to disclose information collected about you. Examples of the types of issues that would require me to break confidentiality are if you tell me about instances of child abuse and elder abuse. Pepperdine's University's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may also access the data collected. The HSPP occasionally reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

The data will be stored on a password protected mobile phone and computer in the principal investigators place of residence. The data will be stored for a minimum of three years. The data collected will be transcribed, coded, and de-identified.

There will be no identifiable information obtained in connection with this study. Your name, address or other identifiable information will not be collected.

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Your responses will be coded with a pseudonym and transcript data will be maintained separately. The audio-recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed.

The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's office for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation is voluntary. Your refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or

remedies because of your participation in this research study.

Participation may be terminated by the investigator if it is determined the participant does not meet the selection criteria.

**ALTERNATIVES TO FULL PARTICIPATION**

The alternative to participation in the study is not participating or completing only the items which you feel comfortable.

**EMERGENCY CARE AND COMPENSATION FOR INJURY**

If you are injured as a direct result of research procedures you will receive medical treatment; however, you or your insurance will be responsible for the cost. Pepperdine University does not provide any monetary compensation for injury.

**INVESTIGATOR'S CONTACT INFORMATION**

I understand that the investigator is willing to answer any inquiries I may have concerning the research herein described. I understand that I may contact Michael Patterson at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] if I have any other questions or concerns about this research.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT – IRB CONTACT INFORMATION**

If you have questions, concerns or complaints about your rights as a research participant or research in general please contact Dr. Judy Ho, Chairperson of the Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University 6100 Center Drive Suite 500 Los Angeles, CA 90045, [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

I have read the information provided above. I have been given a chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

I have explained the research to the participants and answered all of his/her questions. In my judgment the participants are knowingly, willingly and intelligently agreeing to participate in this study. They have the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study and all of the various components. They also have been informed participation is voluntarily and that they may discontinue their participation in the study at any time, for any reason.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Questions

1. General demographic information:
  - a. Age
  - b. Gender
  - c. Profession
2. How long have you attended a small group?
3. Since you have been attending the small group, have you experienced a significant change in your faith or in the way you think about the world around you?
4. If so, what of the following scenarios below have you experienced:
  - a. A difficult dilemma that was resolved, requiring a significant amount of self-examination.
  - b. A time when you questioned your thinking on a certain truth or fact that resulted in a significant life change.
  - c. A discontent or stressful situation that was resolved by connecting new understandings with the situation.
  - d. A moment when you had to explore options and set a clear course of action to overcome a problem or grow in some way, such as taking on a new role, developing new relationships, or taking significant steps to act.
  - e. A situation where you had to acquire new knowledge or skills in order to move forward, such as increasing competence or self-confidence.
  - f. A moment in your life that you felt you had to change or in some way reorient yourself in order to succeed.



5. Describe the experience you had that changed, impacted, or transformed your life during the time you have attended the small group.
6. How did the experience change you? What was different from before you started attending the small group?
7. What about your small group experience led to the change?

## APPENDIX D

### IRB Approval Letter



Pepperdine University  
24255 Pacific Coast Highway  
Malibu, CA 90263  
TEL: 310-506-4000

#### NOTICE OF APPROVAL FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Date: February 09, 2018

Protocol Investigator Name: Richard Simpson

Protocol #: 18-01-718

Project Title: Elements of Transformational Learning in Small Groups of an Evangelical Christian Church

School: Graduate School of Education and Psychology

Dear Richard Simpson:

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Since your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the IRB and documenting the adverse event can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* at [community.pepperdine.edu/irb](http://community.pepperdine.edu/irb).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Sincerely,

Judy Ho, Ph.D., IRB Chair