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## Something Happened: Exploring Student Religious Experiences Through the Eyes of Their Teacher

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*Brigham Young University*

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Something Happened: Exploring Student Religious Experiences  
Through the Eyes of Their Teacher

Jason Bird Pearson

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

### Something Happened: Exploring Student Religious Experiences Through the Eyes of Their Teacher

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Master of Arts

Religious education involves learning about religion and the possibility of having religious experiences. Although measuring religious knowledge can be fairly straightforward, assessing whether students are having religious experiences can be more difficult. The purpose of this self-study is to develop clearer understanding of the interactions that might enable my students' religious experiences and how I might recognize when such experiences are occurring. I have written 10 narratives describing situations in which I believed students in my seminary had religious experiences. I interviewed those students to better understand their side of the narrative, and then used the Listening Guide to analyze the narratives and find whether and in what ways I was able to tell when a student was having religious experiences in my classroom.

Four plotlines emerged from the data, which centered on what the student was doing to prepare for religious experiences. These ranged from simple attendance and participation to extensive outside seeking and preparation. Regarding my involvement in these experiences as a teacher, I found that common elements across the plotlines included taking time to know students and attending to intuitions about their needs. Implications of the present study are explored for both religious educators and teachers in other content areas who might be interested in helping students move beyond content knowledge toward meaningful engagement with a discipline.

Keywords: religious education, religion studies, evaluation, action research

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

I had lied about daily scripture reading every term in seminary. In my freshman year my teacher decided that each day he was going to pull a name to select a student to come to the front of the class and answer a question from what they had read in the scriptures the night before. For some reason, I knew the next day in class the name he would draw out would be mine. So, I went home, pulled out the New Testament and read one chapter. I put some items to memory and prepared for the teacher to grill me the next day. Sure enough, the very next day the first name he pulled out was mine. I walked up to the front of class. He asked me where I had read the night before. I told him Revelation 4. He asked me, “what was one thing around God’s throne?” I told him there was a rainbow. He didn’t believe me and had to turn there himself to see that I was right. I was, of course, right and went back to my chair with a smile on my face. I had won yet did not learn a thing. I received a pat on the back for doing a good job when no good had happened. In fact, this experience allowed me to believe I could lie and get away with it, and there would be no lasting consequences other than good grades. A student’s ability to scam a teacher is a problem for all teachers and educators but is especially hard for teachers of religion.

Today, I am the seminary teacher. I stand in front of classrooms of teenagers and worry that what I’m doing will teach them the wrong lessons. I worry that they will not be converted to the gospel, but to the grade. I worry that they will be more concerned with pleasing me than pleasing God. As a seminary teacher today, I am trying to avoid this problem and help my students along the path to becoming truly converted to Jesus Christ.

## Origin of the Problem

In Religious Education (RE) there are two different goals: teaching religion and teaching about religion. Teaching religion is the “born again,” evangelical notion where learners have deep experiences that change their lives. Teaching about religion is the “our religion,” concept where the teacher is teaching the information and skills necessary to live that religious way of life (Kollar, 2005). In my profession, I am trying to achieve both of these goals.

I currently teach students in high school who take part in Release Time Education (RTE), and who walk across the street from their high school to a building owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I have about 180 students and teach six classes over a two-day period. This program’s purpose is “...to help youth and young adults understand and rely on the teachings and Atonement of Jesus Christ, qualify for the blessings of the temple, and prepare themselves, their families, and others for eternal life with their Father in Heaven” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012, p. x). Beneath this overarching objective there are three areas emphasized that teachers implement to help achieve the program’s purpose, they are: live, teach, and administer. For the purpose of this paper, I will focus on the areas of live and teach.

We **live** the gospel of Jesus Christ and strive for the companionship of the Spirit. Our conduct and relationships are exemplary in the home, in the classroom, and in the community. We continually seek to improve our performance, knowledge, attitude, and character.

We **teach** students the doctrines and principles of the gospel as found in the scriptures and the words of the prophets. These doctrines and principles are taught in a way that leads to understanding and edification. We help students fulfill their role in the learning

process and prepare them to teach the gospel to others. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012, p. x)

As their teacher, I teach my students religion because I want them to have a testimony of and become converted to Jesus Christ and His gospel as taught by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I also teach them *about* religion because I want them to know and understand the doctrines and principles within the gospel. I am looking for religious experiences which are what the psychology community would call the types of experiences students have when they are learning religion. As a seminary teacher, I am looking for religious experiences and not just spiritual ones. Though religious experiences and spiritual experiences seem to be the same thing, they are different as Court (2013) explains, “The concepts of spiritual and religious experience do overlap, though the terms are by no means well defined. Religious experience is spiritual, but spiritual experience can be unrelated to any particular religion” (p. 253).

To become a seminary teacher in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, you must obtain a bachelor’s degree and take the required class. You then become a student teacher, teaching in a classroom where you are observed. It is then determined whether you will be hired. Since there is never a guarantee you will get hired as a seminary teacher, as a backup I also planned on becoming a math teacher. I learned Spanish on my mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, so I also received a minor in Spanish Education. In my math and Spanish education courses, as well as my courses in teacher education, I learned the concept of teacher assessment. We often talked about teacher assessment and what tools we have as teachers to monitor and improve our teaching. When I taught math for a semester, it was easy to identify the gaps my students had in their learning by giving them quizzes or exams, analyzing the quiz and exam results, and seeing the gaps, or the problems my students got wrong. This

allowed me to see where I was falling short as a teacher. In RE, it is not as easy to see if your students are making the desired progress. There are no quizzes to assess whether a student is becoming a better person or is becoming closer to Christ through your teaching.

Henry B. Eyring, a leader of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, stated in an address to seminary teachers, “Our aim must be for them to become truly converted to the restored gospel of Jesus Christ while they are with us” (Eyring, 2001). I want to move my teaching beyond just memorizing facts and stories about religion and religious events, which I acknowledge is essential, but I don’t want this to be the end of my teaching. I want to move my teaching towards reflecting my objective, which is to help students truly become converted to Christ through religious experiences.

### **Statement of the Problem**

To assess the second purpose of teaching about religion, the seminary program has instituted a Learning Assessment (LA) that allows teachers and students to see what they know about the doctrines and principles found in the section of scripture they are studying that year. The LA is usually a multiple-choice test with four essay questions. Assessing the first purpose of teaching religion, or helping students have the sort of religious experiences that might lead to conversion to the gospel of Jesus Christ, is more complicated. The LA only assesses religious knowledge with very little emphasis placed on how a student feels about that knowledge, or how it has changed their life.

This difficulty of assessing this first, perhaps more central, purpose makes it also more difficult to assess how I am doing as a teacher. Since becoming a religious educator, I have struggled to assess myself as a teacher within the confines of teaching religion. I want to make sure I am focusing more towards the first purpose of teaching religion rather than the second

purpose of teaching about religion. How do I know if I am doing well since the LA does not provide clear information about religious experience? How do I know if I am improving in helping my students come unto Christ?

### **Statement of the Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to develop clearer understanding of the interactions that might enable my students' religious experiences and how I might recognize when such experiences are occurring.

### **Research Question**

From my observations of my seminary classroom, what are the elements of teacher and student interactions that I perceive as being part of a religious experience?

### **Limitations**

I believe that I can sense when a religious experience has happened in my observations or interactions with one student, but I may not be aware of every religious experience for every student in my class. I recognize the things we say and do in class may have an impact later in life as students reflect or confront challenges in their lives. Focusing more deeply and clearly on situations that I perceive as involving a religious experience might provide insights that can help me deepen such experiences within my teaching and with my students. The process toward conversion or coming to Christ is a lifetime pursuit. It is extremely difficult to gauge where any one individual is on that spectrum at a given time. In the present study, I will not be looking at the depth of a student's religious growth or conversion over time; instead, I will explore the moments in my teaching when I sense that a student is having a religious experience. Another limitation of the present study is that when I do perceive that a religious experience has occurred, my perception might or might not be accurate, or match that of the student. For this purpose, I

included student interviews in my study which allowed students the opportunity to correct misunderstandings I might have about their experiences. However, these interviews rely both on my own and on student memories of the events, which could be both limited and influenced by the interview itself. In spite of these limitations, from careful analysis of these experiences, and especially the ways in which student memories might differ from my own, I hope to develop ways of recognizing more often when these moments occur and helping students deepen their religious experiences.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Literature

In the year 389, St. Augustine (389/1968) wrote a series of dialogues that he had with his son Adeodatus entitled *The Teacher*. In this essay, he makes the claim that God alone is the one who is the teacher of all knowledge. He describes the role of speaking and states that “our aim in speaking is simply to teach” and “a human teacher is only there to prompt a man” to engage in the dialogue with God within (p. 7). However, the learner only learns when they look “upon the inner Truth, according to their abilities. That is therefore the point at which they learn. When they inwardly discover that truths have been stated, they offer their praises - not knowing that they are praising them not as teachers but as persons who have been taught...” (p. 59). He continues to claim that this inner Truth is from God and a human teacher is only there to prompt a man towards God. From this perspective, a teacher might not have the capacity to convert a student but can only facilitate the kinds of religious experiences that might lead to conversion.

In the Gospel of Matthew, the Savior states that “Except ye be converted... ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (King James Bible, 1769/2013, Matthew 18:3). At the end of each of the Gospels in the New Testament, Christ gave the admonition to his disciples to go and preach to all nations. The commandment to preach in a way that might facilitate conversion is in many religions, not just in Christianity. In fact, this concept can be found in any educational endeavor. Does the math teacher only want to teach concepts to her students, or does she want her students to have the kinds of experiences with math that might lead them to become mathematicians? Becoming a mathematician does not fall into the realm of religious conversion, but there is a change or conversion in the person as they assume a new identity for themselves. They are becoming a new being. Paul in the New Testament says, “And have put on the new

man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Colossians 3:10).

What do experiences that might lead to this sort of change look like in the seminary classroom?

Can these religious experiences be perceived by a teacher?

Often when people explain their religious experiences, they can seem strange or unbelievable to those who have not had the same or similar experiences. In 1843, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1843/1985) tried to explain the actions of Abraham as he went to sacrifice his son Isaac under commandment from God. He states that as Abraham goes to sacrifice his son on an altar, he is lauded as a knight of faith because he was obedient to God. Kierkegaard tries to rewrite the experience of Abraham to justify ethically the actions of Abraham. In the end, he claims that you cannot kill someone ethically, and without an understanding of Abraham’s experience with God he is a mad man. He also mentions that what he calls a knight of faith is not recognized in society, and their works to follow God often go unnoticed (Kierkegaard, 1843/1985).

### **What Is Religious Experience?**

In this section, I explore the nature of religious experience as an important prerequisite for conversion. As was stated above, religious experience is a specific type of spiritual experience that is linked to a particular religion, as Court (2013) explains, “The concepts of spiritual and religious experience do overlap, though the terms are by no means well defined. Religious experience is spiritual, but spiritual experience can be unrelated to any particular religion” (p. 253). I will mention the idea of spiritual experience and will be discussing student spirituality, but for the purpose of this paper and my own teaching, I am mostly looking for the type of spiritual experience that is linked to a particular religion, that is, religious experience within The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



“Religious conversion is the process by which a person commits to the beliefs of a new religious tradition and shifts away from their previously held religious beliefs” (Stark & Finke, 2000, as cited in Snook et al., 2018, p. 223). It is something that has been researched for thousands of years (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 1998) and has been one of the most researched topics in the psychology of religion (Hood, 2009). Often, conversion is a process that happens over a long period of time (Galonnier & de los Rios, 2015; Snook et al., 2018). People convert to religion for various reasons. “Conversion scholars generally agree that a crisis or disorientation precedes conversion” (Rambo & Bauman, 2012, p. 883). Often people are searching for help with stress, problems, relationships, illnesses, or challenging family dynamics, and these situational stresses or crises are the catalyst to conversion (Zehnder, 2011). Although these situations may be part of the path of conversion, religious experience is central to conversion (Iyandurai, 2014).

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wants their youth to become converted because then they are connected with heaven. Because of the spiritual nature of conversion and the limitations of public education, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints created seminary; a place where youth can not only learn about their religion, but also connect spiritually with God through that religion, or have religious experiences that make conversion more likely. But because of the spiritual nature of the seminary learning experience, it can be difficult for seminary teachers to be able to tell if their students are having these religious experiences using traditional assessments.

### **The Spiritual Dimension of Conversion**

"Religious conversion cannot be explained simply as a psychological process but involves a spiritual dimension" (Iyandurai, 2014, p. 189). Paul, to the Corinthians, said: “For

what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11). This is what makes measuring the kind of spiritual experiences that tie a person to a particular religion so difficult. These religious experiences are something that happens between a person and God in the context of their religious faith. This spiritual dimension might make it difficult for someone who has had a religious experience to explain, let alone someone observing the experience to assess, what happened. Even if it is difficult to explain, this spiritual dimension of religious experience is still something that is essential to conversion. “The spiritual dimension cannot be ignored in religious conversion, and it is vital to understand the phenomenon of conversion” (Iyandurai, 2014, p. 191). This spiritual dimension of religious experience allows a person to connect with God through their religion, potentially leading to conversion. Lewis Rambo found that converts claimed to be closer to God and that “God is no longer an abstract concept but a living reality” (Rambo, 1993, as cited in Iyandurai, 2014, p. 191).

Why is the religious experience so important in the conversion process? Why does the RE teacher care to connect their students with God? D. Todd Christofferson (2018), an apostle in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, stated:

Most of us find ourselves at this moment on a continuum between a socially motivated participation in gospel rituals on the one hand and a fully developed, Christlike commitment to the will of God on the other. Somewhere along that continuum, the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ enters into our heart and takes possession of our soul. It may not happen in an instant, but we should all be moving toward that blessed state. (pp. 31-32)

Dale G. Renlund (2019), another apostle in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, said in the October 2019 General Conference of the church:

Being converted unto the Lord starts with an unwavering commitment to God, followed by making that commitment part of who we are. Internalizing such a commitment is a lifelong process that requires patience and ongoing repentance. Eventually, this commitment becomes part of who we are, embedded in our sense of self, and ever present in our lives. Just as we never forget our own name no matter what else we are thinking about, we never forget a commitment that is etched in our hearts. (pp. 22)

This is why a religious experience is essential because the goal isn't just to know something but become someone new. A RE teacher in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wants his or her students to be as far as they can be on the Christlike commitment end of that continuum. Because when hard times come, the student will have a committed and deep relationship with God, who can always help him through his trial even when those people who were there aiding in their conversion process are no longer part of their life (Christofferson, 2018).

### **Religious Education, in General**

It is illegal for public schools to teach students religion for conversion purposes because of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. In this clause it states there can be "no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." (U.S. Const. amend. I). US public education can only teach about religion or what has been called "our religion" and they cannot teach the evangelical born again effect of religion (Kollar, 2005). In other secular nations (e.g., the UK and Europe), similar concerns have contributed to the perception that state operated RE has lost its spirituality and

religious meaning (Conroy et al., 2012). Conversion is to be avoided in RE that is operated by the state. Therefore, the question of how to measure conversion is likely considered irrelevant in those situations since conversion is taken out of the learning model. This is better described as education about religion instead of religious education. Public schools can teach about religion on the same level as they are able to teach about history.

As a result, some students see RE as simply comparing religions, and they miss seeing how religion can have meaning or application in their own personal lives. These students often comment that their only goal is to pass the learning assessment. There is no purpose behind what they are trying to accomplish and instead they adopt a checking the box learning mentality. These students often become bored and skeptical about the value of teaching religion, and this creates an atmosphere where “confusions, contradictions, and conflations abound” (Conroy et al., 2012).

Trouble also comes in RE when the curriculum is bounded by specific learning objectives. Often the curriculum is too dry to spark a religious experience. RE should “articulate the importance of meaning, imagination, joy and the hope that one may be gifted with occasional unfettered connection with the Divine” (Court, 2013, p. 258). When a teacher has a long list of concepts to recite to the students, that teacher will have difficulty engaging his students and will have a hard time helping them find any meaning in what they are learning.

### **Religious Education in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

Education about religion does not provide a complete picture of how religious people experience their religion. Therefore, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints developed the seminary program for high school aged students so they could have religious experiences during the week and not just on Sunday.

Education in the church has always been important. Joseph Smith founded the School of the Prophets in 1833 just three years after the founding of the church (Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013, Section 88). In the early 1900s, seminary was established in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to offset the “godless education so common in secular schools” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015, p. 27). The first class was held in April 1912. Early on in the program, school credit was given simply for Bible courses taught in seminary classes. Prestige came when teachers began to travel the country to receive theological degrees to advance their knowledge of the Bible. These degrees sometimes caused secularism to begin to creep into the seminary program. Church leaders became concerned with the direction of seminary and began to reassess the intent of the program (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2015). In 1938, President J. Rueben Clark delivered a talk on the purpose of seminary and what the church is trying to accomplish through seminary. This talk is still read by teachers today. It is called “The Charted Course of the Church in Education.”

In the address, President Clark identified the fundamentals that are important to religious education operated by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. One of those fundamentals is that seminary teachers and their students should hold to the conviction that Jesus is the Christ and that “the Father and the Son actually and in truth and very deed appeared to the Prophet Joseph in a vision in the woods,” and that “the Book of Mormon is just what it professes to be” (Clark, 1938, p. 2). He talked about the importance of seminary teachers having a testimony of these things, and that if a teacher didn’t have a testimony of these things, they should retire immediately. There should be a focus on spiritual things or the religious experience as it pertains to The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints:

These students (to put the matter shortly) are prepared to understand and to believe that there is a natural world and there is a spiritual world; that the things of the natural world will not explain the things of the spiritual world; that the things of the spiritual world cannot be understood or comprehended by the things of the natural world; that you cannot rationalize the things of the spirit, because first, the things of the spirit are not sufficiently known and comprehended, and secondly, because finite mind and reason cannot comprehend nor explain infinite wisdom and ultimate truth. (Clark, 1938, p. 5)

Just in the last few years, there has been an added emphasis on teaching seminary students about their relationship with Jesus Christ. Seminary teachers are now encouraged not to simply talk about Christ in their lessons, but to structure their lessons around Christ so their students have experiences where they can feel connected to Him (Webb, 2018). In the handbook for seminary teachers, *Gospel Teaching and Learning*, the very first fundamental of gospel teaching and learning is to teach and learn by the Spirit (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012). Therein lies the greatest challenge. How can a teacher know what is happening in a student's relationship with God when that relationship is not only private but deeply personal?

### **Difficulties of Evaluation in Religious Education**

Dallin H. Oaks (1997) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints wrote of teaching and learning by the Spirit. After speaking of the importance of teaching and learning by the Spirit, Elder Oaks elaborates on what communication from the Spirit is like. He uses phrases like “the still small voice” (para. 51), “enlightens their minds and speaks peace” (para. 59), “you shall feel that it is right” (para. 63), “burning in the

bosom” (para. 65), or “comfort and serenity” (para. 65). His discussion about teaching and learning by the spirit emphasizes private rather than public manifestations.

Christ’s warning of false prophets and that “Ye shall know them by their fruits... Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matthew 7:16, 20). He had nothing happy to say about the scribes of his day who had operationally defined righteousness in quite empirical terms. So, to what “fruits” was he referring? It was not obviously observable behavior for he continued, “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:21-23). How did he recognize the hypocrisy or what true conversion would be? What "fruits" was he speaking about?

Harkness (2008) speaks of many of the challenges of assessment in RE. He states that there are four major domains in seminary-based ministerial formation: cognitive, ministerial skills, personal character development, and empathy and passion. This list contains things that are temporal (pertaining primarily to the “natural world”) and things that are spiritual. Both the temporal and the spiritual aspects of RE are important and to eliminate one in favor of the other could be detrimental to the RE process. Harkness continues explaining that the overall purpose of the Bible is to help students be edified, built up, nurtured, and helped. These are all spiritual outcomes and should be our main goal in Christian education. However, Harkness states in the article that assessing spirituality cannot be fully addressed in his article, leaving a gap in the most important aspect of Christian education. He says conversion is very broad, can take a long time, and can combine all aspects of a person’s life to finally achieve real, deep, and lasting religious

conversion. Ultimately, it is God who will be the final assessor of conversion, as no one can truly understand the hearts of students and teachers. However, is there a way a teacher can know if a student is having a religious experience? True, God is the final assessor, but can a teacher or minister see some of these religious experiences that might lead to the student becoming more converted in their classrooms? If not, how can they improve their teaching in a way that facilitates these experiences?

It might be that helping students acquire textual knowledge and analytical skills is also part of the process that leads to conversion. A necessary, but not sufficient condition.

Through developing the mind, we develop the character... A second, practical and moral goal of religious knowledge is to help us live meaningful, moral lives, to develop the disposition and determination to perform acts of kindness, generosity, and compassion... A third goal, the one we sometimes forget in our pursuit of the other two, is spiritual. Scripture holds profound insights, often captured metaphorically, which are not intellectual, which reach the spirit, but which become accessible to us through the intellectual channels of text reading and textual interpretation... Pure, mature communion with God is surely a goal of Religious Education. (Court, 2010, pp. 500-502)

From this perspective, the combination of these three goals of religious education—development of the mind, moral character, and communion with God—is what leads a student to having a religious experience, one that might in turn contribute to conversion. The mind and character are essential points to develop if we are to access the spiritual. In the *Doctrine and Covenants* (2013, Section 8:2) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints it states: “Yea, behold, I will tell you in your mind and in your heart, by the Holy Ghost, which shall come upon you and which shall dwell in your heart.” These three goals are important because the teacher needs to realize



that it isn't just the powerful tear-jerking experiences that lead to someone's conversion. The kind of religious experience that leads to conversion involves combining intellectual understanding, a change in behavior or character, and spiritual communion.

### **My Own Conversion**

I was born in a home in which going to church was just the thing we did. I don't think I even considered whether there was any other option. My earliest memory of having a religious experience was in a children's class one Sunday when the teacher was telling us about when Joseph Smith saw God and Jesus Christ in a grove of trees. I remember clearly thinking I was sure that event had happened. I knew it deep inside of me.

The next experience I remember feeling was when I was a teenager and was after a long period of stress and anxiety. Because of the stress in my life and prompted by encouragement from the current president of the church, Gordon B. Hinckley, I decided to read the Book of Mormon every night. After reading 20 verses every night and finally finishing the book, I knelt before God to ask Him if the Book of Mormon was true. I remember feeling so happy in that moment. I could hear someone say in my mind, "You have always known it was true." That moment was powerful for me. I have often gone back to it when I have questioned the existence of God in my personal life, and I remember this moment. It has always anchored my faith that God is there.

The most impactful time for my personal conversion was when I was a missionary in Texas where I served for two years teaching the doctrines of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. My mission president had a huge impact on me and inspired me to follow Jesus Christ more completely. Now, the teachings of Jesus Christ have become a part of who I am and have dictated so much of every decision I make every day. In addition to these three

specific experiences in my life, there were so many small religious experiences that contributed to my conversion.

All these religious experiences were important to my personal conversion. I don't believe they are the only reason I am converted today, but looking back, I believe they were essential. They were subtle and were usually the result of previous experiences and learning opportunities compounding to one memorable moment. In each of these experiences, I felt like I was connecting to someone outside of myself. I believe that someone was God. Gordon B. Hinckley seemed to give the exact challenge that I needed at the exact time in my life when I was being intensely tried. In fact, I can honestly say President Hinckley was a participant in that religious experience. It felt as if someone knew my predicament and told President Hinckley to challenge church members to read the Book of Mormon, knowing that eventually I would follow through with the challenge.

The hardest thing is knowing whether my students are having these religious experiences of pure, intimate, connected communication with God in the classroom. What happens in these religious experiences is deeply internal and not easily perceived by other people. Court (2013) elaborates on this idea:

Religious study should not only lead to religious knowledge and a moral life, but to creating a framework for a religious life within which students of any age might be surprised by joy, peace, insight, meaning and connection – whatever inadequate words we ascribe... A religious life sustained only by habit or fear, by community, security or stability or by the acquisition of an extensive body of knowledge is not a full religious life. While we cannot teach, promise, evaluate or verify religious experience, we must

include it as a revealed and valued aim. Clearly, this is not an aim that can be broken down into goals and behavioral objectives. No 'behavior' is intended. (p. 257)

Encapsulating this quote, Court makes the claim that we cannot evaluate or verify religious experience and that no behavior is intended, but she uses the words "joy, peace, insight, meaning and connection" which gives cause for contemplation. While there may not be a specific behavior intended for the students to show a religious experience, there are indicators such as joy, peace, insight, meaning and connection. One can often tell when someone's emotion moves from anger to joy or from anxiety to peace. Though it has been shown that nonverbal communication is not 93% of all communication (Lapakko, 1997), as was once thought after a famous study by Mehrabian and Ferris (1976), it is clearly an important factor when trying to communicate how we are feeling. A teacher can often tell when their students are experiencing deeper meaning or gaining understanding by the body language or facial expressions of the students. This nonverbal communication cannot be context free if we want to identify its meaning (Barrett, 1993).

In short, religious education is more than just learning what is right and wrong or how to act. The whole person is involved in the process (Harkness, 2001). This includes thought, feeling, and behavior--and other people can be involved as well. The claim of other people's involvement as being a key part of RE is stated as truth in the *Doctrine and Covenants* (2013, Section 50:21-22) of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. "Therefore, why is it that ye cannot understand and know, that he that receiveth the word by the Spirit of truth receiveth it as it is preached by the Spirit of truth? Wherefore, he that preacheth and he that receiveth, understand one another, and both are edified and rejoice together." Henry B. Eyring, an apostle of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, states that if a teacher prays after a class and

asks God for confirmation of lifting a student, God will reveal to the teacher that something did happen by indicators such as, “a look on a student’s face, or the sound in a student’s voice, or even the way the student sat up and leaned forward at some point in the lesson” (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012, p. 78). Christ says in the Gospel of Matthew that, “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:20).

To set a groundwork for evaluation, DeMott and Black (1998) define evaluation of education with four different areas or levels:

First, evaluation involves evidence about what is. Second, the evidence is compared to some criteria and/or purpose. Third, evaluation involves a judgment about the worth of that which is being evaluated. And fourth, the purpose of evaluation is to improve education. (p. 478)

In the context of this study, this statement can yield several insights. When I look at the last three areas, I can clearly see where spiritual evaluation fits. My criteria or purpose is trying to help my students have the kinds of experiences that will lead them to Jesus Christ. This is of great worth to me, church leaders, and parents of my students, and I intend to use this information to help me spiritually educate my students. The first area, evidence about what is, is where I feel there is a lack of concrete information as far as religious experience is concerned. According to Court (2013) there is no behavior to indicate a religious experience. However, I believe there can be indicators when coupled with shared thoughts and feelings. The behavior might be as simple as a brief moment of eye contact, a nod, a change in posture, etc. These alone might not mean anything, but coupled with shared thoughts and feelings, a teacher can have a shared religious experience with a student.

## CHAPTER 3

### Method

#### The Challenge

A fundamental aspect of my role as a teacher is to promote the religious development of my students. In order to promote that religious development, I need to identify when students are having religious experiences in their interactions with me, in my classroom or elsewhere. The purpose of this study is to develop clearer understanding of what interactions are more likely to enable my students to have religious experiences and what are the characteristics of accurate intuitions concerning the impact of our interactions on their religious development. This is a difficult task for several reasons:

#### *Student Honesty*

Students who publicly profess a lack of belief, as well as students who lack faith, can feel shamed by peers, parents, or church leaders despite assurances that they will continue to be cared for and not excluded for professing a view different from religious teachers or leaders. This causes many students to struggle with being honest about their religious experiences. They struggle to admit they don't have faith, or when they do have faith, they struggle to admit they do as well for other various reasons. Sometimes they don't want to appear "too good" in front of their peers.

#### *Misidentification of Emotional Response as Religious Development*

Crying doesn't always mean they felt something related to the class. In the seminary teacher handbook for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, it is cautioned that teachers should not try to emotionally manipulate their students to make them think they are feeling the Spirit. President Howard W. Hunter stated, "I think if we are not careful as . . .

teachers working in the classroom every day, we may begin to try to counterfeit the true influence of the Spirit of the Lord by unworthy and manipulative means. I get concerned when it appears that strong emotion or free-flowing tears are equated with the presence of the Spirit. Certainly, the Spirit of the Lord can bring strong emotional feelings, including tears, but that outward manifestation ought not to be confused with the presence of the Spirit itself' (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012). Feeling the Spirit can often have strong emotions attached to it, but this doesn't always mean that when someone is crying in a religious setting that means they are feeling closer to God.

### ***Hubris***

I want my students to have a connection with God in my classes. Because of this, I could believe I am having a greater impact on them than I actually am. I could make up experiences where I believe I was impactful to inflate my own ego as a teacher.

### ***Religious Experiences are Personal***

The types of religious experiences I am looking for in class are deeply personal and internal. The challenge is how to access these experiences because they are personal for each student. Sometimes belief and testimony are too sacred for students to share in a group setting.

### ***Traditional Survey Can Invite Dishonesty***

Students may over-report having religious experiences because they know their teacher is looking for them. We give anonymous surveys asking students about their levels of conversion when they take the Learning Assessment in class. The problem is that the left bubbles on the answer sheet are all the indicators of conversion, and the right ones are the indicators of lack of belief. Then when they turn in this anonymous paper, anyone can see where they are at just by

looking at the last paper on the stack that they just turned in. We don't currently have a successful way to survey student's conversion levels.

Ask any religious teacher of teenagers, simply inviting students to testify of the things they have felt about God can be a very quiet experience. As I've observed, I see both deeper acceptance and rejection emerging in an RTE setting because of the sharing of deep and personal beliefs on one hand or sharing the lack of belief in what is being taught on the other hand. The struggle is ironically either acceptance or rejection in either situation because the students feel so much pressure to be accepted by their peers. To avoid the social pressure associated with claiming a religious experience, I want to see if I can first identify when a student might be having an experience before attempting to check with the student on what they might have been experiencing.

In this study, what I am fundamentally seeking to understand is my tacit knowledge, including intuition, concerning what actions on my part and interactions with my students lead to deeper religious development. Often, I base my understanding of whether an experience was spiritual or not on my own intuitions. However, those intuitions may or may not be accurate. Therefore, my purpose in this study is to identify the characteristics of experiences with my students in my intuitions about them that are an actual reflection of the experience.

### **Researcher Position**

I understand that I am stating that I want the students to have a deep and personal relationship with God and I want to understand more clearly what actions and intuitions I can rely on in determining whether I'm being successful in meeting this goal. This could be seen by some readers as an admission of researcher bias. However, qualitative research often involves reporting observations or experiences of which the researcher is an integral part. For this study,

an outside or “objective” observer would not have access to these observations and understandings I hope to uncover as I articulate and explore these experiences. Thus, for this study a more appropriate goal is transparency. According to Galdas (2017):

Those carrying out qualitative research are an integral part of the process and final product, and separation from this is neither possible nor desirable. The concern instead should be whether the researcher has been transparent and reflexive...about the processes by which data have been collected, analyzed, and presented. (p. 2)

In this study, I seek to probe and excavate my understanding of my perception that students I interact with and teach are having religious experiences that lead to a deepening of their religious development. This study operates out of an ontological stance (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). By this, I mean the study seeks to uncover what is happening in my interactions with students that I label as leading to their religious development. This study seeks to provide accurate and viable descriptions of my tacit and embodied knowledge, and intuitive promptings: assertions for understanding and action rather than truth claims.

### **Self-Study**

Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices (S-STTEP) is a type of qualitative research which holds the most promise for my ability as a researcher to answer the question I have posed. S-STTEP researchers are not just trying to seek for understanding but improvement (Pinnegar & Hamilton, 2009). Through a S-STTEP approach I believe, from my observations of my classroom, that I can identify characteristics of religious experiences as they occur in my interactions with students and gain a deeper understanding of the accuracy of my intuitions about them. Through this work I seek to develop not traditional findings but assertions for action and understanding based empirically in my analysis of my accounts of these



experiences. Hopefully, this study will improve my practice in supporting students' religious development. Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009) define self-study as

the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas ... It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political ... it draws on one's life, but it is more than that. Self-study also involves a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known, and ideas considered. (p. 236)

This is why this study utilizes the methodology of S-STTEP. My study adheres to the five characteristics of this methodology identified by LaBoskey (2004). The study needs to be self-initiated and self-focused, improvement aimed, interactive, multiple qualitative research methods are to be used, and utilizes exemplar validation. I have initiated this study and focused data collection and analysis on my observations of student actions that are associated with my perceptions that a student might be having a religious experience. My purpose is to better understand students' experiences of their religious development to provide students with more opportunities for religious development. I want to use this research to find out as Elder Eyring states what I "can do to bring those lifting experiences to [my] students again and again" (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012, p. 78).

This study is interactive in three ways: First, my data is based on interactions with my students and my perceptions of them. Second, I utilized a critical friend to challenge my observations, analysis, and findings. Third, I returned to the students whose experiences form the basis of my analysis. I presented my perceptions of our experiences that I felt led to a deepening of their religious development, sought their verification, and negotiated a shared understanding.

The data for this study includes my observations and explanations of my experiences and accounts of my negotiations with students concerning meaning and accuracy. My analysis used

strategies from basic qualitative analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2011) and the Listening Guide (Gilligan et al., 2006; see Data Analysis section below). Because of the iterative nature of my analysis, my interactions with critical friends and my negotiations with students who are the subject of my observations, my assertions for action and understanding are exemplars.

### **Data Collection**

My data are comprised of observations, notes on my reflections, and journals that record experiences and interactions with my students that I label as spiritual or leading to their religious development. When I came up with this research question, my mind went back to previous classes that I had taught when I thought a student had a religious experience. I am guided in this process by direction from Elder Henry B. Eyring. He proposes:

After a class, you might find a moment to pray that you might see clearly what happened in the class and what happened in the lives of the students. You may do it your own way, but the way I like to do it is something like this: I ask, ‘Was there something I said or did, or that they said or did, that lifted them?’ ...

If you ask in prayer, humbly and in faith, you will sometimes—perhaps often—have moments during that class brought back to your memory of a look on a student’s face, or the sound in a student’s voice, or even the way the student sat up and leaned forward at some point in the lesson that will give you reassurance that they were lifted.

But more important than that, it can give you the chance to learn. You can learn what happened in the classroom and, therefore, what you can do to bring those lifting experiences to your students again and again. (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2012, p. 78)

In my data collection, I sought out old records that account for spiritual interactions with students that follow Elder Eyring's suggestions, and I constructed records of new experiences based on his guidance. These notes provided much of my data. I looked at notes and journal entries from my past years of teaching, focusing especially on observations that occurred between January 2020 and April 2020.

Since this is a self-study, and the data collection is comprised of my reflections of my perceptions of experiences when I believed that my students had a religious experience, I have not mentioned any names of those studied to protect the identity of students about who I record my observations. However, because I planned to determine the accuracy of my intuition or perception by confirming whether the student would agree that they had a religious experience, once I completed my data collection (but before I engaged in data analysis) I contacted the student(s) involved and sought informed consent. On this occasion I asked the student to verify the accuracy of my account and sought agreement for the account to be used in my thesis.

Therefore, I took an unusual approach to gathering informed consent. I sought out the students who were involved in my observations. I asked to meet with them (and also with their parents if they were under the age of 18). I provided a document explaining my project and I reviewed my account of our interaction. I then asked them to sign a document of informed consent if they were willing to have the de-identified account included in my thesis. I have received approval from the university International Review Board and all participants and their parents if needed, have signed consent forms (see Appendix C-F).

## **Data Analysis**

In the analysis of the data, I interviewed the student involved and asked them to help clarify and add detail to the narrative. I then used the Listening Guide. After the first analysis, I used critical friends to help deepen the analysis to see if there was anything that I missed.

### ***Limited Student Interviews***

Before my analysis of my narratives, I presented my narrative to the students themselves. I asked them if they agreed with what I had written and if there were any additional details that needed to be added. I asked them if they felt like this was a significant religious experience for them. I recorded those interviews and with that text, I was able to add their narrative to my own to create a more cohesive story about what happened. See Appendices B, C, D, and E for all recruitment documents.

### ***Listening Guide***

To analyze both my narratives and the narratives of the student, I used the Listening Guide. Gilligan et al. (2006) created a multiple reading guide called a Listening Guide. The multiple readings are called listenings rather than readings because as a researcher you are as much an active participant as the research participant. As a researcher you are focusing on listening to the text—hearing it—rather than merely coding it. Multiple listenings (and analyses) are conducted so that the researcher tunes into the story being told on “multiple levels and to experience, note and draw from his or her resonances to the narrative” (p. 159; see Appendix A).

The first part of the Listening Guide is looking for plotlines. Through answering the questions in the Listening Guide, I identified plotlines or similarities that helped group the stories to better analyze them. This process took some time to try and find a way that the stories could be grouped together. I put the information from the Listening Guide into a spreadsheet and from

that sheet, I was able to see where the stories could be linked into plotlines. I looked at as many similarities as I could find such as: What caused the event to be noticed? What was the student response? What was different about my teaching that could have sparked a response? How did I know something happened? What was the student doing before the event? What prompted the event? The only category that to me had any concrete similarities was what the student was doing before the event. I was able to piece together four different plotlines based on the student's readiness before the event. Then with those plotlines, I showed using the I-poems how my analysis of each story and plotline fits together.

The second part is called I-poems that are created with every "I" statement in the narrative. This forces the researcher to listen to the *first-person-voice* and to hear more clearly how this person speaks about themselves. This was such an enjoyable part for me as it put the narratives to life. When the narrative is put into an I-poem, small but important details are easily seen. You can see the flow of the narrative and see the hinge points when something happened in the narrative to indicate the religious experience. I took some liberties in the I-poem creation to make the poems flow better. For example, sometimes I would be using my own voice through the poem but in the last line, I would use a phrase the student used, such as "I believe you" to put a figurative cap on the poem (see Appendix B).

The third part is Contrapuntal Listening which comes from the concept of contrapuntal music, which combines two separate melodic lines. Each has its own shape and movement but the two are played simultaneously and move in relationship to each other. The interpreter is trying to listen simultaneously to different layers of a person's expressed experience in terms of the question posed (Gilligan et al., 2006). Here I started with the entire narrative and looked for different voices. I looked for negative positive voices, my voice versus the student's voice, or my

actions versus the student's actions. Using a highlighter, I went through each narrative multiple times looking for different voices. I then went and did the same thing with the I-poems to see if the different voices were easier to see. From this, I was able to begin to form my conclusions about the narratives.

### ***Critical Friends***

Because this study is a self-study, I had critical friends help me with the analysis. After I followed the steps in the Listening Guide, I presented the analysis to my critical friends so they could push me on my analysis. I had them see if my conclusion, that this student had a religious experience, was convincing from my analysis. My critical friends included a co-worker of mine and a close friend that was not a seminary teacher.

### **Religious Language**

In The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, there is a specific verbiage adopted by members used almost as a universal language when describing spiritual and religious experiences. There are terms that have become so prevalent in this religion that we have grown accustomed to hearing and speaking these words to help members of the church express our experiences and to achieve mutual understanding. For example, when a student says, "I felt the Spirit" this means, according to our theology, that they are implying they had a faith promoting experience as described in Galatians: "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22-23). Another example would be the student describing how he or she feels edified (Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1981/2013, 50:17-22). Although I understand this verbiage may be foreign to some readers, I will be using this language to describe my experiences and the students' experiences as it fits the cultural context in which the experiences occurred.

## **Trustworthiness**

Rather than seeking objectivity, “bias-” or “value-freeness,” a more appropriate way of talking about the validity and reliability of researcher observations in qualitative research is “trustworthiness.” To support the goal of trustworthiness, in addition to being transparent here regarding my integral position in relation to the phenomenon I am studying, I accounted for my own expectations in part through involving critical friends in my analysis, and through the limited student interviews in which I checked for student perceptions of the experience. Throughout this process, I actively sought evidence and perspectives that might disconfirm my perceptions and analyses.

## CHAPTER 4

### Results

In analyzing 10 religious experiences selected for this study, I identified four plotlines. The development of these plotlines was a very rigorous experience. After the analysis of the Listening Guide, I put all of the information into a spreadsheet and began to see that each story was unique. I could find threads that bound all of them together but there was very little that could put the stories into their own groupings. After days of analysis and discussion with critical friends, the one thread that we could use to put the stories into groups or plotlines was the student's role in bringing about the interaction. From this analysis, four distinct plotlines arose. Plotline 1 includes students who were coming to class not specifically looking for anything but while they were there, something I said impacted them. Plotline 2 includes students who came to my office. The interaction between us moved from a simple conversation to a spiritual one. Plotline 3 includes stories of students who were seeking on their own to change their spiritual relationship with God. When I suggested they could do more, they acted, and I perceived more spiritual growth. Plotline 4 includes stories where the student had a specific question or challenge and found answers to their challenge or question during regular class.

It is important to note that these plotlines are not perfect and do not encompass all the types of interactions a teacher could have with their students. As I was categorizing the narratives, there was one that didn't seem to belong in any category but after a while I could justify putting it into Plotline 3 if I modified the definition of it slightly. This process was difficult as each story and situation was so different. What marked the plotlines as unique from each other was not the elements in the plot but the setting or context of the plotline and the



pattern of interaction between me and the student. By this I mean I found more commonalities in the location or setting of the experience than in the nature of the experience itself.

What I present here will be a description and identification of commonalities within each plotline. Next, I will present an I-poem that reflects the experience and captures the interaction. Finally, I will show how the I-poem reflects and characterizes the plotline.

### **Plotline 1: Participating in Seminary Life**

There are no grades in seminary and, even if there were, they wouldn't count for high school credit. Attendance is the only thing necessary to be able to graduate seminary, not participation in class. The best external motivator in seminary is to tell their parents that they are not participating, though when you call a parent, the student no longer trusts you or wants anything to do with your class. Thus, the only way to really get results is to convince the student that seminary and God are something they should care about. Student choice is essential to success in seminary.

Because of these dynamics, sometimes you have students in class who are just there and not much else. They want to get their attendance marked and so their parents do not get an email home saying they were absent. I have had so many students like this. I feel like my hands are tied and there is nothing I can do to convince this student that a relationship with God is something they want in life. Parents will often ask me to go and spiritually rescue their children who are going astray. As a teacher, I often feel helpless. I find myself begging God to allow me to say the right thing one day that will make a difference in a kid's life. In two of my stories, I believe God answered those prayers.

These students were not bad students. They were always fine in class, but they never really contributed to the lesson. They never seemed to be engaged. Then one day there seemed to

be a moment when my thoughts become clear. I stumbled across an idea that seemed good or that I usually didn't talk about. As I begin speaking about this new idea or unusual thought, the student in this scenario looks up and starts listening very intently. As I notice the student look up, I realize that the thought I am speaking about could apply to them and what I know about them. After a second, the moment is gone but the look on their face still stays with me.

This interaction is very brief. I have little evidence that something important happened in the interaction. After interviewing both students years later (one being three years and the other two) they both did not remember the specific event. They remembered my class, and both said they had seen a lot of spiritual growth during that period of their lives but couldn't remember the specific lesson or interaction. I did personally notice that both students did improve in their participation in class after that but that could be my own desire to have an impact that could skew that view. The strongest evidence that something was happening was my perception. In both circumstances I felt impressed to do something new or different and that, combined with their reactions, led me to believe that something of significance happened. See Table 1 for the I-Poems pertaining to this section.

**Table 1***I-Poem From Stories 1 and 4*

My I-Poem from student 1	My I-Poem from student 4
<p>I had taught him. I had taught him.</p> <p>I am almost always a mercy teacher. I don't cry repentance. I remember specifically. I need to invite to repent. I felt like it was the right thing to do. I remember speaking of repentance. I remember he looked up. I knew.</p> <p>I asked him. I knew then.</p>	<p>I spoke about it, it felt right. I didn't prepare it before the lesson. I don't know why. I really felt. I felt. I remember the student's attention.</p>

We can see evidence of my perception of the student just being there and not really contributing to the class. In the I-Poem about student 1, the phrase "I had taught him" is repeated twice, emphasizing the idea that these kids are just there passively being taught. All of the action in this phrase is from me. Also, in the poem about student 4, remembering the student's attention is significant as it implies that the student not paying attention is a normal thing.

In both instances, I felt impressed to make a change to my normal teaching methods. Regarding student 1, I usually teach about the mercy of the Savior instead of what the student should be doing to repent. However, in this lesson I chose to focus on the student's efforts to repent. I use the phrase, "I felt like it was the right thing to do." With student 4, I use the phrase, "I didn't prepare it in the lesson," "I don't know why," and "I really felt," which all indicate that there was a change in what I was teaching based on something that I felt impressed to change.

In each case, after the teaching change, I saw evidence that the student seemed to be paying attention more than they ever had before with phrases like “I remember he looked up” and “I remember the student’s attention.”

### **Plotline 2: Engaging in Conversation**

In seminary, there isn’t a curriculum to get through. There is a curriculum, but I can deviate from it as I see needs in my classes. Because of this freedom, I can take a lot of time to just get to know my students and address their needs and concerns. This can lead to the seminary building being a place where kids feel the pressures of normal school life fade away. There is very little pressure here to perform like the high stakes that can be felt at the high school. I often get students that want to be in the seminary building when they have free time because of the way they feel there. In two of my stories, the students involved were coming to my office when they had free time just to chat.

These students trusted me and wanted someone to talk to about their challenges and struggles. I had interactions with them that showed them that I cared more about them than their success in seminary. The more we interacted in my office simply talking about life, the more that trust grew, so did my ability to share with them about God and his ability to help them in their struggles. I do get paid to teach these students about God, but money is not the reason I teach people about Him. My belief in Him is the main driving force in my life. I believe that any person will be happier if they have a better relationship with Him. As I grew to care more about these two students, so did my desire to share more about God. In both stories, there is a significant amount of time that passes before we come to significant spiritual interaction. Some moments were powerful and others just small steps. See Table 2 for the I-Poems pertaining to this section.

**Table 2***I-Poem From Story 2*


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My I-Poem from student 2

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I remember.  
 I saw her.  
 I would tell her.  
 I was so glad.  
 I knew she felt safe.

I didn't know.  
 I wanted.  
 I told her.  
 I read it.  
 I told her.  
 I prayed.  
 I recognized.  
 I had become.

I had no clue.  
 I looked.  
 I felt strongly.  
 I had read that book.  
 I had power to become.  
 I read the Book of Mormon.

I told her this.  
 I told her with strong emotions.  
 I believed.

She began to cry as well.  
 "I believe you."

I knew.

---

In this I-Poem, it is clear that I perceived that this student felt safe to come to me when I wrote, "I knew she felt safe." I perceived that there was a close enough relationship with the student that I was able to share something with strong emotions. Though it doesn't say that I was

crying when I state, “I told her with strong emotions,” I note that she was crying as well. This experience was more than just a teacher telling their student what they thought was the right answer. There was something deeply felt here by both the teacher and the student. Because this student felt safe, it allowed me to feel safe as well to open up my deep feelings about the power of the Book of Mormon. With this close connection with the student, I believe there was more of an opportunity for the Spirit to come and work with both of us. It created a place where our spirits could connect with each other and connect with God.

### **Plotline 3: Pursuing Answers Independently**

Some students are very aware of their spiritual growth and are doing so many things on their own to continue that growth. They know how to make spiritual decisions on their own and don't need someone to give them the push to grow more. They want their lives and the lives of those around them to be better. Many of these students are in my classes. Sometimes I can invite them to take another step in that growth and they are able to progress even more than they could have on their own. In seminary I can help students see more clearly the spiritual experiences they are having in their lives that they weren't aware of. Three of my stories had students who were in this position.

These students were taking what they had learned in previous years in seminary, Sunday school, and other church functions and were applying the teachings in their lives. One was helping a friend recover from a traumatic event. Another decided that they needed to participate more in seminary if they were going to have a good experience. The other was in a leadership role in seminary and was preparing to make the whole seminary program have a better year. In all three of these instances, the student was not being motivated by me in their original efforts. With each one of these students, there was a moment or several moments when I was able

to invite them to either share their testimony of God or the church, or to take on a less self-centered role in seminary. They didn't ask for more work or opportunities, but when the opportunity was presented to them, they took it, and with it found they were able to understand more their relationship with God and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See Table 3 for the I-Poems pertaining to this section.

**Table 3**

*I-Poem From Story 10*

My I-Poem	The Student's I-Poem
<p>I have never had a student more excited.            I remember her crying after class.            I asked.            I don't know why.            I got really excited.            I told.</p> <p>I remember.            I saw her look around.            I knew she was looking to bless.            I've never seen a student care so much about their peers.</p>	<p>I didn't feel.            I wasn't learning anything new.            I knew it was true.            I knew all the answers.            I was ready for something new.            I was ready to learn something.            I was like, okay, yeah.            I can serve people.</p> <p>I was like wow.            I think that's when it clicked.            I finally started memorizing everyone's name.            I could talk to them.            I would see them.            I'd go up to them.            I got to know them.</p> <p>I have a lot less anxiety.            I went to class.            I just felt completely comfortable.            I reached out to people.            I got out of my comfort zone.</p> <p>I trust Him more.            I pray a lot more.            I kind of put it all to Him.            I gave everything to Him.</p>

As I analyze the student's I-Poem above, they use phrases like: "I knew it was true," "I knew all the answers," "I was ready for something new," and "I was ready to learn something." It is clear that this student was aware of their spiritual growth and wanted more. This student was yearning for change. As they became aware of that learning, they began to look outwards and saw their peers and that the next step in their spiritual growth didn't have to do with them learning more in the classroom but with them helping their peers learn. at the context of my own I-Poem is that the student came to me upset after class and I was able to give her some small advice about how to move forward. This small piece of advice helped this student to see seminary differently and to act in her own faith and with more purpose.

This change becomes unmistakable as the student's I-Poem progresses. The whole second half of the I-Poem shows so much evidence of the student's growth and development. They were not only confident to reach out to help lift their peers but also their relationship with God increased as well: "I trust Him more. I pray a lot more. I kind of put it all to Him. I gave everything to Him."

#### **Plotline 4: Asking for Help**

In seminary I always try to get my students to share their questions. Many seminary teachers will start their class asking their students if they have any questions. I have spent entire lessons just answering questions that students have with the idea that if they have something relevant to talk about, then anything that I have prepared is secondary to their current concerns. As a teacher I pray to be able to answer my students' probing questions. Often students will come to class with questions, will not ask them directly, but will hope that something in seminary will be said that will help them. I have had many of my students tell me that a certain lesson or class was exactly what they needed to hear that day.



When these questions come up in class (or the sheer fact that so many of my students are likely thinking of questions or concerns but don't ask them) it can be a very daunting task. Inviting students to ask questions can be scary as I know that I don't have all the answers and there have been times in class when it felt like they were not helped by the response that I gave. However, I do believe there is added power given to a teacher that is asked a sincere question by a student.

In three of the stories, these students each had a specific question or concern in their life that they were wondering about. In each of these experiences, I didn't know the question or concern that the student had before class started. In two of the stories the student asked the question directly to me and in the other I didn't know the whole context until I interviewed the student later. During the interviews, I discovered that the answers were very impactful, and that the student used the lessons they learned months later. In each of the stories, I could see how my life seemed directed to a place where I could be ready to answer the questions.

In each of these experiences, there seemed to be something extra given to me to be able to answer the question in a way that gave spiritual strength to the student. In one of the experiences, I had a dream the night before we went to class in which my students wanted me to explain a certain topic to them. I forgot about the dream until I came to class, and a student asked me a question that was almost exactly about the same topic that my dream was about. See Table 4 for the I-Poems pertaining to this section.

**Table 4***I-Poems From Story 8*

Me	Student
I felt passionate.	I felt depressed.
I had read.	I felt lazy.
I just felt really inspired.	I procrastinated.
I went to work.	I was a lot less happy.
I did more collaborating.	I began to care less.
I did more talking.	I wasted time endlessly.
I did more planning.	I just lacked the care.
I did more wrestling.	I began to question.
I got in class.	I had no reason.
I could feel.	I was stuck.
I wanted this.	I couldn't feel joy.
I asked.	I entered my scripture study.
I felt.	I went to school.
I asked.	I felt sad.
I looked at a student.	I felt God would help me.
I walked by.	I walked into Brother Pearson's.
	I listened.
	I never wanted to leave.
	I never wanted the feelings to diminish.
	I recognized.
	I heard.
	I wrote.
"I needed to hear this today."	I know God is aware of me.
	I needed.
	I realized.

In another story, I had felt very passionate about a certain topic that I wanted to teach one day. For some reason I just had an idea, and I couldn't make that idea fit into the block of scriptures that we were teaching that day. I worked hard and seemed to produce a decent lesson. For the most part though, it felt like a normal lesson when I taught it. After one of my lessons, I

could tell that it really impacted one student; at least they were very emotional during the lesson. After interviewing the student and finding out the details of their life outside of class that day, there were some amazing parallels to my viewpoint of the story.

When I look at these two I-Poems side by side, I can see my struggle and wrestle to say the right thing to my students that day, and at almost the same time the student was struggling with the opposite emotions. As my drive to try and convey a message to my students grew, the student was wanting to do less and losing motivation to keep doing the things asked of them every day. I was using words like passionate, inspired, work, collaborating, talking, planning, and wrestling. The student is using words with the opposite feel like depressed, lazy, procrastinated, less happy, wasted time, lacked the care, and stuck.

As I come to the actual lesson, I can see this shift in this student and the motivation that comes into them: “I never wanted to leave,” and “I never wanted the feelings to diminish.” You can see a shift in the student from inaction to action with phrases like: “I listened,” “I recognized,” “I heard,” and “I wrote.” I was completely unaware of what was happening to this student before that lesson, and even throughout the lesson I still didn’t realize the impact that the lesson was having on this student. In fact, I wrote my side of the story before I knew all the details of the student’s side of the story. As I was able to write the I-Poem, it was beautiful to see both experiences side by side and how parallel they were.

When I analyze my motivation to give that lesson that day and seeing the student with that specific circumstance happening to them, it really does feel like there was some other force assisting me in the preparation of that lesson. I felt that way in my lesson preparation, but it seems that the student felt that way as well, as the student says in the last stanza, “I know God is aware of me.”

Here I also want to mention the importance of the contrapuntal listening. In this narrative there were two distinct voices, but I didn't see them until I went through the process of looking for them. During the analysis of the narrative, it was crucial for me to put the different voices side by side to see the parallel experience.

### **Cross Case Analysis**

As I looked across the four plotlines, I noticed there were certain common elements that could provide me with guidance for future interactions with students. These commonalities involved listening to my inner thoughts and what the students had to say, observing carefully with both my physical and my intuitive eye, and finally interacting carefully and fully with the students guided by my listening and observations.

In each of the plotlines, the students confirmed that this time of their life was a time of spiritual growth. For some students it was a big moment and for others it was a year or more:

- “I had always had a testimony of God before but that really, you know, strengthened it.”
- “I know God is aware of me.”
- “I still use this lesson today.”
- “I've been able to recognize how much He trusts me.”
- “I know God loves me.”
- “I believe you.”
- “I really gained a lot.”
- “I just found it.”
- “I trust Him more.”
- “I pray a lot more.”

In each of the experiences, there seems to be this time where I felt an impression to teach something different than I originally thought or had done in the past. In seven of the stories, I used the phrase, “I felt.” There seemed to be a moment when a thought came clearly to my head that made sense to say.

As I am teaching, the students and what they are currently doing in the class are always going through my mind. I see when they start paying attention and notice what I changed in my teaching to get a response out of them. As stated above, I will have moments when I feel that I need to make a change in my teaching and sometimes when I do, I will notice that a student will start paying attention more:

- “I remember he looked up.”
- “I looked.”
- “I saw her look around.”
- “I recognized.”
- “I can see in her face.”
- “I could see in her eyes.”
- “I stopped her.”
- “I looked at a student.”

When I notice the change in the student, it encourages me to continue along with the change in my teaching. Often times with what I know about my students, I can recognize that the change in my teaching could really apply to them. It feels like the idea comes first and then I realize that it is perfect for that particular student. This applies to lesson preparation as well and not just during my interactions with them in class. My knowledge about them encourages what I decide to teach them during my lesson preparation.

One thing that wasn't mentioned in any of the I-Poems was the fact that my observations of the students contributed to how I taught them. Many of the experiences were preceded by me knowing something about the student before the event happened. This information came in several ways such as talking with a parent about their child, observing the student interact with a previous teacher, teaching the student for more than one year, or observing the student in a leadership capacity in seminary.

## CHAPTER 5

### Discussion and Results

The original question of this study is from my observations of my seminary classroom, what are the elements of teacher and student experiences that I perceive as being part of a religious experience? I identified 10 interactions that I perceived as being part of religious experiences and captured and analyzed those stories. From my analysis, I identified four plotlines: participating in seminary life, pursuing answers independently, engaging in conversation, and asking for help. In my cross-case analysis, I learned that my students confirmed that they generally did have religious experiences during the time in which those interactions occurred. I also learned that the student's reaction to my teaching was helpful in my identification of those religious experiences.

#### My Realizations

As I reexamine my teaching, there are things that used to matter to me that don't matter as much anymore. The physical interactions that I thought were important, like raising your hand, writing in your journal, sharing with a partner, or following along, don't seem as important. I used to feel that if students were raising their hands in class and talking, they were having religious experiences or at least that the student was having a good time. Maybe having a good time was all that mattered. Engaging my students in any way was so important before but now as I have analyzed my purpose in teaching seminary, I want my students to have religious experiences and not just be engaged. That could look different for every student.

I found that as I began to gather data for this paper, I became much more purposeful in my efforts in class to identify when my students were having a religious experience. I felt pressure to gather enough stories to make this paper relevant. This pressure caused me to rethink

the way that I prepared lessons and how I interacted with my students. I was much more driven to have more meaningful classes and interactions. Doing this for a prolonged period of time has changed the way that I prepare and teach.

### ***Following Intuitions***

After doing this research, I thought I would have a list of tips or tricks that I could implement into my teaching that would increase the likelihood of my students having religious experiences. This is not the case, and I am more trusting of my own intuitions or inspirations than I was before instead of relying on new tips and tricks. Because of all the things that led up to these religious experiences, I am much more aware of my own intuitions and the influence they can have on the classroom. The more closely I follow my own teachings about attending to religious experiences, the more I will be led to interact in ways that support students' religious experiences. Many of these experiences with students happened after I had personally had a powerful religious experience in which my own commitment was fortified. Before one experience, I had gone to one of our temples and had a deep connection with God that day. In another, I was wrestling with a spiritual topic that was troubling me deeply and the answer to that problem just happened to be the thing one student needed. When I teach my students religion, my own connection to religion is essential.

In every story, I made a lesson plan or had an idea of how I wanted the interaction to go. Somewhere before or during the interaction, I felt a need to change what I was doing. For example, I felt I needed to do something, I remembered a dream, I had a thought, I asked a question. I didn't plan on these feelings to come. I don't believe it is possible to force them to come. After hundreds of lessons, I could never guarantee a student was going to have a religious experience. I never knew a religious experience with a student was going to happen before it



happened. As a young teacher, I would have never noticed my students' reactions during a class because I was so concerned about what I was going to say next. As I have done this research, I am much more aware of what my students are experiencing during a lesson. As I notice their reactions, I am paying more attention to what contributed to those reactions. This causes me to recognize more when I am being impressed to make changes in my teaching and be more willing to follow those promptings.

### ***Creating Plotlines as a Learning Process***

The creation of plotlines was a difficult process. However, after analysis, and based on the results, I believe that the most important insights I gained from this study did not come from the plotlines themselves but from the process of looking for them. I would not have discovered these insights had I not tried to work through the process of identifying plotlines. These experiences cannot be replicated in their exact form. If I had a student come to my office and ask me the exact same question as one of the students in my stories did, the answer to that student's question might be completely different. The background, the atmosphere, my own connection with God that day, the student's connection with God that day, or the sincerity of the question will determine the availability of the Spirit and how I would answer the question. Most of the lessons in my stories were taught at least five other times, and I didn't have one story that was from the same lesson. Knowing where these interactions are going to happen is not as important as knowing that they could happen anywhere a teacher is trying to reach their students. This has caused me to shift how I spend my preparation time. I find myself thinking more about my students than about what I am going to say. I want to connect with them more and understand their experiences.

## **Conclusions**

This type of study could potentially be important for any teacher. In this modern age, teachers are being replaced by online learning programs. If a teacher is just there to stand and deliver material, then replacing them with YouTube or Kahn Academy seems like a great financial or logistical plan. However, there is more to a teacher than just to stand and deliver material. With all of these stories, there was a relationship that was developed between me, the student, and the topic. These connections are essential in human interaction and create spaces where people feel an identity and a closeness to a topic. It is not enough to know a topic so that you can receive an income someday. A teacher wants their students to become something more. They want their students to feel great joy in in connection with their learning, and for that learning to become part of their lives. Although this paper is focused on religion, the connections I feel in with my students feel similar to those I had in my college math classes as a sat in wonder and awe at the beauty of mathematics. Those classes made me want to become a mathematician and because of that, I made connections with the people in those contexts and with the topic, and it is now a part of my identity. Math brings me joy. After spending time with teachers in the public schools, they are there to help their students feel the joy of their subject and become something because of it or become converted to it.

## ***Implications for Practice***

Based on what I learned through this study an important implication is that teachers need to be purposeful. Teachers need to be aware of opportunities they might have to help their students connect deeply with what is being taught. Teachers need to be open to institutions and promptings and act on changes they feel they need to make to their teaching even in the moment. These changes may be different from the regular teaching patterns, but teachers should listen to

the intuitions that come to their minds during lesson preparation and during the lesson itself. This is not a recipe. Another teacher cannot read through my experiences with students and expect to find a formula that will apply to an experience that will come from their students. As was said above, a teacher needs to be in touch with their own intuitions, or I would say relationship with God, and that effort is constant and never ending.

Along with being in touch with their intuitions, a teacher needs to be in touch with their students. Because students are so different solutions to teaching them will be different as well. There are general principles of teaching that apply to all students, of course, but if we are looking for conversion or real change in our students, and not just memorization of facts, we need a deeper mode of teaching that connects directly to the students. Because this is not a recipe, careful and constant observation and study are essential. In the past I have spent most of my preparation time coming up with what I was going to say as a teacher. When I am looking for my students to have religious experiences, it makes me want to spend more of my preparation time studying my students as well as having those experiences myself. As I put more effort into getting to know my students and what is happening in their lives, I am more able to clearly see what they need to hear. As President Russell M. Nelson (2018) states, “good inspiration is based upon good information.” Elder David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve said: “Teaching is not talking and telling. Rather, teaching is observing, listening, and discerning so we then know what to say” (as cited in Osguthorpe, 2011). As I come to class, and during my preparations, knowing the needs of my students, the Lord is able to put into my mind more clearly what I could say that would be helpful.

If I am going to be a part of the process, I cannot get casual or think that I have found the trick to helping students learn. Any good teacher will know that you can never arrive at the

pinnacle of good teaching. Students are extremely complex, and they all think very differently. What a teacher needs to do is learn as much as they can about their students and trust that when the time comes and a student asks something in earnest, the teacher will be given what to say if they have put in the effort to connect with the student and with the material, they hope will help the student find answers.

Something else that needs to be mentioned is the nature of religious experiences in the process of conversion. As was stated earlier in the paper, religious experiences are only one part of the conversion process but what needs to be mentioned here is that having religious experiences does not guarantee that a student will be converted. Though I can with confidence state that my students did have religious experiences in my interactions, I cannot say that they were converted. Though these students did have religious experiences, the ability to choose is still in their control. Conversion is a lifelong process, and it has been said that it never does end in this life. These experiences may not lead to conversion today but could in one future date. A teacher should never become discouraged when a student doesn't seem to be making progress in the current time. I am sure my high school Calculus teacher didn't know that he sparked in me a love of mathematics enough to lead me to get my bachelor's degree in Math Education.

### ***Implications for Future Research***

Future studies might focus on collecting narratives of students about times when they believed that they had a religious experience. A teacher could inquire of their students about when they felt like they had a spiritual experience and then have the students write a narrative just as I did in this study. Using similar qualitative analyses, researchers/teachers might gain additional insights into student perceptions of the nature of religious experiences and what might have contributed to those experiences.

A teacher could also encourage their colleagues to do conduct similar studies in their own teaching contexts in order to see what differences or similarities might emerge. Would there be different plotlines, themes, or insights when different teachers conducted their own self-studies?

This would also be an interesting type of study to do with other subjects outside of religion, or even in religious classes that have more of a secular focus. A math teacher might look for moments when they might be facilitating the development of mathematicians instead of just teaching content. It could be also interesting if similar studies were conducted within other religious education contexts besides The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

A follow up study might involve interviewing these 10 students five years from now to see where they are in their religious development. It would be instructive to see how the students viewed their religious experiences five years later to see how much impact they felt it had on their religious development.

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## APPENDIX A

**The Listening Guide**

The multiple readings are called listenings rather than readings because as a researcher you are as much an active participant as the research participant. As a researcher you are focusing on *listening* to the text—hearing it—rather than merely *coding* it. Multiple listenings (and analysis) are conducted so that the researcher tunes into the story being told on “multiple levels and to experience, note and draw from his or her resonances to the narrative” (p. 159).

**Overarching Questions to Listening Guide**

- Who is speaking to whom?
- What stories are being told about what relationships?
- What are the societal and cultural frameworks in which the stories are being told?

**Step 1: Listening for the plot.**

## Part A

- What is happening? When? Where? With whom? Why?
- What stories are being told?
- What are the dominant themes of the stories?
- What are the metaphors? What are the images? Which are repeated?
- What are the contradictions?
- What are the absences? What is present by its absence? What is omitted or not expressed?
- What are the landscapes or multiple contexts within which the stories are embedded?
- What is the larger social context in which the story is being told and/or experienced?
- What is the local social context in which the story is being told/ and or experienced?
- What is the situation under which the researcher and researched come together?

## Part B: Listening to our own responses.

- What are our own subjectivities? What do they make us think? What feelings do they uncover in us (We identify, explore, make explicit our own subjectivities)?
- What are our thoughts about the narrative being analyzed?
- How do we feel about what is being said?
- What do we feel is being expressed (whether overtly stated or not) in the narrative account?

- What is our social location in relationship to the participant?
- What is the nature of our relationship with this person?
- What are our emotional responses?
- Where do we feel a connection with this person, where do we feel distant from or other than this person?
- How do the ideas and thoughts and story expressed touch us (or not touch us)?
- As our thoughts and feelings emerge attend carefully to why we think we are responding as we do.

Part C: Create a report that outlines the plotlines you found and the support for them from the stories

## Step 2: I-Poems

### Direction

Prepare an I-Poem from the collection of well-remembered events (one for each person). Provide a summary of what you learned from the I-Poem for each person. Provide an analysis of what constructing the I-Poems revealed about the relationship between personal experience and individuals' research inquiries.

### Purpose

Forces the researcher to listen to the person's *first-person-voice* and to hear more clearly how this person speaks about him or herself. Attending to the first-person voice enables the research to come into closer relationship with the participant by really hearing the voice and attending to what the person knows about him or herself before talking about him or her.

The I-Poem will sometimes uncover things that are not directly stated but are central to the meaning of what is being said. The I-Poem reveals the associative stream of consciousness carried across the narrative in the first-person voice. This allows the first-person voice to emerge not constrained by the narrative. This allows the researcher to listen to the sounds, rhythms and uses of the I—revealing the self.

- Rule 1: Underline or select every first person "I" within a passage you have chosen along with the verb or any seemingly important accompanying words.
- Rule 2: Maintain the order in which the words and phrases occur in the text.
- Rule 3: Place each phrase on a separate line like a poem.
- Rule 4: Where appropriate divide the I-Poem into stanza's following the natural flow of the speaker. Attend to shifts in meaning, change in voice, change in cadence, or start of a new breath.

### Step 3: Contrapuntal Listening

Contrapuntal Listening comes from the concept of contrapuntal music. The logic comes from the notion of contrapuntal in music this combines two separate melodic lines. Each has its own shape and movement but the two are played simultaneously and move in relationship to each other. The interpreter is trying to listen simultaneously to different layers of a person's expressed experience in terms of the question posed.

1. The first two listenings involved listening for the plotlines and then listening for the psychic landscape which provides context for this listening.
2. Attending to your research question—what is the influence of biography on research interest? —read through the narrative beginning twice more, each time tune into one aspect of the story being told—one voice expressing the person's experience.
3. Specify the voices you will listen to —determine the marker of the voice—how you will know that voice when you hear it.
4. Now read through the text again listening to just one voice in the text.
5. Mark it with a color.
6. Now read through the text listening for the “another” voice in the text.
7. Mark it with a different color.
8. Areas of the text may be marked with more than one color.
9. As you identify the places where the two voices coalesce in the text: note the relationship. The voices do not have to be in opposition to each other—they may oppose, complement, harmonize, contradict.

Questions to ask:

1. Does one voice relate more to the I-Poem than the other?
2. What are the relationships between the voices?
3. Do they take turns?
4. Do they seem to be opposing each other?
5. Consider, Is there another contrapuntal voice in the text? Can you identify it? Mark it with a third color and then return and consider the relationships revealed.

## APPENDIX B

**I-Poems****Student 1****Me:**

I had taught him.  
 I had taught him.  
 I am almost always a mercy teacher.  
 I don't cry repentance.  
 I remember specifically.  
 I need to invite to repent.  
 I remember speaking of repentance.  
 I remember he looked up.  
 I knew.  
 I asked him.  
 I knew then.

**Student:**

I do remember.  
 I remember.  
 I remember.  
 I remember the time.

**Student 2****Me:**

I remember.  
 I saw her.  
 I would tell her.  
 I was so glad.  
 I knew she felt safe.

I didn't know.  
 I wanted.  
 I told her.  
 I read it.  
 I told her.  
 I prayed.  
 I recognized.  
 I had become.

I had no clue.  
 I looked.  
 I felt strongly.  
 I had read that book.  
 I had power to become.  
 I read the Book of Mormon.

I told her this.  
 I told her with strong emotions.  
 I believed.

She began to cry.  
 "I believe you."

I knew.

**Student 3****Me:**

I felt.  
I just needed to do it.  
I had a spiritual impression.

**Student:**

I thought.  
I don't know.  
I don't know.  
I really thought.  
I had no way I could help him.  
I just took him.

I know this doesn't, like, make it any better.

I know you don't know me.  
I just want you to know.  
I'm here for you.  
I don't know.  
I'm here.  
I didn't expect it to go anywhere.  
I don't even know you.

I helped him.  
I invited him.  
I invited him.  
I was worried.  
I invited him.  
I would watch him.  
I had always had a testimony of God before but that really, you know, strengthened it.

**Student 4****Me:**

I spoke.  
I don't know why.  
I really felt.  
I felt.  
I remember.

**Student:**

I think, I think.  
I do remember.  
I think.  
I took your class.  
I was finding.  
I think, I think.  
I do remember.  
I don't know.  
I think.  
I do remember.  
I think, I think.  
I don't know.  
I think.  
I do remember.  
I think, I think.  
I don't know.  
I think.

I really gained a lot.

I think, I really think, I think.  
I remember.  
I do remember.  
I didn't comment.  
I don't know why.  
I think, I think.  
I remember.  
I think, I think.  
I do remember.

**Student 5****Me:**

“I don’t want solutions.”  
 I had a young woman begin to visit me.  
 I knew.  
 I would often try.  
 I would give her.  
 I specifically remember.  
 I started telling her.  
 I began to wonder.  
 “I know God loves me.”  
 I received.  
 I can see in her face.

**Student 6****Me:**

I did not feel a need.  
 I had a dream.  
 I woke up.  
 I forgot.  
  
 I got the biggest smile.  
 I proceeded to teach.  
 I was talking.  
 I believe.  
 I was part of.

**Student:**

I’d been thinking about this question.  
 I asked.  
 I was thinking.  
 I asked you.  
 I was thinking.  
 I wrote the entire class.  
 I’ve been able to recognize.

**Student 7****Me:**

I felt impressed.  
 I remember.  
 I remember.  
 I don’t know why.  
 I didn’t really feel.  
  
 I stopped her.  
 I loved her comments.  
 I knew.

**Student:**

I had so much to say.  
 I was very nervous.  
 I read what happened.  
 I don’t know what happened.  
 I wasn’t able to say it.

Then...

I shared my testimony.  
 I just started crying.  
 I don’t know.  
 I just felt.  
 I don’t know.

I know.  
 I was doubting a little bit.  
 I just found it.  
 I had to do it.  
 I read it.  
 I needed this.



**Student 8****Me:**

I felt passionate.  
 I had read.  
 I just felt really inspired.  
 I went to work.  
 I did more collaborating.  
 I did more talking.  
 I did more planning.  
 I did more wrestling.  
 I got in class.  
 I could feel.  
 I wanted this.

I asked.  
 I felt.  
 I asked.  
 I looked at a student.  
 I walked by.

“I needed to hear this today.”

**Student:**

I felt depressed.  
 I felt lazy.  
 I procrastinated.  
 I was a lot less happy.  
 I began to care less.  
 I wasted time endlessly.  
 I just lacked the care.

I began to question.  
 I had no reason.  
 I was stuck.  
 I couldn't feel joy.

I entered my scripture study.  
 I went to school.  
 I felt sad.  
 I felt God would help me.

I walked into Brother Peason's.  
 I listened.  
 I never wanted to leave.

I never wanted the feelings to  
 diminish.  
 I recognized.  
 I heard.  
 I wrote.

I know God is aware of me.  
 I needed.  
 I realized.

I want to live my life.  
 I did it.  
 I did that.  
 I thought.  
 I wept.  
 I laughed.  
 I obeyed.  
 I waited.  
 I taught.  
 I loved.

I finished writing.  
 I told him.  
 I nodded my head.  
 I don't remember.  
 I told him.  
 I told him.

“I love you.”  
 “I don't even know you.”  
 “I love you.”

**Student 9****Me:**

I had wondered.  
 I have always wondered.  
 I could see in her eyes.  
 I saw that desire.  
 I really desired.  
 I said the first thing that came.  
 I took her to...

I sit here.  
 I don't remember.  
 I remember.  
 I had never before.  
 I knew that answer.

I could tell.  
 I told her.  
 I could tell by the look on her face.

**Student:**

I was confused.  
 I asked.  
 I don't know.  
 I thought.  
 I don't know.  
 I was still confused.  
 I wasn't going to say anything.

I asked you.  
 I went and read it.

I learned so much.  
 I feel closer.  
 I feel desire.  
 I'm so excited.  
 I want to be an angel.  
 I can be an angel.  
 I am an angel.  
 I still use this lesson today.  
 I love it.

**Student 10****Me:**

I have never had a student more  
 excited.  
 I remember her crying after class.  
 I asked.  
 I don't know why.  
 I got really excited.  
 I told.

I remember.  
 I saw her look around.  
 I knew she was looking to bless.  
 I've never seen a student care so  
 much about their peers.

**Student:**

I didn't feel like...  
 I wasn't learning anything new.  
 I knew it was true.  
 I knew all the answers.  
 I was ready for something new.  
 I was ready to learn something.  
 I was like, okay, yeah.  
 I can serve people.

I was like wow.  
 I think that's when it clicked.  
 I finally started memorizing  
 everyone's name.  
 I could talk to them.  
 I would see them.  
 I'd go up to them.  
 I got to know them.

I have a lot less anxiety.  
 I went to class.  
 I just felt completely comfortable.  
 I reached out to people.  
 I got out of my comfort zone.

I trust Him more.  
 I pray a lot more.  
 I kind of put it all to Him.  
 I gave everything to Him.

## APPENDIX C

### Parental Permission for a Minor

#### Introduction

My name is Jason Pearson. I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University. I am conducting a research study (under the direction of Dr. Michael Richardson, an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education) about identifying the elements that contribute to my perception that students in my classroom are having a religious experience that might lead to conversion. I am inviting you to take part in the research because I have perceived that you might have had a religious experience in my class.

#### Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will read the experience that I have written about you.
- I am going to ask you if you agree with what I have written and if there are any additional details that need to be added.
- I am going to ask you if you feel like this was a significant religious experience for you.
- If you agree, I may request that you participate in a follow-up interview following the same procedures, after I have looked for themes in the experience.

The interviews will take place at your home at a time convenient for you. Each interview should not take longer than a half hour.

#### Risks/Discomforts

There is a risk of loss of privacy, which I will reduce by not using any real names or other identifiers in the written report. I will also keep all data in a locked file cabinet in a secure location. Only I will have access to any data that includes your name. There may be some discomfort caused by being asked some of the questions. You may answer only those questions that you want to, or you may stop the entire process at any time without affecting your standing in seminary.

#### Benefits

There are no direct benefits for your participation in this project. You might benefit from the opportunity to clarify and better understand the experiences we discuss together.

**Confidentiality**

The hard copy research data will be kept in a secure location, and digital data will be password protected. Only I will have access to any data that includes your name. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the data will be kept in a locked cabinet or office.

**Compensation**

There will be no compensation for participation in this project.

**Participation**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your class status, grade, or standing with the seminary.

## APPENDIX D

### Youth Assent Form

#### What is this study about?

My name is Jason Pearson. I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University. I am conducting a research study (under the direction of Dr. Michael Richardson, an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education) about identifying the elements that contribute to my perception that students in my classroom are having a religious experience that might lead to conversion. I am inviting you to take part in the research because I have perceived that you might have had a religious experience in my class.

Your parent(s) know we are talking with you about the study. This form will tell you more about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it.

#### What are you being asked to do?

If you agree to participate in this research study:

- You will read the experience that I have written about you.
- I am going to ask you if you agree with what I have written and if there are any additional details that need to be added.
- I am going to ask you if you feel like this was a significant religious experience for you.
- If you agree, I may ask you to participate in a follow-up interview following the same procedures, after I have looked for themes in the experience.

The interviews will take place at your home at a time convenient for you. Each interview should not take longer than a half hour.

#### What are the benefits to you for taking part in the study?

There are no direct benefits to you. However, you might benefit from the opportunity to clarify and better understand the experiences we discuss together.

#### Can anything bad happen if you are in this study?

It is possible that the information you share might be seen by others, but I will be careful to not use your real name in any written report of this study. I will also keep my notes about what you say in a locked file cabinet in a safe place. I will be the only one to have access to information that has your name attached. It's possible that you might feel worried or nervous as we talk about your experience. You may answer only those questions that you want to, or you may stop the interview at any time without affecting your standing in seminary.

**Who will know that you are in the study?**

We won't tell anybody that you are in this study and everything you tell us and do will be private. Your parent will know that you took part in the study, but we won't tell them anything you said or did either. When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won't include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study.

## APPENDIX E

### Consent to be a Research Subject

#### Introduction

My name is Jason Pearson. I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University. I am conducting a research study (under the direction of Dr. Michael Richardson, an associate professor in the Department of Teacher Education) about identifying the elements that contribute to my perception that students in my classroom are having a religious experience that might lead to conversion. I am inviting you to take part in the research because I have perceived that you might have had a religious experience in my class.

#### Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- You will read the experience that I have written about you.
- I am going to ask you if you agree with what I have written and if there are any additional details that need to be added.
- I am going to ask you if you feel like this was a significant religious experience for you.
- If you agree, I may request that you participate in a follow-up interview following the same procedures, after I have looked for themes in the experience.

The interviews will take place at your home at a time convenient for you. Each interview should not take longer than a half hour.

#### Risks/Discomforts

There is a risk of loss of privacy, which I will reduce by not using any real names or other identifiers in the written report. I will also keep all data in a locked file cabinet in a secure location. Only I will have access to any data that includes your name. There may be some discomfort caused by being asked some of the questions. You may answer only those questions that you want to, or you may stop the entire process at any time without affecting your standing in seminary.

#### Benefits

There are no direct benefits for your participation in this project. You might benefit from the opportunity to clarify and better understand the experiences we discuss together.

**Confidentiality**

The hard copy research data will be kept in a secure location, and digital data will be password protected. Only I will have access to any data that includes your name. At the conclusion of the study, all identifying information will be removed and the data will be kept in a locked cabinet or office.

**Compensation**

There will be no compensation for participation in this project.

**Participation**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at any time or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your class status, grade, or standing with the seminary.



## APPENDIX F

**Recruiting Documents**

Recruitment statement for initial email or phone contact

**18 and older**

Hi, [student]. I am doing a research project about when I thought my students were becoming more converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have written down an experience about you when I thought you were becoming more converted. I was wondering if I could we could get together to discuss that experience. I am looking for any clarifying details you might add and then just your thoughts about the experience if you remember it. There is no obligation and if you choose not to do it, that is absolutely fine. Thank you so much and let me know what you think.

**Parents**

Hi, [parent name]. I am doing a research project about when I thought my students were becoming more converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have written down an experience about your child [student name] when I thought they were becoming more converted. I was wondering if I could meet with them to discuss that experience. I am looking for any clarifying details they might add and then just their thoughts about the experience if they remember it. There is no obligation and if you choose not to do it, that is absolutely fine. Thank you so much and let me know what you think.

Recruitment statement for personal contact

[To be used if Jason approaches a student or parent in a face-to-face context about participation in the project]

**18 and older**

Hi, [student]. I am doing a research project about when I thought my students were becoming more converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have written down an experience about you when I thought you were becoming more converted. I was wondering if I could we could get together to discuss that experience. I am looking for any clarifying details you might add and then just your thoughts about the experience if you remember it. There is no obligation and if you choose not to do it, that is absolutely fine. Thank you so much and let me know what you think.

**Parents**

Hi, [parent name]. I am doing a research project about when I thought my students were becoming more converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have written down an experience about your child [student name] when I thought they were becoming more converted. I was wondering if I could meet with them to discuss that experience. I am looking for any clarifying details they might add and then just their thoughts about the experience if they remember it. There is no obligation and if you choose not to do it, that is absolutely fine. Thank you so much and let me know what you think.

### Recruitment statement for social media

[To be used if Jason approaches a student or parent through a social media platform, using a personal message (e.g., Facebook Messenger)]

#### **18 and older**

Hi, [student]. I am doing a research project about when I thought my students were becoming more converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have written down an experience about you when I thought you were becoming more converted. I was wondering if I could we could get together to discuss that experience. I am looking for any clarifying details you might add and then just your thoughts about the experience if you remember it. There is no obligation and if you choose not to do it, that is absolutely fine. Thank you so much and let me know what you think.

#### **Parents**

Hi, [parent name]. I am doing a research project about when I thought my students were becoming more converted to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I have written down an experience about your child [student name] when I thought they were becoming more converted. I was wondering if I could meet with them to discuss that experience. I am looking for any clarifying details they might add and then just their thoughts about the experience if they remember it. There is no obligation and if you choose not to do it, that is absolutely fine. Thank you so much and let me know what you think.

## APPENDIX G

## IRB Approval Letter

**Memorandum**

To: Mike Richardson  
 Department: BYU - EDUC - Teacher Education  
 From: Sandee Aina, MPA, HRPP Manager  
       Wayne Larsen, MAcc, IRB Administrator  
       Bob Ridge, PhD, IRB Chair  
 Date: August 17, 2020  
 IRB#: IRB2020-306  
 Title: Exploring student religious experiences through the eyes of their teacher

Brigham Young University's IRB has approved the research study referenced in the subject heading as expedited level, category 7.

The approval period is from 08/17/2020 to 08/16/2021 . Please reference your assigned IRB identification number in any correspondence with the IRB. Continued approval is conditional upon your compliance with the following requirements:

1. A copy of the approved informed consent statement and associated recruiting documents (if applicable) can be accessed in IRIS. No other consent statement should be used. Each research subject must be provided with a copy or a way to access the consent statement.
2. Any modifications to the approved protocol must be submitted, reviewed, and approved by the IRB before modifications are incorporated in the study.
3. All recruiting tools must be submitted and approved by the IRB prior to use.
4. In addition, serious adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately, with a written report by the PI within 24 hours of the PI's becoming aware of the event. Serious adverse events are (1) death of a research participant; or (2) serious injury to a research participant.
5. All other non-serious unanticipated problems should be reported to the IRB within 2 weeks of the first awareness of the problem by the PI. Prompt reporting is important, as unanticipated problems often require some modification of study procedures, protocols, and/or informed consent processes. Such modifications require the review and approval of the IRB.
6. A few months before the expiration date, you will receive a prompt from iRIS to renew this protocol. There will be two reminders. Please complete the form in a timely manner to ensure that there is no lapse in the study approval. Please refer to the [IRB website](#) for more information.

Instructions to access approved documents, submit modifications, report complaints and adverse events can be found on the IRB website under IRIS guidance: [http://orca.byu.edu/irb/IRIS/story\\_html5.html](http://orca.byu.edu/irb/IRIS/story_html5.html)