


What we can learn about mission from the conversion stories of unchurched seekers in Germany

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This article deals with the special challenges of Christian mission in an increasingly secular environment in Germany. The churches are facing new social groups, such as the growing groups of secular and religiously indifferent people, on whom the classic missionary methods of both mainline and free churches have little effect. This qualitative study examined 20 previously unchurched converts to the Seventh-day Adventist Church in West Germany to better understand how their conversion process unfolded and what conclusions can be drawn for future missionary efforts. The conversion process for the participants usually took place in four steps: (1) a biographically determined receptivity was addressed by a (2) suitable trigger, this match triggered (3) a study phase, and finally, it led to (4) a longing for community with like-minded Christians. It is striking that, contrary to many existing models of conversion, it was not usually other Christians who triggered and drove the conversion process, but instead about half of the participants experienced the process alone. While Christians were not essential for the beginning of the conversion process, it was the community of Christians that made faith firm and lasting. Finally, it became clear that conversion was a phenomenon of middle age. Apparently, a kind of critical self-reflection seemed to take place in this phase of life, which in some participants created a receptivity for conversion.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This work can contribute to the development of new missiological approaches for a rapidly changing society.

Keywords: conversion; mission; unchurched; secular; religious indifference; Germany.

Rationale

Over the last 50 years, Western Europe has faced an unprecedented phase of secularisation. In Germany, the two mainline churches have lost almost 50% of their members during this period (Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung 2020). This secularisation trend in Western Europe is unique in the world and in history (Casanova 2007:112; Großbölting 2013:9). Scholars speak about the end of the Christendom age in Western Europe (Bartholomä 2019:216; Paas 2011:14).

At first glance, free churches¹ are less affected by this secularisation. Studies either speak of a stagnation movement (Pollack & Rosta 2022:110) or a slight growth of this sector (Bartholomä 2019:31ff) in Germany. However, Bartholomä (2019:235) makes it clear that this development is hardly the result of successful missionary efforts. As he states for the German context and Stolz and Favre for the Swiss one, this less dramatic trend in the free churches is more likely to be because of the fact that members of free churches often have more children (Stolz & Favre 2019:621) and are better able to keep them in their respective churches (Bartholomä 2019:25; Stolz & Favre 2019:621). In addition, they have benefited more from membership growth through transfers from other churches, as well as through migration (Bartholomä 2019:38; Pollack & Rosta 2022:110).

After Europe, especially from the perspective of the mainline churches, was for centuries considered Christianised, the interest in mission has increased significantly in all areas of Christianity in Western Europe in recent decades (Pohl-Patalong 2020:73; Schacke 2009:23; Sekretariat der Deutschen Bischofskonferenz 2022:71; Wrogemann 2019:29). This new interest in

1. The term *free churches* [*Freikirchen*] should identify the smaller Christian churches next to the two mainline churches in Germany, the Protestant Church [*Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland*] and the Roman Catholic Church. The name was a kind of self-designation that was meant to emphasise a double freedom, a freedom from the mainline churches and the state and a freely chosen faith through conscious decision instead of infant baptism and socialisation, as in the mainline churches. This term identifies a diverse group of churches in opposite to the term evangelical that identifies a form of spirituality.

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mission and conversion is also because of the fact that all churches are facing new social realities caused by secularisation. In an extensive survey conducted in Germany in 2023 (Kirchenmitgliedschaftsuntersuchung KMU- 6), 33% of the participants stated that they do not believe in the existence of a higher being. In addition, 20% weren't sure if such a being exists (Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland 2023:34f). These results imply two growing social phenomena. The first is what Taylor (2020a:44ff) describes as 'secularity 3' in which anything supernatural is simply unthinkable. The second is that of religious indifference, in which people feel unsure about whether God exists but who also see no need to deal with the topic any further because the question of God does not seem relevant to them in everyday life (Meulemann 2015:179).

Both phenomena are, at least on this scale, relatively new and call into question both the mainline church and the free church mission models. The mainline church model of mission is that of religious socialisation. One becomes a member of the church through infant baptism and is socialised through family and religious, social traditions (Herbst 2010:115). This model is fundamentally being questioned in a society in which more and more families no longer practice faith and homogeneous Christian societies are increasingly dissolving. Consequently, Herbst (2010:147f) speaks of the failure of the model of Christian socialisation in Germany. The free church model of mission is that of evangelising with the gospel in order to move people to make their own decision for God (Dietz 2022:17,81). However, it turns out that this missionary approach is closely linked to the religious socialisation of the mainline churches because Bartholomä (2019:126) describes the prevalent missionary approach of the free churches as a revival mode [*Erweckungsmodus*]. It builds on existing faith and attempts to convert or revitalise it. The result is that both models are predominantly functioning in Christian socialised people, and therewith have limited success in reaching the new non-Christian social groups (Bartholomä 2019:126; Paas & Bartholomä 2020:175; Zimmermann et al. 2011:129).

New approaches are needed to reach secular and religiously indifferent people with the Gospel. Associated with this, a new sensitivity is needed both for the people who have experienced such a conversion from non-belief to faith, and for the 'missio Dei' (Bosch 2011:457), for God's missionary work in these groups. This article and the doctoral thesis from which it is derived aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of conversion and missionary opportunities among the growing group of secular and religiously indifferent people in Germany.

Models of conversion

The concepts of mission and conversion are complex and their definitions have been the subject of considerable debate over the past decades within and beyond the various spectrums of Christianity (Snook, Williams & Horgan 2019:226,237). A definition of Christian mission that represents a wide array of

Christian churches is that proposed by the World Council of Churches. According to their definition, mission means 'the proclamation and sharing of the good news of the gospel by word, deed, prayer and worship and the everyday witness of the Christian life'. In particular, the term 'evangelism', which is closely linked to the term mission and is sometimes used synonymously, has as its primary objective the process of personal conversion (World Council of Churches 1999). Conversion is generally viewed as a transformation process in a person's life, which ends with a change in religious orientation. This process involves a fundamental change in religious beliefs and relationship with God, identity, lifestyle, relationships with the world and the view of one's own self and history (Jindra 2014:8; Rambo 1993:1ff; Snook et al. 2019:237; Strähler 2021:67ff). As previously stated, from a free church perspective, the concept of conversion occupies a unique position within the context of missionary work, serving as the foundation of faith and church membership (Dietz 2022:16,22; Geldbach 2005:38).

In his meta-analysis of conversion, Rambo (1993:13f) describes five variants of conversion. The first one is the turn from no or minimal faith to faith, called 'Affiliation'. The second is an 'Intensification' of the faith a person is already affiliated to. The third and fourth describe a 'transition' from one 'institution' (denomination) or 'tradition' (religion) to another. The last one describes the negative variant of conversion that he calls 'apostasy'. Others call it, in contrast to conversion, 'deconversion' (Streib & Keller 2004:191). If one considers the social groups that churches encounter in Germany today, then five groups can be distinguished for the positive case of conversion (Table 1).

This article focusses only on religious affiliation and unchurched people who are not connected to church or other forms of religious communities.

In Rambo's (1993:165ff) interdisciplinary conversion model, in which he synthesised a wide range of conversion literature at that time (Gooren 2010:38–39), the conversion process is usually triggered by a 'crisis'. This triggers an inner 'quest' in which 'advocates' who support the seeker in reorientation play a guiding role. This leads the convert to a 'commitment' with the new group and to life changes.

Especially in the second half of the 20th century, the role of crises as triggers of conversion processes, in which the individual is more of a passive recipient because he or she

TABLE 1: The classification of five groups that support the case of conversion in Germany.

Group	Type of the connection	Variant of conversion
Religiously socialised	Highly connected to church	=> Intensification
Religiously socialised	Minimal or distantly connected to church.	=> Intensification
Religiously socialised	Not connected to church (= indifference)	=> Affiliation
Not religiously socialised	Not connected to church (= secularity)	=> Affiliation
Religiously socialised	Connected to church (in another tradition)	=> Transition

does not choose the crises but can only react to them, receded in mission studies in favour of an active individual in the conversion process (Streib & Keller 2004:184). Accordingly, Taylor (2020b), who studies conversion in secular Australia, speaks about encounters with Christians as triggers for conversion processes. In her model, these encounters address inner longings, creating an openness to spiritual experiences. Through these experiences, those involved ultimately develop into an active part of a spiritual community. The individual therefore actively and willingly decides to enter into and continue the process of conversion. Jindra (2014:88), in her 'new model of religious conversion', shares this idea by stating that usually long lasting relationships to other Christians are a 'necessary part of the conversion process'. But she broadens the picture by saying that even if such relationships exist, a conversion process only takes place when the experienced faith 'fits' with the inner needs and the life narrative of those involved (Jindra 2014:109f). Clearly both models show an active individual in the conversion process that consciously engages in it to find a fit between the new faith and the inner needs and longings. Jindra (2014:60f) also shows that even before the concrete trigger of a conversion process, life circumstances or experiences occur that affect the later process. She describes how religious experiences in childhood influence later openness to religious groups. Conversion is, therefore, now viewed less as a sudden, externally triggered phenomenon, but rather as a process that lasts over a longer period of time and in which the individual is an active agent.

The view of the role of other people in the conversion process has also changed. In Rambo's model, they only appear after the trigger moment, as orientation aids in the quest phase. However, they are not involved in the trigger of the process. The trigger is considered to have a direct supernatural origin. In Taylor's and Jindra's model, other Christians already play a role as triggers of the process, as those who create a taste for the process. For all three models, Christians play an essential and active role in the conversion processes of other people.

Methodology

Research question

As a result of the challenging situation in Germany described at the beginning, the key question is: how can (free) churches better reach people in a postmodern, individualistic, increasingly religiously indifferent and secular environment, with the Gospel? In order to shed more light on this question, this study specifically addresses the following questions: What motivated the interviewees to (re)engage with the topic of faith? How did the conversion process look like for the participants? Who or what were the catalysts of the process? And what conclusions can be drawn from this for future missionary efforts?

Methodology

This study is a qualitative survey following the principles of grounded theory (Creswell 2013:83ff). The data of this survey are the transcripts of qualitative interviews. All interviews were semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. They were

recorded, transcribed and coded in a constant process of going back and forth through new and already existing data. From these codes, preliminary categories were developed. These categories were verified or falsified in the following interviews and the connection between the emerging categories was examined. The data collection took place between August 2023 and April 2024. No more interviews were conducted after the categories were saturated, which means that no new categories emerged from the interviews (Creswell 2013:86).

Population

For this study, 20 interviews were conducted. Seven participants were female 13 were male. The participants were between the ages of 23 years and 83 years. The majority of the participants ($n = 13$) were between 33 years and 53 years of age. Three participants were 30 or younger. Four were 60 and older. All participants were from Western Germany. Eleven of them were from North Rhine-Westphalia, four each from Bavaria and Lower Saxony, and one from Hesse.

Sampling

The sampling was a 'purposeful sampling' (Creswell 2013:155), because the participants had to meet six criteria. They had to (1) be of legal age (18+ in Germany), (2) and had to have undergone a conversion process themselves. This process (3) had to have taken place in Western Germany, (4) within activities of Seventh-day Adventist² local churches or projects. (5) The interviewees were not to have been in regular contact with a religious group for at least 5 years before this (new) encounter with faith and Christian community, and were not to have practised their faith regularly in their private lives. In addition, (6) contact with the new Christian community should not have been more than one year ago. The sampling was also a 'convenience sampling' (Creswell 2013:158) because the group of potential participants who met the criteria was limited.

Ethical considerations

This survey was approved by the research ethics committee of the University of Pretoria (Faculty of Theology) under the application number T106/22. All participants agreed to a letter of informed consent either in written form or they gave their consent verbally, which was then recorded and stored with the interview. All interviews were transcribed and anonymised afterwards. The data from the interviews are stored at a safe place.

Findings

Religious background of the participants

The participants of this survey came from various social and religious backgrounds. Six of the participants were from

²The *Seventh-day Adventist Church* is a free church that was founded in the northeast of the United States in the mid-19th century. Today it has 22.2 million members worldwide (Office of Archives, Statistics, and Research General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists 2022). In Germany, it has around 35 000 members in 558 local churches (Freikirche der Siebenten-Tags-Adventisten in Deutschland 2022).

families with an active religious background. An active religious background is characterised by at least occasional church attendance and religious practices, such as prayer and Bible reading. There were four participants who came from completely secular backgrounds. The last 10 participants came from religiously socialised homes where religious life was lived as part of the culture or tradition, but in whose families no active faith was practised.

Three findings concerning the religious background are interesting. Firstly, all participants who stated that they had been religiously socialised but had not experienced an active religious life in their family questioned, when looking back on their childhood, whether they ever had a faith. This may be another indication that religious socialisation, solely through religious, socially anchored traditions, religious education and church festivals, no longer functions effectively.

Secondly, none of the six participants who experienced an actively lived faith life in the family, regardless of whether they belonged to a free or mainline church, had completely given up their belief in God. It had faded into the background, but never completely disappeared. For some participants it formed the receptivity for a conversion process.

Thirdly, it is interesting that even among the four participants who grew up completely secular in their homes, two participants said that they had always at least considered the existence of a higher being. Therefore, growing up without references to God, does not necessarily mean being in secularity 3.

How did the conversion process look like for the participants?

The conversion process for the participants usually took place in four steps (see Figure 1). It began with a match between (1) a biographically formed receptivity and (2) a trigger that addresses this receptivity. This match set in motion (3) a phase of individual study. Sooner or later in this phase, the participants (4) were looking for exchange, orientation and acceptance in a community with other like-minded Christians.

All, but one interviewee, could name a phase or even a specific moment that triggered the conversion process. Three types of triggers could be distinguished: (1) crises, (2) encounters with special people, and (3) special moments in life. The last-mentioned trigger formed the largest group in this study.

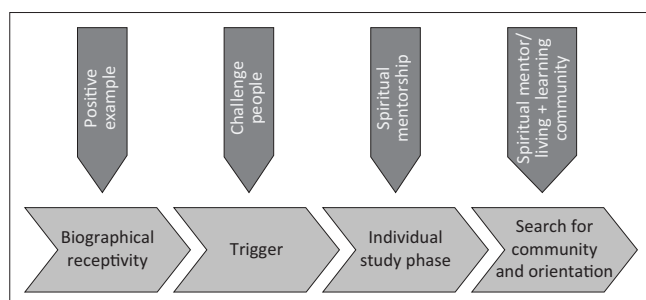


FIGURE 1: The four-step-model of conversion.

Crises were moments when people were thrown off course. This was less about visible, supernatural interventions by God, but rather about physical or psychological crises in life. The participants spoke about depression, physical illness, drug and alcohol addiction, and disappointed life goals as the causes of the crises they encountered. These crises created suffering and thus an openness to fundamentally reorienting oneself in life.

Encounters with special people were in some cases encounters with other Christians who lived out their faith in an authentic and attractive way and thus aroused interest in faith. In all cases where other people lived out faith in real life, these were church members not professional ministers. For example, a long-time colleague of a participant who had a very stressful job but was '... so calm, balanced, strong in her faith' that this colleague triggered a longing in the participant to become like her. In another case, the husband of a participant lived in a close Christian community that his wife thought: 'He was so active, I thought he really lived Christian community. (...) I envied him'. This positive image of community triggered a longing for a Christian community that this participant knew from her childhood. This type also included new partners who introduced the topic of faith into the relationship.

Special moments in life were not crises nor were other persons in the centre of these moments. Sometimes other people were involved in these moments, but it was not the person himself or herself that made the difference, but something that triggered a dynamic in the participants. One example is the daughter's question when looking at a crucifix: 'Daddy, what happened to him?' This question triggered a latent search for the right religiosity and a strong interest in history that was always running in the background of this participant. The daughter was involved here, but the decisive factor was not the daughter as a person but a match of the question with the personal interest of the participant. Another person could have probably triggered the same reaction. This match triggered an interest in the life of Jesus and a deep fascination with his ministry. For another participant, who had been involved in the coaching and life optimisation scene for years, it was the statement of another participant in a coaching course who explained: '... she's stopping now. This is all New Age and occultism' that triggered her interest. At this juncture, the participant was unable to discern the meaning of these terms. Rather, the encounter with something hitherto unknown prompted the notion that there might be an unidentified factor in her life that was affecting her. This statement triggered a fundamental interest in the participant to know and be able to deal with the factors that influence her life. This search led the participant to an encounter with God. A final example is a participant who was sitting in a philosophical discussion group. When a new participant put a Bible on the table, he described that 'I somehow (...) felt at home'. The Bible triggered a lifelong search for spirituality that had begun once in the church, and has led him primarily to philosophy in recent decades. These examples show how each participant's experiences align differently with the

four-step model of conversion. The specific moments that participants mentioned would not necessarily trigger them all, but a trigger only occurs when the experienced moments meet an individual receptivity in the participants.

The conclusion that this match between the individual receptivity and the trigger was highly individual is underlined by the fact that some of the participants tried to inspire others in their environment with precisely the topics that triggered them and failed because these people were not touched by these topics. Therefore, there didn't seem to be any reproducible triggers where one trigger can reach many people, but there only seemed to be very individual ones. One of the participants put it this way:

'... I think you can only reach unbelievers if you can give them exactly what they are looking for (what triggers their receptivity). And that is difficult to judge if you don't know these people.'

What was striking is that only 12 of the 20 participants had other people who were involved in the triggering moment. All other participants experienced the triggering moment completely alone. And even among these 12 participants, only in seven cases were other people actively and consciously involved in the triggering moment. In the other cases, people were passively or unconsciously involved.

The match between the trigger and the personal receptivity was the spark that triggered a phase of individual searching. When people were involved in the trigger moment, they were usually also the religious mentors in the study phase. As was the case with those people involved in the trigger moment, these were almost always church members, not professional staff. When other Christians were not actively involved in the trigger but were known as Christians, the participants often actively sought their advice in this phase. When other Christians were neither involved in the trigger nor known, the web and especially social media were usually the places where people were looking for information.

The primary sources of information during the study phase were usually also the bridge builders into a specific Christian community. For those who primarily sought orientation on the web, the most influential online speakers on the key issues of receptivity were usually the determining factors where participants sought spiritual community in real life. Whoever addressed the right issues had the chance to shape the direction of the process.

As for the trigger, for most participants the process of individual study was a process they went through alone. A total of 11 participants had no other person with whom they studied faith during this time. For these participants, YouTube videos were the main source of information.

In addition to YouTube, many participants also described personal Bible study as a key driver of the conversion process. Some participants rediscovered the Bible at this point in their lives, while others, especially those who did

have religious socialisation but no active faith in childhood, also described discovering the Bible for the first time here. To summarise, the primary catalysts in the search phase were (1) the web, primarily YouTube, (2) personal Bible study, and (3) religious mentors.

Sooner or later in the study phase all participants were looking for community with like-minded Christians. There were two reasons for this. Firstly, the participants sought acceptance and guidance for their new religious beliefs. They were looking for like-minded people who understood and valued their own findings and who could give them orientation for open questions. Secondly, they were looking for social acceptance because the interviews showed that a new faith and a resulting change in lifestyle were often accompanied by a lack of appreciation in their usual environment, which caused a loosening of existing relationships. This is why participants were looking for a new social community. Accordingly, they were looking at the same time for social community and clarity in religious beliefs. They stated that this community made their faith firm and lasting. Some participants said clearly that they believed that faith would not have such a meaning in their lives and would not have endured over such a long time if they did not have other Christians with whom they could live it together.

The duration of the conversion processes for the participants ranged from an almost spontaneous event, as was the case with two participants, to a process that lasted decades, as was the case with three other participants. For the other 15 participants, the duration of the process was between 1 and 4 years. No connection was found between previous religious experience and the duration of the process.

Discussion and conclusions

Conversion without the influence of Christians and churches

It can be seen that the models of Rambo, Jindra and Taylor, in which either crises are the primary triggers of conversion (Rambo 1993:44), or in which encounters with other Christians are at the core (Jindra 2014:88; Taylor 2020b:38), are both proven to be justified in the results of this study. Crises and encounters with other Christians can be triggers for conversion processes but neither has universal or almost universal validity. Both stand alongside other models. From the results of this study, namely a third group emerges, which is the largest, in which neither crises nor other Christians are the trigger, but in which the conversion process is triggered by very personal and individual trigger moments. While in the presented models the focus seem to be on Christians (and therewith the church) as 'advocates' (Rambo 1993:167) or 'agents' (Taylor 2020b:41) of conversion, this third group puts the spotlight on the converts as active agents in their own interest. Almost half of the participants experienced the trigger without other people. A bit more than half of the participants also had no other people involved in the search phase. And if people were involved in the

conversion process, they were usually church members, not professional staff. This leads to various conclusions.

Firstly, it seems necessary for Christians to live their faith more publicly. Thereby, on the one hand, more Christians can become positive role models of faith for others in the sense of Taylor and Jindra. On the other hand, by doing so, they can be known as Christians so that other people in whom God triggers a conversion process without the participation of other people can find mentors and orientation.

Secondly, this requires an understanding of mission in which all Christians are missionaries, because the Christians with whom seekers usually had first contact were not professional ministers but ordinary Christians. This fits with the results of the *Greifswalder Konversionsstudie*. In that study, friends also have the greatest influence on the conversion process at the beginning, but this influence then decreases in favour of the pastor as the process progresses (Zimmermann et al. 2011:114). Something similar is evident in this study, where pastors also take on a stronger role when people come into contact with the church. This conclusion is closely connected to the idea of the missional church movement where Frost and Hirsch (2013:106) state that every Christian and every congregation should see themselves as 'missionaries to their own context'.

Thirdly, Christians and churches should prepare themselves to meet these new believers. These people do not come as blank slates, but rather they come out of the study phase with their own convictions and are now looking for social and religious acceptance and orientation. The Christian community must learn to meet these people and their convictions with respect and embark on a shared learning journey. A sensitive, individual and empathetic approach to these people is needed.

Fourthly, churches need to focus more on presenting content relevant to their faith on the Internet so that people who are looking for answers can find guidance there. The Internet is one of the most important sources of information for participants. All participants who were familiar with the Internet used it as a source of information.

The role of Christian Community – Living and learning communities

One conclusion of this study is that other Christians and churches are not essential for the trigger moment and the study phase, several participants experience these phases without other people, but church is essential to let the faith become firm and lasting. This relativises the image that the church or Christians are *the* driving forces of mission as suggested in all described models of conversion. Converts seek community and answers to open questions. Therewith, they seek learning and living communities. This has great similarity to the idea of the 'sacred umbrellas' (Gorski & Guhin 2017:1124). The term is based on the concept of the

'sacred canopies', which was long advocated by Berger (2014). It describes the need for homogeneous religious societies in which faith can be maintained and multiplied. If these collapse, faith also declines. Gorski and Guhin now describe how these homogeneous places of faith transmission are shifting from the societal level (sacred canopies) to local, homogeneous cells (sacred umbrellas). Stolz, Favre and Buchard (2014:18) describe the success of free churches in Switzerland in a similar way, speaking of a 'particularly strong sense of belonging and communal identity'. Vermeer and Scheepers (2017:15–16), who study highly missionary churches in the Netherlands, speak of a 'subcultural religious identity' and 'umbrellas of conservative belief'. Smaller, as homogeneous as possible, local communities are repeatedly described as a resource against the trend of secularisation, which maintain faith and, at least in part, allow it to grow. This picture corresponds with the results of this study, because the participants also describe a community that is a living and learning community, which offers social acceptance and religious orientation, as the reason why faith becomes firm and lasting. Here, the focus of churches should be on the formation of such local communities that can offer a sacred umbrella to people who find faith without the help of others.

But participants also describe that this close community can be a blessing and a curse at the same time. They outline how they sometimes found it difficult to become part of these close communities because closeness can quickly create a feeling of distance if you are not part of the community. In extreme cases, this intimate community can also result in a bunker mentality (Mueller 2006:140), whereby the collective withdraws from society, thereby becoming irrelevant or even invisible. But some participants also describe how these boundaries can be overcome, namely by people becoming bridge builders, taking guests by the hand, introducing them to people, networks, rituals, processes and habits, and thus helping them to immerse themselves in the community.

Individual approach to people

The results of this study confirm Jindra's (2014:109f) idea that experiences before the actual trigger moment influence the process of conversion. The trigger must match an individual's biographically determined receptivity. This shows that in times of social differentiation and individualisation (Van der Loo & Van Reijen 1992:33), the triggers of conversion processes are also very individual. One-size-fits-all triggers that try to reach as many people as possible with the same trigger seem to have less chance of success today. As Kinnaman (2011:13) states: 'Disciples cannot be mass-produced. Disciples are handmade'. Anyone who wants to consciously trigger such a receptivity obviously needs a great deal of sensitivity to the other person in order to be able to get a sense for the personal receptivity. Churches and Christians must therefore find ways how they can share life with unchurched people to get a sensitivity for them in order to become able to match their individual receptivity.

Conversion as phenomenon of the middle age

The results of this survey support the results of the *Greifswalder Konversionsstudie* among converts of the protestant church in Germany, which comes to the conclusion that conversion is a phenomenon of the middle-aged. The average age of converts in their study was 45.3 (Zimmermann et al. 2011:66). Most participants in this survey among members of a free church were between 33 and 53 years, and therefore also middle-aged. Although this study exclusively examined adults, thus precluding any assertion regarding the number of individuals who may convert during adolescence, the findings indicate that, contrary to the commonly held assumption that conversion takes place predominantly in young age (Gooren 2007:348; Kinnaman 2011:31), there is a notable cohort of individuals who convert after adolescence in middle age.

Zimmermann et al. (2011:69) state that it would be interesting to ask about reasons for turning to faith in midlife. The statements of the participants in this study may provide an indication as to why conversion may be observed more frequently in this age. Some of the participants describe a kind of (critical) self-reflection phase in life. This is how one participant describes it:

'In your early 40s you are a bit settled. Things are going well in life. (...) And then you also have time to work on new things or, yes, to gain experience with new things.'

Here, the previously set life goals have obviously been achieved and the perspective for new ones opens up. Another participant described the opposite case: 'I haven't achieved much in life (...) although I really tried and always worked and was always reliable (...) And then I asked myself: What is the meaning of life?' Goals set earlier were obviously not achieved here and this raises the question, what is the meaning of life actually? And what can be new life goals that can bring fulfilment in life? And a third participant describes:

'Being successful in the job was very important to me and achieving a certain status in society was also very important to me. And being a (...) successful businessman by worldly standards was very important to me. Accordingly, I also dealt a lot with material things. (...) and then) I had (at some point) reached the deepest point in my life. I was somehow (just) trying to function....'

Here, you could say that although he achieved his life goals, they did not bring him the fulfilment he expected from them. Here, too, there is a kind of self-reflection about life goals and their outcome. And there is a time of realignment for new goals. These descriptions indicate a phase of pausing and summing up the goals in life and their results during middle-age.

The question arises as to whether this phase is, may be, directly related to the individualisation of society. Van der Loo and Van Reijen (1992:38) describe as the paradox of individualisation, which is one of the structural features of

modernisation that people are more free in their decisions than ever before and at the same time are so lost in giving identity and meaning to life. Therefore, Baumann (2009:36) speaks about the pressure to give meaning to one's own life. The theme of the search for meaning and identity seems to be a leitmotif of modernisation and also represents the most common receptivity or longing among the participants in this study. It is possible that these phases of summing up and self-reflection are the result of this uncertainty and pressure of individualisation to give meaning to one's own life. In a society where there are explicit standards for a fulfilling life, individuals will, as they progress, align themselves with these standards, ensuring that they remain within the prescribed boundaries. In a society of complete freedom, where most of the societal guidelines were removed perhaps these moments of standing still and reorienting become more frequent and maybe these moments can create a receptivity for a matching trigger of a conversion process. When it comes to mission, churches and Christians in general should therefore focus more on people in the midlife age who are looking for meaning and identity in life.

How the participants have perceived God in the process

The prevailing understanding of mission in many Christian churches today is that of 'missio Dei' (Bosch 2011:457f). *Missio Dei* stands, among other aspects, for the idea that mission does not originate from the church, but is an essential characteristic of God and originates from him. The church is merely God's assistant in mission who embody his gospel and bring it to all areas of life and society, and to all cultures and contexts. It is all the more surprising that most studies on mission look at it from a sociological or psychological perspective and the consideration of God's direct influence in it is often given little attention (Gooren 2007:348). Therefore, finally, this article will focus on how the participants experienced God in the conversion process. In this study, God's influence becomes visible in three ways.

Firstly, it became visible through the match between trigger and receptivity. For many participants, the match came totally unexpected out of nowhere and drew their attention in a direction they have never expected. Therefore, the match was experienced as something miraculous.

Secondly, they perceived God in a feeling of being guided through the process. Many describe how life events and new insights have intertwined so perfectly in the conversion process that they could hardly attribute this to chance. They rather perceived it as guidance.

Thirdly, they realised God in the fact that they experienced changes in their lives that they interpreted as the result of conversion and the new life with God. These were a kind of divine confirmation of the process. These changes included, for example, healing from illness or addiction, disappearing fears, or discovering a new identity or inner peace.

The concept of *missio Dei* should therefore not only be a theoretical concept. When mission originates in God and not in the church nor solely or predominantly in sociological or psychological factors, the focus in mission should be more on exploring and considering God's actions towards people today, in order to continually understand to what mission we should become a part of. As Flett and Wrogemann (2020:222) state: 'It belongs to the church to be continually coming into being and receiving its identity (and I would add also its mission) in Christ'.

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