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# Can We Be Friends? An Examination of the Role of Cross-Sex Friendship on Emerging Adults' Spiritual Development

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CAN WE BE FRIENDS?

AN EXAMINATION OF THE ROLE OF CROSS-SEX FRIENDSHIP ON EMERGING  
ADULTS' SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

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A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

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by

Brittane Y. Turner

May 2016

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**Higher Education and Student Development  
Taylor University  
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Thesis of

Brittane Yvonne Turner

entitled

Can we be friends?

An Examination of the role of Cross-sex Friendship on  
Emerging Adults' Spiritual Development

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree  
in Higher Education and Student Development

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## Abstract

Much curiosity surrounds the question of whether men and women be just friends. Heterosexual cross-sex friendship is a nonromantic, nonfamilial, relationship between a man and a woman (Schoonover & McEwan, 2014; O'Meara, 1989). While nonromantic by definition, the relationship may not remain void of all sexual tension. Furthermore, these relationships are especially explored during emerging adulthood (O'Meara, 1989). The emerging adulthood life phase involves individuals ages 18 to 30 (Smith, 2009). During the transition to adulthood, many emerging adults feel curious about religion and spiritual development (Setran & Kiesling, 2013; Bryant, 2007). Although some emerging adults seem non-committal especially in faith, others desire “real” encounters with God and even possess a spiritual hunger (Powell, Tisdale, Willingham, Bustrum, & Allen, 2012; Setran & Kiesling, 2013). These individuals find faith directing and guiding their quest for identity and personal purpose in life (Fowler, 1981). Emerging adults navigate identity formation and establish their own “meaning of life”—which results in many utilizing personal spiritual beliefs as a foundation to that process (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p. 14). Thus, the current research examined 10 Christian emerging adults’ faith development with specific attention to the role of their cross-sex friends. The research also explored the impact of faith-based higher education, specifically, the environments and programming educators provide to foster healthy cross-sex friendships that further faith development.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

In recent decades, media outlets have become obsessed with portraying male-female connections as the best of both worlds—a friend relationship with someone of the opposite sex that may include a sexual relationship. These heterosexual relationships are also referred to as cross-sex friendships: a male and female entering in a seemingly platonic relationship (Schoonover & McEwan, 2014). However, ideas such as “friends with benefits” or movies like *When Harry Met Sally* give males and females a standard of the function of cross-sex friendships that can cause ambiguity in the friendships’ meaning and purpose. Sexual tension appears to hold a significant presence in the lives of those in cross-sex friendships (Freitas 2008; Smith 2009). These relationships especially flourish during emerging adulthood—also a time of growth in one’s spiritual and faith formation. Navigating cross-sex friendship has a particularly important impact on faith formation in the development of emerging adulthood. This study explored the effects of cross-sex friendships on faith development among emerging adults.

### **Emerging Adulthood and Spiritual Development**

Individuals who fall into the age range of 18-30 years old in America form part of a social demographic referred to as emerging adulthood (Smith, 2009). In the last several decades, a number of social changes have contributed to this new phase of American life (Smith, 2009). Typically self-focused, emerging adults tend to spend time discovering

themselves and striving for career establishment. Thus, many do not follow traditionally expected social engagements such as getting married and having children. Setran and Kiesling (2013) found that “[emerging adults] are actively engaged in identity formation, exploring personal meaning in love, work, and worldview” (p. 3).

A number of factors contribute to the emerging adulthood phenomena, including the growth in higher education. Some attribute this growth to the fluctuating American economy and the dramatic increase of high school graduates immediately entering college (Smith, 2009). Another major social change lies in the economy’s effect on job stability. With jobs no longer stable and life-long, workers frequently change jobs or need new training and education. The widespread delay in marriage presents a significant social change. According to Smith, “Between 1950 and 2006, the median age first marriage for women rose from 20.3 to 25.9 and for men 22.8 to 27.5” (p. 5). Additionally, Setran and Kiesling (2013) found that “[emerging adults’] lives are marked by instability: regularly moving, changing jobs, and revising their life plans” (p. 3).

Amidst the ebb and flow of transition, many emerging adults find themselves curious about religion and spiritual formation. Bryant (2007) argued, “Religion is typically associated with commitment to a supernatural power that is . . . celebrate[d] both individually and within the context of a faith community” (p. 835). Many emerging adults view the establishment faith practice as something for later in life, once they have settled down (Smith, 2009). According to Setran and Kiesling (2013), “Faith commitments are placed in a ‘lockbox,’ stowed away for safekeeping until later in life” (p. 17). However, even though faith tends to take less priority, many find comfort from a faith source amidst the busy transition of their lives. In a study of the faith development

of college seniors, participants showed that reliance on God for help and provision resulted in what they called “real” encounters with God (Powell, Tisdale, Willingham, Bustrum, & Allen, 2012). In addition, Setran and Kiesling (2013) found that, despite the disruptions and distraction of current culture, a deep spiritual transformation occurs, specifically in the pursuit of Christian discipleship. Furthermore, Setran and Kiesling (2013) discovered that “[e]merging adults seem to possess a ‘spiritual hunger’ despite some of the negative characteristics and self-centered nature of this life-stage” (p. 6).

### **Cross-Sex Friendship in Emerging Adulthood**

Friendship can provide a plethora of benefits to one’s life (Bleske & Buss, 2000). A friend offers intimacy, an increase in positive interaction, feelings of worth, and companionship (Barry, Madsen, Nelson, Carroll, & Badger, 2009; Hiebert, 1996). Women's friendships tend to focus on nurturing, sharing, personal communication, and general expressiveness; men's friendships emphasize a focus on shared activities (O’Meara, 1989). Men and women often have different needs and expectations of friendship, thus, complicating what are labeled as cross-sex friendships.

According to O’Meara (1989), “Cross-sex friendship is a specific type of friendship—a nonromantic, nonfamilial, personal relationship between a man and a woman” (p. 526). While nonromantic, the friendship does not necessarily remain devoid of sexual tension and passion. Such feelings may lead to confusion and unclear friendship expectations. In order to avoid such dynamics, cross-sex friends must examine their motives for entering and continuing the relationship (Harvey, 2003). Without this self-examination, confusion and formation of romantic feelings may follow (Hiebert, 1996).

The emerging adulthood life-phase supports the establishment of cross-sex

friendships. Many young adults explore the idea of intimacy but do not feel ready to establish themselves in a romantic relationship (Arnett, 2000). Emerging adults often postpone marriage until later in their twenties or early thirties, and the widespread message from society supports the ambiguity of sexual tension or sex within a supposed opposite sex friendship. Arnett claimed, “For [those] who wish to have a variety of romantic and sexual experiences, emerging adulthood is the time for it . . . [parental involvement has decreased] and there is no pressure to enter into marriage” (p. 474). Therefore, the norms of emerging adulthood prove conducive to ambiguously defined cross-sex relationships.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Given current social trends and the gap in the literature regarding the effects of cross-sex friendship on Christian faith development in emerging adults, an opportunity exists for further study. Therefore, this study sought to examine the effects of cross-sex friendship on the faith development of emerging adults. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data collection occurred at a small, private, highly residential, faith-based institution in the mid-west. This university, comprised of nearly 2,000 traditional undergraduate students, offers a variety of students mindful of Christian faith development and involved in cross-sex friendships. The sample from the institution consisted of students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

Benefits of this study include established clarity in regards to expectations of and motives for cross-sex friendship and greater awareness of the effects cross-sex friendships have on Christian faith development. Within the themes that emerged from

this research, Christian faith-based institutions and students who value faith growth may consider adjustments to institutional programming and personal perspective changes. Furthermore, amid all of the concern regarding emerging adults and their casual views towards commitment and sex, this study endeavored to explore the impact on Christian emerging adults engagement in cross-sex friendship and their faith formation.

### **Research Questions**

This study explored the following research questions:

- How do college students define cross-sex friendship?
- What factors contribute to the establishment of cross-sex friendship?
- How do college students, emotionally and cognitively, experience cross-sex friendship?
- What is the impact of the cross-sex friendship on college students' spiritual development?

## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

Cross-sex friendship holds unique value within the current cultural social construct. Defined as a friendship between a man and women without romantic inclinations, these relationships have become increasingly prevalent among emerging adults (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009). The unique nature of the emerging adult phase encourages cross-sex friendships more than ever before (Arnett, 2005; Farrell, 2011; Freitas, 2008). Therefore, the following literature review explored and defined emerging adulthood and emerging adults' journey through faith formation. Additionally, the review of the literature examined the nature of cross-sex friendship and the impact this type of friendship has on emerging adults' lives.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

In recent years, developmental psychology literature has explored the change that occurs between adolescence and adulthood (Eryilmaz & Atak, 2011). Arnett (2000) argued, "Emerging adulthood is proposed as a new conception of development for the period from the late teens through the twenties, with a focus on ages 18-25" (p. 469). Individuals tend to postpone the full transition to adulthood through the delay of marriage, the suspension of parenthood, the delay of a real career, the deferred completion of an education, and the continuation of living with their parents (Atak & Emyilmaz, 2011). Most emerging adults believe their lives remain unsettled, and many

find their lives “fluid, tentative, experimental, and relatively unbound” (Smith, 2009, p. 56). Transition stands out as the most pervasive theme in emerging adults’ lives and tends to cause anxiousness. These individuals find the navigation of basics in life demanding (Arnett, 2000). If life does not come easily or responsibilities become cumbersome, emerging adults rely on their parents to provide the security they desire. Herein lies tension with the emerging adult lifestyle: they desire independence yet reject responsibilities of independent adulthood (Smith, 2009).

Additionally, relationships during emerging adulthood tend to encourage the exploratory nature of this life phase. Emerging adults report a desire to settle down eventually (Smith, 2009). Furthermore, emerging adults often lack definition in relationships and speak of interactions with the opposite sex in a highly casual manner, even when romantically interested. According to Smith, “[E]merging adult females have somewhat more investment than their male peers in getting a clear understanding of the nature of their relationship” (p. 59). These adults do yearn for intimacy, loyalty, and security but only on their own terms and preferably with less commitment. Many emerging adults “hang out” with the opposite sex and have friends they would consider dating (p. 59). Therefore, their lack of definition and casual nature of opposite sex relationships leads to the development of cross-sex friendships within this phase of life.

### **Spirituality and Emerging Adulthood**

The interchangeable use of the terms *spirituality*, *belief*, and *faith* necessitates clear definitions for the purpose of this study. Mayhew (2004) described spirituality as “the human attempt to make sense of the self-connection to and with the external world” (Evans Forney, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 195). Spirituality tends to entail subjectivity



and self-focus. The recognition of spirituality stems from a deeper longing to articulate different dimensions of the human experience that include “depth, meaning, mystery, moral purpose, transcendence, wholeness, vulnerability, the capacity to love, and the appreciation of the spirit (or Spirit) . . . as the essence at the core of life” (Parks, 2011, p. 16). In summation, spirituality represents a hunger for authenticity. In addition, *belief* indicates a conscious intellectual decision to agree with certain doctrines and theologies. Belief involves an understanding of what one may hold dear, prize, give allegiance or loyalty to, or hold at high value. Additionally, *faith* serves as “an act of knowing and being,” humanity’s way of making meaning with the world (Dykstra & Parks, 1986, p. 19). Furthermore, faith becomes “an orientation of the total person, giving purpose and goal to one’s hopes and strivings, thoughts and actions” (Fowler, 1981, p. 14). Parks (2011) also defined faith as a force that drives “meaning-making,” characterized as a “human action [that] is conditioned by a felt sense of how life really is (or ought to be), or what has ultimate value” (p. 21).

Individuals navigate through stages of faith or spirituality over their lifetime. Fowler (1978) developed perhaps the most well known theory of faith and spiritual development. His theory does not equate faith and religion (Dykstra & Parks, 1986). Faith development functions uniquely for each individual and is ambiguous in nature (Fowler, 1981). In Fowler’s understanding, “faith is in a sense both the quest for and the construction of meaning” (Dykstra & Parks, 1986, p. 56). According to Fernhout (1986), “Fowler also refers to faith as a powerful form of knowing” (p. 76). The quest of meaning making and knowing lasts from birth to adulthood and involves different stages of faith and spiritual maturity through one’s experiences (Evans et al., 2010).

When applying Fowler's faith development theory to emerging adulthood, Stages 3 and 4 specifically apply to this developmental category. Stage 3 occurs during late adolescence into early adulthood (Dykstra & Parks, 1986; Fowler, 1981). Individuals in this stage view faith and spirituality as meaningful but not essential (Fowler, 1981). According to Fowler, "A person in Stage 3 is aware of having values . . . he or she articulates them, and defends them and feels deep emotional investments in them, but typically has not made the value system, a system" (p. 162). Therefore, emerging adults at this stage still need external validation to endorse their choices in faith development (Evans et al., 2010). As individuals move from Stage 3 to Stage 4, their beliefs and meaning making become more foundational and "a coherent and explicit meaning-making system" (p. 198). Stage 4 entails "double development," whereas previously (Stage 3) "the individual sustained an identity and faith compositions by an interpersonal circle of significant others, now claims an identity no longer defined by the composite of one's roles or meanings to others" (Fowler, 1981, p. 182). This progression leads an individual to build an autonomous faith system. Fowler's theory provides a foundation to understanding the faith establishment process in emerging adults.

Despite emerging adults' shift away from the traditional church practice of faith and religion, their spiritual awareness and practice increase (Smith, 2009). Setran and Kiesling (2013) suggested a rise of spiritual interest among emerging adults despite the decline of faith practice. Many of these adults navigate the "meaning of life" and state their "spirituality is a source of life and joy" (p. 14). The growing interest in spirituality proves conducive to the life exploration and inquisitive nature of the emerging adulthood stage of life. Many separate from their families of origin and navigate questions of

vocation and meaning. This separation and exploration compel many to reflect on their lives and take responsibility for events that occur. Spirituality, in many cases, becomes a way to cope with all of life's uncertainties. In addition, these individuals view God as a combination of "Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist"; this perspective aligns with emerging adults' view of faith as a "lifestyle enhancing appliance," a means of making a better life and satisfying one's needs (p. 23).

Community also heavily impacts faith formation; however, this community does not involve structured institutions like the church (Setran & Kiesling, 2013). Faith formation and spirituality for emerging adults slowly detaches from the church (Setran & Kiesling, 2013; Smith, 2009). Emerging adults tend to define spirituality vaguely, yet the loose definitions usually consist of reflection of "one's inner life" and connection to the world (Setran & Kiesling, 2013, p. 15). Also, many reserve full spiritual exploration for later in life, especially once they have kids. Thus, spiritual formation notably occurs in emerging adults through everyday life experiences, either now or later. With formal practice removed, emerging adults seem open to spiritual and faith exploration.

### **Emerging Adults in Cross-Sex Relationships**

Emerging adults' transition into adulthood permits the causal exploration of romantically intimate relationships (Weaver, Mackeigan, & MacDonald, 2011). Emerging adults tend to desire relationships in which "no strings are attached" (Freitas, 2008, p. 134). Additionally, they can pursue intimacy without commitment because of their constant state of experimentation and the "busyness" of school demands (Weaver et al., 2011, p. 41). Sexual hook-ups offer a prime example of casual romantic relationships for emerging adults.

The establishment of the hook-up culture has provided a foundation of sexual experimentation and clouded the definition of romantic interaction between members of the opposite sex:

Many students said hookups and one-night stands are easier than steady relationships because everyone is so busy with schoolwork, part-time jobs, volunteer commitments, extracurricular activities, friendships, and of course partying. Committed relationships can drain a person's time, and most students just don't have room (or don't make room) in their schedules for hanging out regularly with a boyfriend or girlfriend. So squeezing in no-strings-attached sex after hours seems more efficient.

(Freitas, 2008, p. 134)

Surprisingly, hookup relationships have replaced the "first date" and tend to result in long-term relationships. Additionally, Freitas found, "When romantic encounters (coffee, dinners, or 'just talking') occur it's after multiple hookups...dates just aren't a common way into a relationship aside from hooking up" (p. 139).

Many emerging adults find themselves exploring another type of casual romantic relationship, characterized as *friends with benefits*. Friends with benefits relationships involve the engagement in sexual activities as friends without a defined romantic relationship (Hughes, Morrison, & Asada, 2005; Weaver et al., 2011). Individuals usually choose opposite sex friends with whom they feel comfortable exploring sexually and tend to want more than friendship in the future. Even though the concept of friends with benefits existed in previous generations, the frequency of this relationship type has increased in the past decade (Weaver et al., 2011). According to Weaver et al., "There is

speculation that these relationships may be more common among today's youth and young adults than in previous generations" (p. 41).

In addition, these seemingly *laissez-fair* sexual romantic relationships perpetuate the delay of marriage in emerging adults. Considered one of the most distinguishable characteristics of emerging adulthood, delayed marriage allows individuals to explore all relational options until they feel ready to marry (Farrell, 2011). Today, young adults seem less likely than previous generations to marry before the age of 30. In 1950, the median age of marriage was 20 for women and 22 for men (Arnett, 2005). The age increase continued only slightly through the 1970's, with the average marriage age for women at 21 and men, 23. However, the most dramatic shift occurred in 2000, with the median age of marriage at 25 for women and 27 for men. The four-year rise of marriage age evidences many emerging adult's desire to keep their options open (Farrell, 2011). Emerging adults report navigating busier lives and require more time for establishment and development of personal identity before settling down (Arnett, 2005; Farrell, 2011). A long-term commitment such as marriage hinders exploration and the creation of life on one's own terms first (Farrell, 2011). According to Wuthnow (2007), "Today's young adults, especially the unmarried, pick and choose, piecing together an erratic patchwork identity from their experiences—'tinkering' until they find something that fits" (as cited in Farrell, 2011, p. 519).

### **Cross-Sex Friendship**

Cross-sex friendship occupies a unique place in the American society (Monsour, Harris, Kurzweil, & Beard, 1994). Individuals who engage in these relationships appreciate the change of perspective, the interaction, and the fresh presence cross-sex

friendships bring as opposed to same-sex friendships. Examining cross-sex friendships thoroughly necessitates a foundational definition and examination of the concept of *friendship*. Friends provide companionship, support, and acceptance—all characteristics that aid in the development of identity and enhance the quality of everyday experiences (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009). The caring and supportive qualities definitive of friendship prove distinct among different friendship types, namely same-sex friendships and cross-sex friends. For example, female friendships generally operate as more intimate, described as “expressive” or “face-to-face,” whereas male friendships seem “instrumental” or “side-by-side” (Bell, 1981; DeLucia-Waack, Gerrity, Taub, & Baldo, 2001; Fischer & Narus, 1981; Lewis, 1978; Wright, 1982). With regard to cross-sex friendships, Bleske and Buss (2000) discovered this type of friendship “boosted one’s self esteem and gained respect from others” (p. 913). In addition, these relationships positively impact one’s self-image, which more specifically results in developing mutual respect, gaining attention, feeling attractive, and frequently exchanging compliments (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009). Although cross-sex friendships can play a positive role in self-development, negative aspects also exist.

Unfortunately, cross-sex friendships can lead to miscommunication of relational expectations. Many report a feeling of “sexual tension” when interacting with their opposite sex friend. Kaplan and Keys (1997) found 58% of participants reported at least slight levels of sexual attraction to their cross-sex friends. In addition, Sapadin (1988) surveyed 150 professional men and women, asking what they liked and disliked about their cross-sex friendships. Unanimously, women reported a dislike of sexual tension.

Men, on the other hand, more frequently described sexual attraction as a prime reason for initiating a friendship.

The catalyst of mutual understanding of the relationship lies in communication. With the relationship left in ambiguity, confusion of expectations and feelings arise (O'Meara, 1989). According to O' Meara, "Cross-sex friendship appears a relatively scriptless relationship, leaving the friends without role-defined expectations for everyday interaction" (p. 528). Therefore, as research indicates, when men and women intentionally discuss expectations and boundaries, the friendship flourishes and adds quality to their lives (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009; O'Meara, 1989). However, when not addressed, the ambiguous nature of the relationship can produce unwanted strain and confusion (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009; Freitas, 2008; O'Meara, 1989). Furthermore, cross-sex friends must come to a mutual agreement concerning the emotional bond that exists in the relationship (O'Meara, 1989). When the expectation of emotional bond solidifies, the relationship flourishes.

**Emotional bond.** Romantic undertones in cross-sex friendship intensify the need for individuals' openness and honesty about relationship expectations (O'Meara, 1989). The presence of romantic undertones may cause misunderstanding as to the purpose or expectations of the relationship. Nevertheless, the emotional bond between the two individuals involved can provide unique benefits such as "opposite-sex companionship [and] insights into perspectives of the other sex," which may result in reduced sexism and permit the exploration of traditional sex-roles (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009, p. 902).

**Sexual bond.** Baumgarte and Nelson (2009) found, "Sexual attraction and excitement can be both a benefit and a detriment to cross-sex friendship" (p. 902). For

decades, scholars have intentionally investigated the expectation society has placed on male and female relationships as only existing for the sexual pleasure of both parties (Afifi & Faulkner, 2000; Hiebert, 1996). As mentioned above, individuals in cross-sex relationship report sexual overtones dictating the nature and “feel” of the relationship (Monsour et al., 1994). An element of intimacy adds a tone to the relationship that may heighten sexual intensity. Thus, the development of intimacy through interaction, quality time, and physical contact could increase the sexual tension within the relationship.

### **Conclusion**

Emerging adults’ lives continuously evolve and progress, inviting individuals to experiment and explore what life has to offer. Exploration for an emerging adult may consist of furthering one’s education, not settling in a career, and delaying marriage. Furthermore, emerging adults tend to involve themselves in casual romantic relationships because they report a lack of readiness to settle down. The lack of commitment leads many to become only friends with the opposite sex because they do not have time for a commitment. A lack of commitment may lead to cross-sex friendships, which serve as a vehicle of intentional connection without explicit romantic intentions, though implicit intentions may occur. Individuals involved in such type of friendship may experience confusion due to the presence of sexual and emotional tension. In addition, emerging adults report interest in faith formation and disinterest in formal religious practice, with fluidity of spiritual formation practice conducive to this life stage. Furthermore, emerging adult’s faith development is experiencing growth and slowly achieving autonomy. Since the nature of emerging adulthood proves rather progressive and fluid, the impact of cross-sex friendship on faith formation requires further investigation.



## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

#### **Purpose and Design**

This study explored the relationship and effect of cross-sex friendship on spiritual formation in emerging adults. In particular, this study delineated college students' definition of cross-sex friendship, the consistency and activities that create the friendship, personal emotions or thoughts regarding the friendship, and any impact cross-sex friendships have on their spiritual development. Current social trends have raised awareness on these topics in higher education, but a clear gap exists in literature regarding the effects of cross-sex friendship on specifically Christian spiritual formation in emerging adults—this gap indicated a significant need for continued research and examination. Data collected from a Midwest, faith-based institution provided a variety of perspectives from students mindful of Christian faith development and, in many cases, involved in cross-sex friendships.

In order to explore students' experiences and thoughts regarding cross-sex friendship more fully, this study used a qualitative phenomenological design. According to Creswell (2011), "Qualitative research is best suited to address a research problem in which you do not know the variables and need to explore" (p.16). Although prior research did address some of the variables and effects of cross-sex friendship on spirituality in emerging adults, aspects of each of the variables required more of an

investigation. Additionally, a phenomenological data analysis specifically defines the type of qualitative study. A phenomenological data analysis “highlight[s] ‘significant statements,’ sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). Furthermore, a phenomenological approach functions best when common shared experiences among individuals require exploration in order to draw themes that, in turn, can assist in the development and implementation of practices or policies for “a deeper understanding about features of the phenomenon” (p. 81).

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of a sampling of undergraduate students—both male and female—from a faith-based institution in the Midwest. The institution—a small private, Christian liberal arts college—enrolls mostly traditional undergraduate students and is highly residential. Additionally, participants were undergraduate students from different racial and cultural backgrounds to ensure diversity in the sampling. The participants included students in institutionally recognized leadership positions as well as students who participate in spiritual forming activities such as Bible studies, Bible classes, and chapel services offered by the institution. Student involvement and participation in institutionally and non-institutionally recognized activities ensured multiple perspectives and a variety in relationship contexts for cross-sex friendships. Furthermore, these students self-proclaimed to seek Christian faith growth and formation actively, which differs from the “typical” emerging adult. This aspect, in addition to the institution providing programs and other opportunities to foster faith development, added a uniqueness to the participant sample and the study overall.

## **Procedures and Analysis**

The researcher collected data through 10 face-to-face, structured interviews that lasted from 30-60 minutes. Ages of participants ranged from 20-22, and both sexes received even representation (5 males, 5 females); each sex had one international student participant. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility within the researcher-participant conversation. Faculty and staff members of the institution randomly selected and referred participants to the researcher. The researcher conducted one pilot interview with one participant to provide flexibility and adjust any procedures or questions. Participants received contact via e-mail, explaining the study and asking for their participation. Upon the agreement and selection of the first 10-12 individuals, the researcher arranged a meeting room and time to conduct the individual interviews. Before the interview, participants received a sample of the interview questions and a consent form stating information about the study and notice of recording the interview. The researcher also provided consent forms at each interview. Once the participant signed a consent form, the interview followed the protocol (see Appendix A).

The researcher recorded the interviews were recorded and kept them on a password protected computer, changing participants' names to ensure anonymity. After completing the interviews, the researcher collaborated with an independent transcriber, who consented to confidentiality before receiving and transcribing the interviews. In the coding process, the researcher analyzed interviewee responses using MAXQDA coding software. Each theme received a color code established by the researcher along with placement into appropriate categories. Additionally, the researcher developed conclusions based upon the data analysis and relevant literature (Creswell, 2013).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Results**

The results of the present study offered discussions of same-sex and cross-sex friendship (also referred to as opposite sex friendship), including faith and spiritual development in emerging adults. The participants willingly and thoughtfully engaged in transparent, meaningful conversation, which added to the richness of the findings. Three major themes of sexual tension, friendship development, and friendship impacting faith development emerged along with corresponding subthemes: external influences, same-sex friendship, value of opposite-sex friendship, impact of residence life on friendship, opposite sex friend positively impacting faith, and faith influencing aspects of friendship.

#### **Theme 1: Sexual Tension**

All 10 participants believed sexual tension becomes present at some point during an opposite sex friendship. David candidly stated, “With having friendship of the opposite sex there is that romantic part that comes into play . . . so, I think the challenge is if you want the friendship, not wanting that romantic part to seep into it.” Sexual tension and potential romantic implications contribute to hesitancy when sharing personal deep thoughts or feelings—an element of friendship that all participants desired. David states, “With the opposite-sex there tends to be sort of a limit on the closeness.”

In addition, many shared that sexual tension felt obstructive to the platonic friendship, or, as Kurt stated, “I feel like a lot of times in male/female friendships there’s

an unspoken elephant in the room that is kind of like, ‘what are we?’” All participants implicitly mentioned that clearly knowing and understanding friendship expectations and affections remain critical in ensuring continued vitality of the friendship relationship.

**Sub-theme: External influences.** Half of the participants mentioned the role of external influences in creating sexual tension between opposite sex friends. Noah explained his frustration of desiring to maintain healthy friendships with his female friends but felt incapable because of the pressure of others’ perceptions. He specifically stated, “We’re just friends, we’re just best friends and society’s like ‘no you can’t just be that; it has to be something more.’” Participants reported feeling frustrated and annoyed with the cultural stigma around opposite sex friendship. Gigi stated,

I just think about growing up, [and people saying], ‘oh you’re talking to so and so’ or ‘you’re hanging out with them a lot so, you must be really into them’ and I think that’s just eye roll kind of thing sometimes.

Additionally, the stigma increases a cautious posture when socializing with opposite sex friends and enhances the existing sexual tension. Kurt noted, “I think that when you have just a friendship, people are looking at you and saying ‘are you going to start something here?’” The concern of what others think not only increases sexual tension but also alters personal perception of the friendship. Miranda shared, “Even with my very best guy friends I have to think differently because I know that when people see us they see us differently.”

## **Theme 2: Friendship Development**

All participants spoke of the value of both opposite and same sex friendship in their lives. Noah stated, “I like hanging out with a mixed group. I like hanging out with a

group of girls or just a group of guys or a mixed group together because you get all the different perspectives.” How the participants became friends with people ranged; however, the main difference between becoming male and female friends emerged in the role and impact of the residence halls. Miranda shared, “The main differentiation between my guy friends and girl friends as far as how I made them were the dorms.”

Additionally, participants’ experiences proved most beneficial when there existed mutual understanding of the friendship. Gigi reported, “[Friendship] relationship [consists of] both parties give and receive time, energy, potentially resources and you feel a lot of connection and mutual coexistence with that person on a different level than with someone who’s just your acquaintance.” Furthermore, participants mentioned an evident “difference” between their male and female friendship, though there emerged multiple definitions of the “difference.” David offered one example: “With the opposite sex there tends to be a limit on the closeness or there can be different ranges of the friendship.”

**Sub-theme: Same-sex friendship.** Seven participants expressed the importance of same sex friendship and camaraderie. Most mentioned deeper understanding of their sex due to shared experiences, thoughts, and emotions. Hailey said,

I feel the same amount of love and respect for friends of both genders, but either gender is definitely different. I can express more to a woman, you know, not only because I feel comfortable but they’re more likely to understand and relate, especially on an emotional level.

Gigi specifically discussed feeling comfortable with individuals of the same gender when sharing deeper, gender-specific experiences:

I think maybe the difference [between opposite and same sex friends] is what I'd choose to share with a female friend would be more things about struggles or like thoughts or feelings pertaining more to being a woman and issues or thoughts or feelings or emotions about like experiences that aren't necessarily exclusive to the female sex but more typical or more like universally experienced by females.

**Sub-theme: The value of opposite sex friendship.** All participants recognized the value of their opposite sex relationship in their lives. Many reported such relationships added diversity in perspective and lifestyle. Kevin stated, "I think it brings a different perspective it helps me think about life differently." Many expressed the necessity of opposite sex friendship when developing a holistic life. Gigi shared,

I think I'd be doing a great disservice to myself to never have friends of the opposite sex because if you think about it I know we're all people and we're all humans and females are different than males and the way we experience life is going to be different but its always good to have a well rounded group of people surrounding you, diversity, so I think that's major benefit.

In addition, greater self-esteem and confidence linked to the presence of healthy opposite sex friendships. For instance, David found his self-esteem impacted:

I would say that my relationship sex has certainly influenced my self esteem so how I view myself as a person how I view myself as a man, and so having those sorts of positive experiences with those of the opposite sex help my own self esteem.

**Sub-theme: Impact of university residence life on friendship.** Seven participants referenced the impact of residence life on their friendship development. Madison stated, “The closest friends of mine I’ve gotten close to because we live on the same wing together.” Miranda shared how her residence life experience affected who she developed friendships with: “I would say the main differentiation between my guy friends and girl friends as far as how I made them were the dorms. They were the only places where I didn’t make guy friends [but] I did make girl friends.” David also commented on residence life positively promoting opposite sex friendship because of his co-educational residence hall experience: “I live in a co-ed dorm, or a co-ed residence hall, so that proximity allows for that fostering of the opposite gender relationships.”

In addition, residence life programming impacts the formation and perception of opposite sex friendships. Kevin specifically addressed a program hosted and encouraged by residence life at the institution that contributed to the stigma of opposite sex friends on campus:

Pick-a-dates are the worst. As much as I love the university, [and have] a great time on pick-a-dates you can hardly have fun sometimes because you’re thinking, should I ask this person out on a second pick-a-date and what would that be signaling or should I just jump to the second date? You know? A lot of questions.

### **Theme 3: Friendship Impacting Faith Development**

All participants shared about the influence of both sexes on their personal faith development. Christie said,



Yeah, I think I have definitely been challenged by a lot of my friends in my spirituality. It's really shaped my stance of things because when you have a lot of friends they have a lot of different situations and you see how you would relate to that or how you would respond to that in a spiritual basis.

David specifically talked about his experience with men in his dorm and the impact of those relationships on his spiritual development:

Sure, living on a floor with all guys I've certainly been encouraged in my faith through those guys you know just how they would live out their life, modeling their faith in a positive way. Answering questions that I have, being there for my struggles, um, and same thing with the women in my life.

For many, knowing their friends possess strong faith and willingly engage in conversations about faith proved extremely beneficial to the faith development of the participants. Hailey offered an example of how friend engagement influenced her faith:

[Having friends] expressing their own faith and engaging in spiritual conversations adds so much growth too. Gathering other people's point of views, [on] spiritual topics [is] just another way that I think that friends help strengthen and like broaden your knowledge of the Christian faith.

**Sub-theme: Opposite-sex friendship impacting faith.** Eight participants had their faith positively impacted and challenged by their opposite-sex friendships. Aden specifically addressed the positive impact he experienced: "I think the most honest, spiritual conversations I have are with my gay friend and all my girl friends, and also my

brother. I think that they offer more comprehensive conversations about spirituality for me.” Other participants shared the impact of personal growth when those of the opposite sex shared differing opinions regarding faith and spiritual topics. David specifically stated, “Opposite sex friendship is definitely helpful for personal growth, spiritual growth. I’ve definitely gotten that, a different spiritual perspective from women. One that I would not have gotten from other men.” Kevin also experienced the same benefit, which caused him to continue to pursue his faith:

I would say that the most spiritually rejuvenating and spiritually encouraging conversations I’ve had at the university have been with girls...those conversations just always left me feeling so inspired and motivated in my faith to keep living for Christ.

Furthermore, participants discussed how their opposite-sex friendships influenced their overall biblical worldview. Christie specifically explained how her opposite-sex friends impacted her view of humanity in light of her faith:

The role opposite sex friends play in my spirituality is helping me discover who God really intended man to be. There are some great men out there, but that also makes me wonder how much greater God intended man and woman to be and seeing that there are no limits with mankind.

**Sub-theme: Faith influencing friendship.** A host of influences shape the development of friendship. However, for the participants involved in the present study, having friends with active, strong Christian faith heavily influenced the depth of that friendship, whether the friend was of the same or opposite sex. Hailey specifically addressed the “attraction” she has to friends who have a strong faith: “The majority of

people that I'm friends with have a really strong relationship with Christ and like that kind of draws me toward them." Participants also discussed how faith dictates the type of friendships they have. For example, Gigi shared how her faith contributes to the depth of her friendships: "My faith and my spirituality informs more of my deeper relationships and less of the relationships I don't feel as emotionally connected and invested."

Additionally, participants mention how friends who share the same faith seem "safer" for personal self-disclosure. Madison stated, "I guess with my Christian friends I am more open to struggles or praises [and day-to-day] life." Furthermore, participants mentioned how they desire friendships in which both individuals spur one another on in their faith. Kevin found the mutual faith investment essential:

I feel like part of how my faith dictates my friendship, is it encourages me to always be looking for other people to invest in but almost most importantly for my own spiritual growth people who will come alongside me and hold the cross in my life for Christ.

Participants also noted a gained foundational understanding of how to conduct friendship in light of their Christian faith. Gigi stated,

If we're suppose to be emulating Christ . . . this is how Christ would interact with this person or this is how Christ would behave toward this friend in this time . . . there's so many really solid examples of friendship in the Bible, especially Jesus and his disciples are the prime examples.

Kevin also expressed thoughts regarding his faith's impact on how he relates to others:

I feel like we should always try to approach those relationships like I said earlier in the interview with Christ's sacrificial love in our minds and knowing that as

humans we're definitely not perfect and we're going to make mistakes, we're not always going to communicate as skillfully or anything if we want to but we are going to mess up occasionally but the point is since we're Christians we can just take one interaction at a time and try handle things the way Jesus would.

Lastly, participants also referenced gaining a clearer understanding of God and the world around them through their interaction with friends. Christie states,

God gives us a chance to see a glimpse of Him in each other, as cheesy as that sounds the more that I think about it. I really think God leads friends to each other and we're able to develop, hopefully develop in your faith because of that or see where you lack and need to work on

Aden also remarked,

I allow my spirituality to change what I think about movies or plays that I see or things that I want to write or conversations I want to have with my friends or just my friends as a whole. I think it's just the foundation for everything because He's created it all.

### **Conclusion: Overarching Theme**

Opposite sex friendships prove beneficial to emerging adult's spiritual development; however, the pursuit of cross-sex friendships may cause some conflicting emotions in expectations and feelings. Participants expressed deep admiration for their opposite sex friendships but also noted difficulty in maintaining a mutual understanding of the nature of the friendships. Nevertheless, despite the difficulty and tension felt, participants valued their cross-sex relationships and found persisting in these friendships were essential to the growth and development of all areas of their life.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

#### Common Themes

Participants provided different perspectives of how their experiences with cross-sex friends impacted their faith formation. Many reported themes of sexual tension between themselves and their opposite-sex friends, the significance of deep friendship development, and the role friends of the same and opposite sex have on their faith development. These participants also reflected on external impacts of friendship development, mostly focusing on the institutional environment's role in friendship formation and sustainability. Each participant's answers proved unique to his or her life experiences and personality. Still, multiple themes emerged from among the interviews.

**Sexual tension.** Many participants reported a feeling of "sexual tension" when interacting with their opposite sex friends. Sexual tension emerged as a theme throughout current literature on the nature of cross-sex friendship. Participants recognized their cross-sex friendships could potentially turn into romantic relationships. Many stated they had the question of the friendship "being more than just friends," especially if they did not have a conversation with their friend about feelings early on in the relationship. Participants sometimes reported feeling attracted to their cross-sex friends but refraining from saying anything because they preferred sexual tension not to get in the way or become more of a challenge (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009; Freitas, 2008;

O'Meara, 1989). Many struggled to decipher the obstacle with cross-sex friendship but also reported many friendships merit working through personal romantic feelings.

Additionally, participants discussed the role of external influences on the development of sexual tension. For instance, Noah stated,

Society views men and men in a different light, especially when it comes to relationships [friendship]. A lot of time you can still be friends with someone of the opposite sex but [there's potential for the perception of the friendship] to be romantic and then questioned.

The perception of others in one's immediate community greatly impacts the perception of sexual tension:

If it is assumed that the friends are seeing each other romantically or that there is a hidden sexual agenda, the members of the friendship must manage the public presentation of the dyad to make sure it communicates authentic [platonic, if the case] friendship to the external audience (O'Meara, as cited in Schoonover & McEwan, 2014, p. 389).

Many participants desired their community to understand the platonic nature of their friendship so that the friendship could progress healthily. Interviewees noted some "tradition" events at the institution contributed to the ambiguous nature of cross-sex friendship, specifically the event called "Pick-a-dates"; in this event, students choose a friend to take on a group outing "labeled" a date despite the "group activity" essence of the program. For some, "Pick-a-dates" greatly contributes to the confusion of establishing healthy relationships with the opposite sex void of romantic tension.

Based on these findings, sexual tension creates hindrances and may feel all-consuming when one desires to build a well-rounded friendship with someone of the opposite sex. The tension detracts from some of the benefits of opposite-sex friendship, and limits the holistic approach to establishing community. Institutional programming must remain sensitive to the contribution to the already loaded relationship and not further the confusion or erode the benefits of having cross-sex friends.

**Friendship development.** The importance of friendship development across both sexes proved of evident value. Baumgarte and Nelson (2009) found friendship development to consist of appropriate challenge, intentionally fostered depth, and an involvement in everyday life activities. Participants expressed the same desire and progression to their friendship development. The closeness of the friendship depended on rapport and the length of time of the friendship. Most participants felt a closer connection with same-sex friends because of a mutual understanding of common experiences that traditionally occur with their same sex and a greater sense of comfort sharing deeper thoughts and feelings with those friends.

In addition, the residence halls and residence life programming contributed to the development of friendship. Emerging adults consider their chosen friends an extremely important part of their lives and significant contributor to their personal development (Barry et al., 2009). Since the participants fell in the age range of emerging adulthood, they found the development of their closest relationships occurred among the peers with whom they lived. In Madison's interview, she specifically addressed the role of residence life on her friendships: "I think the closest friends of mine [were] because we live on the same floor together." Even though friendships still occurred through class,

athletics, and campus leadership involvement, students' living situation proved the largest contributing factor to whom participants befriended. Furthermore, because deep connections with friends seemed of high value for all of the interviewees, many found their deepest connecting points with individuals of the same sex largely due to the residence life program at the institution. Many found they still developed close opposite-sex relationships; however, residence life did not contribute to that development in the way the students ideally prefer unless they lived in a co-educational dormitory. If anything, residence life made close friendships with the opposite-sex harder because of limited hours during the week that students could visit cross-sex friends in their dorms. Aden specifically talked about visitation hours in his interview:

The challenge at my institution is open house policies. For example Friday's guys can go to girl dorms and on Saturday girls can go to guy dorms, this is from 7 to midnight, and Sunday is 1-5 for male and female dorms. The rest of the week no girls or guys in dorms and vice versa or [you'll] get fined.

The policy, though established with virtuous intent, contributes to the "cross-sex" romantic stigma prevalent in our society through a conservative means. Furthermore, in terms of friendship development, participants found environment, specifically residence life, contributed significantly to who they became friends with and the depth of the friendship. Many students desired deeper friendship with the cross-sex but found the "open house" hours hindering the availability and nature of those relationships.

**The value of cross-sex friendship.** Regardless of the closeness participants felt towards their cross-sex friends, all seemed aware of the value of those relationships.



David candidly shared how his opposite sex friendships greatly contributed to his self-esteem and understanding. Additionally, Bleske and Buss (2000) discovered this type of friendship “boosted one’s self esteem and gained respect from others” (p. 913).

Furthermore, participants in the present study enjoyed the diversity of thought and perspective the opposite sex provided on a range of subjects and activities.

Overall, the emotional bond between two cross-sex friends may provide unique benefits, such as understanding different perspectives and expanding perceived “traditional” gender roles (Baumgarte & Nelson, 2009). As mentioned previously, when discussing sexual tension in cross-sex relationships, participants noted, despite the present tension, opposite-sex friendships remain critical to developing a holistic view of life and provide variety to friendship groups. Gigi specifically addressed the value of opposite sex friendship:

I think I’d be doing a great disservice to [myself] to never have friends of the opposite sex because if you think about it I know we’re all people and we’re all human and females are different from males and the way we experience life is going to be a little different but it’s always good to have a well rounded group of people surrounding you.

Therefore, not only do cross-sex friendships prove worth pursuing, but also one should actively seek out those types of relationships.

**Friendship impacting faith development.** For the participants, faith proved evidently foundational to how they process the world around them, especially their friendships. Parks (2011) discussed the impact faith has on individuals’ establishment of personal goals, thoughts, strivings, and relationships. For the emerging adult participants,

faith seemed foundational to their worldview formation. Most participants grew up in homes with strong Christian faith values and practices. As discussed by Powell et al. (2012), many emerging adults remove themselves from formal faith practices. Therefore, these participants did not represent the “typical” emerging adult in terms of their admonition (as opposed to apathy) towards faith and spiritual growth. Additionally, in the case of this study, participants used terms such as faith and spirituality synonymously.

Furthermore, participants found they had deeper friendships with those with whom they could discuss and receive encouraging challenges in terms of faith growth. Setran and Kiesling (2013) found community significantly impacts emerging adults faith development, more than an individual attending a church. This trend did not appear specific to either sex but rather focused on the depth, comfort, and quality of friendship with their communities, which provided a leverage for conversation that could occur in terms of spiritual and faith growth, concerns, and thoughts. Many found more comfort and a sense of camaraderie in same-sex contexts when discussing gender-specific issues and faith such as sexual sin and biblical gender-roles. Both sexes explicitly expressed this comfort when interviewed; however, female interviewees especially expressed feeling more comfortable talking to their same-sex friends in terms of issues of womanhood. Male participants expressed feeling comfortable in talking to their same sex about male-specific spiritual concerns (mostly sexual sin) but seemed more open than the women participants about discussing spiritual/faith concerns with the cross-sex friends. Male participants expressed feeling understood and receiving greater depth in conversations about faith with the opposite sex. Overall, emerging adults value friends in their lives who provide safety when discussing the innermost aspects of themselves (Setran &

Kiesling, 2013). Though the impact of both sexes in terms of faith/spiritual development proved significant, there remains high value for the variety in perspective provided by the opposite-sex.

**Cross-sex friendship impacting faith development.** As mentioned previously, the opposite sex has a unique impact on the development and continual nurture of faith. The cross-sex model provides different perspectives on spiritual concepts, especially in terms of understanding different characteristics of God and overall biblical worldview. Participants expressed the power of having cross-sex friendship exemplify different qualities of God's character, mainly grace. They reported having the opposite-sex demonstrate those qualities proved powerful to their growth and personal understanding of God in their lives.

Additionally, participants expressed the need for a different point-of-view when discussing biblical concepts that affect their personal perspective and practice of faith. The impact and the specific topics they discussed varied for each participant but usually emerged as faith topics about which they found themselves more passionate. Having opposite-sex friends they trusted with how they thought and felt toward a faith-related topic seemed hugely impactful to the participants' faith and personal life development. As mentioned by Arnett (2005), the navigation of emerging adult's value systems remains essential to the continual process of their identity formation.

### **Recommendations for Higher Education**

For faith-based institutions similar to the institution presented, the current study's findings hold great benefit. Particularly, presenting faith-based institutions with knowledge about the impact of the opposite sex on the student body remains essential.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, students developmentally experience and think about opposite sex relationships in both romantic and nonromantic capacities. Students greatly benefit from the community in which they become involved and express a need to interact with and gain insight from their cross-sex friendships. This study and the participants provide prime examples of the need for healthy opposite-sex friendships. Thus, institutions should strongly consider their proactivity in promoting healthy cross-sex relationships and the ways in which they contribute to society's stereotype of unhealthy relationships and the confusion through which men and women navigate. In order to accomplish relational health, institutions should identify areas or programs that could leverage conversation about cross-sex friendships or recognize existing areas that promote unhealthy opposite-sex interactions. Relationships between the sexes remain an intriguing topic among emerging adults; therefore, providing spaces and conversations that promote and model healthy cross-sex friendships necessitates consideration.

Additionally, Christian faith-based institutions may need specifically to investigate further their residence life programs and policies. According to the current study, many participants who lived in same-sex dorms expressed the concern of lacking healthy opposite-sex friends because of hours they could access cross-sex dorms and the activities promoted by their dorms that encouraged nebulous relationships with the opposite sex. Even though the institution established these activities and open dorm hours to promote acceptable interaction, staff members may need to re-evaluate what message truly emerges in certain regulations. As a Christian institution, certain systems and policies have become established for many reasons—and a re-evaluation of why dorm hours exist and what these policies communicate to the student body through

specific programming appears warranted. The present study showed students feel greatly and positively impacted by the perspective of the opposite sex, thereby necessitating spaces that promote healthy interactions and avoid further confusion and tension.

### **Limitations**

The current study contains several limitations. First, the institution at which the study took place was a small faith-based university in the Midwest. The collective values of the institution limit the scope of the “type” of student interviewed. Most students self-identify as conservative Christians and have similar morals and values that align with the institutional lifestyle statement by which they abide. Additionally, the lifestyle statement also affects students’ housing. Most dorm options are with the same sex, and students abide by “open house” hours, which allow them to visit friends of the opposite sex during certain hours on particular days. The strict nature of these institutional regulations provides thoughts and ideas from a significantly limited “type” of college student.

Second, the sample size remained limited only to students available to interview during summer break. The researcher emailed approximately 60 students who worked on campus during the summer and asked if they would participate in the study. The students emailed represented the campus population well; however, the perspectives shared appeared mostly homogenous. Furthermore, the researcher could not account for participant bias when answering questions. Moreover, participants seemed genuinely interested in the research topic; however, the researcher remains unable to guarantee complete truthfulness and unbiased answers of participants.

Lastly, the study involved only individuals who professed a Christian faith. Other affiliations from students of all religious backgrounds may provide different perspective on interactions with the opposite sex. In addition, interviewing students from other cultural background would also add to the variety and the span of interactions and impact of cross-sex friendship on spiritual/faith development.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Studies regarding the impact of cross-sex friendships on students' spiritual formation should take place on various institutional campuses. Institutional variety may lead to a broader understanding of student perspectives and involve students from different faith practices. Enhancing the study's diversity would greatly contribute to the comprehensive nature of the explored topic. Diversity not only in faith practice but also in race and culture would expand the definition of opposite-sex friendships. Different cultures have distinctive opinions and definitions of opposite-sex friendships and even cultural understanding of the roles of men and women—capturing information from a more varied student population could strengthen the claims and themes discovered.

Additionally, sampling a larger audience that more frequently engages in “hookup” culture more regularly could expand and shape the definition of cross-sex friendship. The experiences and definition of opposite-sex friendship proved extremely limited because of the nature of institution and student type. The students interviewed came from a highly conservative Christian institution with established regulations regarding students abstaining from sexual encounters while enrolled. Therefore, collecting a wide variety of experiences could provide a broader definition and operational understanding of opposite-sex friendship.

## **Conclusion**

Cross-sex friendships remains challenging relationships that require awareness from both parties to clearly communicate expectations and hopes for the relationship. As examined previously, society continues in the obsession and over-sexualized perception of the meaning and role of an opposite sex friend. For the emerging adult population bombarded with messages of only over-sexualized cross-sex friendship, attempting to pursue a platonic relationship seems impossible. Nevertheless, once past the sexual tension of a cross-sex friendship, the benefits of that relationship on personal growth in multiple areas proves positively significant especially in terms of faith development.

The emerging adult participants in the current study recognized the value and struggle of their opposite-sex relationships, but they found, over time, the worth of pursuing cross-sex friendships because holistic growth and maturity necessitates knowing and understanding perspectives other than one's own. Participants noted their faith and spiritual growth as areas of life in which they fervently desired to continue pursuing, and their friendships played a significant role in their growth trajectory. More specifically, cross-sex friends offered highly valued dynamic perspective to the understanding and personal application to faith related ideas and practices. Cross-sex friendship provided a changed vantage point on particular topics participants valued and desired. Though these relationships tend to become complicated, their worth in whole-person development remains essential and may require intentionality when communicating friendship expectations in order to experience the advantages of the relationship.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Protocol Questions**

1. What is your definition of friendship?
2. What is your definition of friendship with someone of the opposite-sex?
3. Are any of your friends of the opposite sex?
4. How do you become friends with people from the opposite sex?
5. What are the benefits of having friends from the opposite sex?
6. What are the challenges of having friends from the opposite sex?
7. Are your thoughts/feelings towards opposite sex friends the same or different than your same sex friends? If so, please describe.
8. Describe your personal Christian faith/spirituality.
9. What are your hopes for your faith/spirituality development/growth?
10. How does your faith/spirituality inform your friendships?
11. How do your friends impact your faith/spirituality? Positive? Negative?
12. What role do your friends from the opposite sex play in your faith/spirituality?
13. Do you notice a difference of how your faith/spirituality informs your opposite sex friendships versus your same sex friendships? If so, please describe.

