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NARRATIVE IDENTITIES OF EARLY-RETURN MISSIONARIES FROM THE  
CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS

by

Jillian Ferrell

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

Psychology

Approved:

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UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY  
Logan, Utah

2019

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## ABSTRACT

Narrative Identities of Early-Return Missionaries from The Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints

by

Jillian Ferrell, Bachelor of Science

Utah State University, 2019

Major Professor: Susan L. Crowley, Ph.D.

Department: Psychology

Leaving home and becoming a missionary is a priority and an important identity for many emerging adults in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJC). Some missionaries return home from their missions before their anticipated return date and experience challenges to their identity and stigma within the church community. Little is known about the experience of early-return missionaries, and they are a silenced and marginalized group within the CJC. The present study addresses this gap in the literature by investigating identity development for early return missionaries (ERMs).

A phenomenological worldview and narrative approach guided the investigation of experiences ERMs have in developing and adapting their identity to the ERM experience situated within the CJC context and ways to aid them in that process. Two semistructured interviews were conducted with each of six ERM participants to investigate how they experienced their identity before, during, and after their mission.

Transcripts from interviews were coded for themes focused on identity and contamination and redemption stories, with a focus on both unique experiences and unifying phenomena across participants. Data coded as helpful and unhelpful for identity development progress were analyzed for major themes, and specific tips for helping ERMs were identified. Redemption stories in the participants' narratives were found to be an indicator of successful identity developmental progress. Three themes emerged from the data that identified tasks ERMs must navigate in order to create effective and satisfying redemption narratives of their experience and identity: (1) connecting with an identity outside "ERM," (2) redefining the ERM identity, and (3) finding acceptability within the CJC belief system. Helpful and unhelpful experiences for navigating each task were identified within each theme. Conclusions were drawn from the data and integrated with current literature on identity and ERMs. Last, trustworthiness, contextual limitations, and further directions are presented.

(155 pages)

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Narrative Identities of Early-Returned Missionaries from The Church of Jesus

Christ of Latter-day Saints

Jillian Ferrell

Leaving home to become a missionary is important for many young adults in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJC). Some missionaries return home from their missions before their anticipated return date and struggle to make sense of who they are while facing judgment from members within the church communities and families. Little is known about the experience of identity development for early return missionaries (ERMs). There have not been many chances for ERMs to share what it means to them to have come home early from their mission. This study investigated the process of how ERMs make sense of who they are after returning home early from their mission.

One goal of this study was to find a broad and unifying understanding of how ERMs make sense of who they are given their experiences from their own perspectives while also honoring unique experiences. The second goal was to learn of specific ways to help ERMs feel satisfied and connected to who they are after their ERM experience. Two interviews were completed with each of six ERM participants. Transcripts from interviews were analyzed for common themes across participants and unique experiences. Each participant's story was rewritten in order of what happened before, during, and after their mission, careful to include the most important parts of their stories. Then stories were analyzed for growth-promoting endings and negative endings based on the

participants' descriptions. Stories with good endings indicated more contentment with the ways they saw themselves. From the interviews, specific actions and helps were identified to help ERM's find happy endings to the stories they tell themselves about who they are after having returned from their mission early. The findings were compared and discussed in light of existing research. Lastly, the trustworthiness of the conclusions and ideas for future research questions were considered.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Sue Crowley for being so supportive when the idea for this research came seemingly out of nowhere and disrupted other plans. Her patience with my writing and research insecurities made all the difference, taught me much, and created an environment in which I could truly enjoy the process and develop an even greater love of qualitative research. I also want to thank Sherry Marx for her interest, encouragement, and for her expert guidance in qualitative method and framework. Her ability to conceptualize and reframe questions was key to presenting the data in an engaging and helpful way. Thank you to Renee Galliher for being a valuable member of my committee, lending your perspectives and experiences with identity issues specifically within the context of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

I have deep gratitude for my six courageous participants who shared so many sacred experiences, feelings, thoughts, fears, and passions with me in the interview process. Thank you for being willing to be vulnerable, trust me, and dive into your highly emotional experiences. It was a pleasure to get to know you as the powerful forces for good that you are. I hope this project is something you too can be proud of and that it can do what you each hoped it would do: to help others feel less alone, and to help you find your own voice a bit more in the choir of life.

Last, but not least, I want to thank my family who understood when I could not participate in as many things or visit as often. I could count on them to be excited with me as I hit each milestone in this process. Thank you to my dog, Sugar, who patiently warmed my feet on long boring days and evenings when we would both rather be outside.



Finally, thanks to my newest stress management coordinator, Shyloh, who was content to lay on legs warmed by a laptop and occasionally helped me type if it was getting close to dinnertime.

Jill Ferrell

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

“The only way you are coming home early is in a casket.” A friend of mine heard these words from her father as she left to serve a mission for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (CJC), a high priority in the CJC for young single adult church members. She served the entire 18 months, the time expected of 19- to 25-year-old female missionaries in the CJC. During this time, she suffered mental and physical health challenges in silence as much as possible to avoid going home early. In her mind and in the minds of many in the Church of Jesus Christ culture, coming home early from a CJC mission is a failure and unacceptable. For hundreds of CJC missionaries, an 18-month or 2-year mission is especially challenging, and in some cases missionaries are “released” or sent home before their expected time is up. Those who have this experience are given the label of “early-return missionaries” (ERMs).

Missionaries return home early for many different reasons, but no matter the reason, many of them experience shame, confusion, and a disrupted sense of identity. Missionaries anticipate an excited homecoming, fanfare, and an identity of “returned missionary” (RM). When these young men and women return home early, they must make sense of who they are, who they felt they ought to be, the many experiences that led to their return home, and the reactions of friends and family upon their return.

Additionally, ERMs must make sense of their experience within a culture and community of people who are also constantly sending messages to them about their identity and what it means to be an ERM. More challenging still, many of the messages

ERMs receive are often conflictual, adding to the confusion of the individual. The social and cultural context into which these young men and women return often adds to the potentially disrupted identity of ERM. As a result, more ERM may seek help from mental health professionals (Doty et al., 2016).

Little is known about how ERM make sense of their experiences and identity within the Church of Jesus Christ or other context. Additionally, no literature to date discusses the relationship between ERM and mental health services. It is fundamentally unknown what the expectations, perceptions, and attitudes of ERM are concerning mental health services. In order to serve these individuals in the best possible way, mental health professionals need a contextual understanding of ERM's identity, experiences, and perceptions of the services professionals are providing.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

The following review will provide background information about missionaries from The CJC and introduce the current context of an RM. Current, available research on ERMs will be discussed and gaps in the literature identified. Next, identity and identity challenges in emerging adulthood will be examined and related to young adults who have returned home from a mission early. Narrative identity will be defined, and narrative identity factors, such as redemption stories and congruence in individuals' contexts, will be explained. Research on common ERM self-perceptions and current perspectives of Church leaders will be reviewed. Then, the relevance of mental health services in the ERM context will be introduced. Last, needs for further research and implications of the present research will be outlined.

#### **The Church of Jesus Christ Missionaries**

##### **A Brief Overview of the Church of Jesus Christ Missionary**

Prior to October of 2018, The CJC has commonly been nicknamed in popular culture as “Mormon” or “LDS.” In October, Russel M. Nelson, President of the Church, made a formal request to the world that the church be referred to by its correct name and no longer use nicknames that omit the name of Jesus Christ. To respect this request to include the name of Jesus Christ in the name of the church, while still remaining brief, I will hereafter refer to the name of the church and the associated identity claimed by its

members as “CJC.”

There is a strong focus on missionary work within the CJC that is based on the New Testament pattern of pairs of missionaries who teach the gospel of Jesus Christ, serve others in need, and baptize believers in Jesus Christ’s name (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016b). In the CJC faith, full-time “missionary work is a priesthood duty—and we encourage all young men who are worthy and who are physically able and mentally capable to respond to the call to serve” (Monson, 2012). Young women are also valuable contributors to missionary service, but they are not under the same mandate to serve as are the young men (Ballard, 2007; J. R. Holland, 2016b; Monson, 2014). Women are encouraged to serve a mission if they have a desire to do so. Most young adult missionaries, men and women, are under the age of 25 (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016b).

Prior to a policy change in October of 2012, young men could “send in their papers” for a mission “call” at the age of 19. There were exceptions made for those wanting to serve from specific countries outside of the US. In order to allow individuals in certain countries to serve a mission and also fulfill military obligations and educational opportunities in their home country, some young men could serve missions at age 18 (Monson, 2012). Women, on the other hand, could not serve until the age of 21. In October 2012, a policy change allowed the option for young men everywhere to serve missions starting at age 18 and women to serve as early as age 19, though it is still culturally acceptable for young men and women to leave at 19 (for men) or 21 (for women; Monson, 2012). The policy change resulted in a significant modification in the



demographics and increased by about 30% the number of those serving in the mission field. Currently, young men make up about 66% of missionaries in the field with young women making up 26% and retired couples constituting 8% (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016a). Though the percentage of women in the field has doubled since the age change policy, after taking into account the increase in men, women have tripled their actual numbers in the mission field (Drake & Drake, 2014).

After “sending in their papers” or application, prospective missionaries are sent a “mission call” by mail believed to contain a calling from God. The calls are typically two years long for men and 18 months long for women, with some exceptions for those who require special accommodations usually due to disability. In 2016, there were 418 different mission areas around the world to which one may be called (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016b). Prospective missionaries are not informed where they will be serving prior to receiving their call. Mission call openings are an exciting tradition for many Latter-day Saints who open their call among family and friends and reveal where they will be serving.

Once a missionary has received their call, beginning on the date specified by their call, they spend a short time in a missionary training center (MTC) in one of 15 locations around the world. At the MTC, missionaries learn to teach the gospel in a clear and organized way and begin to learn a language if required by their assignment. Here they practice teaching the gospel to each other and volunteers from the area, receive instruction from church leaders and language instructors, and learn the mission rules and responsibilities. Once out in the field, missionaries are not allowed to communicate with

family or friends at home except by letters and/or weekly emails and two phone calls or video conferences (if available) a year, on Christmas Day and Mother's Day. Of course, occasions arise and missionaries may be granted an exception in rare circumstances.

In the field, missionaries abide by a dress code and are addressed by their last names only preceded by the term "Elder" for men and "Sister" for women. Their days are structured beginning at 6:30 am for personal study and ending at 10:30 pm. They may spend the day meeting with people in public areas or in their homes, serving in various ways, or preparing to do those activities. They are limited in the entertainment and recreational activities that they participate in so that they can focus on teaching and serving others. Missionaries participate in weekly and monthly meetings with mission leaders, local and general church leaders, and other missionaries in their area. They report to a structure of leadership with mission presidents presiding over a mission area and making decisions for all those working in their mission boundaries under the direction and guidance of CJC general authority (worldwide) leadership. Missionary service is voluntary and funded by those who wish to serve, and missionaries are not paid for any of the work, teaching, or service they provide.

After missionaries have completed their specified time out in the field, they return home to their families and relationships to continue working on whatever may come next for them such as education, relationships, and/or careers. RMs are often greeted at the airport by excited family and friends. Their first Sunday home, local leaders may meet with the RM to have them report on their mission experience. RMs are also typically asked to give a "homecoming talk" to the congregation to share their missionary

experiences and to share a testimony (a statement of one's personal faith and beliefs) in the language of the people they served. Friends and family may travel far to attend this homecoming event. Afterwards there may be a get together at the missionary's home to celebrate their return.

### **Early-Return Missionaries**

In certain cases, some missionaries return home early under the direction of mission presidents. Excluding older, retired missionaries, Drake and Drake (2014) reported that before the 2012 age change policy, 177 missionaries were returning home early each month, 4% of all missionaries. After the age change in 2014, the numbers jumped to approximately 389 early-return missionaries a month even though the total percent returning home early only increased by 2%. ERM's made up about 6% of all young single missionaries, totaling about 4,084 individuals per year as of 2016 (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016a; Drake & Drake, 2014).

The shift to younger missionaries and more women missionaries combined with the increase in missionary numbers overall changed the way that mission presidents handled missionaries facing challenges on their mission. Specifically, the amount of time mission presidents spent working with missionaries with mental health/physical concerns decreased. Compared to before the age change, Drake and Drake (2014) found that the time mission presidents worked with males before an early release decreased from 13.4 to 9.9 months and from 8.3 to 6.9 months for females. Time spent working with missionaries struggling particularly with separation anxiety or extreme homesickness reduced from 4.5 to 2.4 months before sending them home early. Potentially, the increase

of missionaries in each area and the addition of 57 new mission areas and mission presidents has resulted in mission presidents sending young men and women home earlier, and perhaps with less input from the missionary (Drake & Drake, 2014). In a survey from Doty et al. (2016), only 39% of ERMs reported that they felt they had some input in the decision to return home. Though it is typical for mission presidents to make the final decision about an early return, the context of the decision for ERMs to return home may impact how ERMs make sense of their experiences, who they are, and how they fit into their culture and relationships.

The challenges that ultimately lead to missionaries returning home early are varied, but according to the survey by Doty et al. (2016), 38% of early-returns surveyed were due to mental health reasons and 34% were for physical health reasons. The 28% of surveyed ERMs not released for physical or mental health concerns were released early due to transgression, mission disobedience, family-related reasons, and disagreement with doctrine. However, randomly sampled data of ERMs from Drake and Drake (2014) found that physical health reasons made up about 62% of releases, with 38% released for mental health reasons. Drake and Drake did not report the percentage of those released for reasons outside of physical or mental health. Although the authors reported that they sampled from all return missionaries globally, the absence of any ERMs released for other than physical and/or mental health reasons is striking and raises questions about how the sampling was conducted. Though only 12% of ERMs surveyed in Doty et al.'s convenient sample reported issues related to transgression as a reason for early release, many male missionaries in Doty et al.'s qualitative interviews said they felt that people in

their communities assume that they returned due to worthiness issues and felt stigmatized in this way.

### **Cultural Experiences of the CJC** **Where the CJC is Predominant**

Particularly in areas where The Church of Jesus Christ is predominant, lines between doctrine and culture tend to be experienced as more blurred. The boundaries for a ward (the term for a CJC congregation) in such an area may only include a few city blocks where in other areas it might take in members within a 100-mile radius. When members are going to church with their neighbors who see their more personal lives, there begins to be a kind of similar language, a status quo and more opportunities to compare or judge each other spiritually. A culture of what is acceptable and how things “should” look develops and is not necessarily connected to or guided by doctrinal beliefs or principles.

For example, when a young man grows up in an area where the church is predominant, most of the young men and his friends are likely going to leave on missions and this becomes an everyday topic of conversation, wondering where they are going to be called to serve. Most return after 2 years. When one of their neighbors or schoolmates returns before two years is up, it breaks a cultural status quo. These individuals may be looked at as different, less faithful, or weak by cultural standards despite having no actual doctrinal basis on which to judge their early return. There is no doctrine in the CJC that condemns or judges the worth of ERMs. In fact, in other times in the church’s history, the time anticipated for missionaries to serve was incredibly variable. Culturally, however,

looking different than surrounding individuals gives rise to questions that would be less salient in areas where The CJC is not as predominant or where members have different cultural backgrounds or histories.

The purpose of this discussion is not necessarily to delineate the lines between culture and doctrine, but rather to acknowledge that there are some practices, language, and expectations that are more culturally derived or interpreted than they are doctrinal truths. Popular sayings in the CJC communicate expectations and values to guide member behaviors. They are usually based on doctrinal values but can be interpreted in many different ways, not all of which are doctrinal values-consistent. An understanding of the cultural CJC expectations and sayings may deepen the understanding of the experiences of ERMs.

**Being perfect.** “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in Heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48, King James Version). Doctrinally, members of the church believe that the purpose of life is to choose to become like Jesus Christ and grow spiritually to become one with Him. Perfection is defined as “whole” or being the best that one can be within one’s own limits of experience and ability which is always growing and expanding and may continue after this life (R. M. Nelson, 1995). Repentance also is doctrinally understood as a tool to help members change and grow in ways that bring them closer to perfection, and it is not expected that anyone can get there without the repentance process, making mistakes, and continuing to learn. Culturally, however, “perfection” is often misunderstood as an overarching state in which there are no mistakes and nothing to improve. Some members believe they can and must become without flaws or mistakes

in this life. Mistakes and the need for repentance are often viewed as set-backs rather than an expected and welcome part of the process of working toward perfection.

Consequently, perfectionism and shame over mistakes also tend to be prevalent in the culture. “Be ye perfect,” is sometimes used as a self-reprimand or a basis on which to judge oneself as not good enough.

**Emotions and automatic thoughts.** The cultural attitude toward emotions and thoughts (internal experiences) are based more often on the existence of the emotions or thoughts themselves rather than how they are responded to, and this may not directly agree with the emphasis of the doctrine. Doctrinally, it is said that Christ was fully human as He was fully God, and, therefore, experienced the full range of human emotions. However, He knew how to respond to His emotions in Godly ways. Contrastingly, there tends to be a culturally based judgmental response to the existence particular emotions (fear, sadness, anger, etc.) and a general belief that emotions and thoughts can and must be controlled to only include the *existence* of “perfect” thoughts and feelings (happiness, gratitude, confidence, humility, etc.). Below, I explicate some of the ways the culture may focus more on the *existence* of emotions or thoughts and how this focus is typically communicated between groups of members. Responses to the mission experience and returning home early are better understood in this context.

***“Forget yourself and go to work.”*** This saying came from a story a president of the CJC, Gordon B. Hinckley (2000) told about his own mission experience as a young man. He described feeling overwhelmed and homesick in England when he wrote home to his parents. His father wrote back to him encouraging him to set his worries aside and

focus on serving others while on his mission: “Forget yourself and go to work.” This phrase is often used to remind missionaries of the purpose of a mission to sacrifice one and a half or 2 years of their lives to the service of others, and to encourage service as a helpful coping mechanism for homesickness. However, this phrase has also been interpreted by some members to mean that having difficult emotional experiences, homesickness, or anxiety is selfish and unacceptable in a mission setting.

***Of the world.*** “Be in the world, but not of the world” (Cook, 2006). This phrase refers to the importance in the CJC faith of valuing spiritual treasures and truths over temporal or “worldly” treasures such as money or technology while still being able to cope with the demands of living in our time where money and technology play a large role. It can also be used as encouragement to behave in doctrinally consistent ways despite mocking, ridicule, or persecution from others who believe differently while still interacting respectfully with those people as needed in daily living. Culturally, “the world” can be interpreted in various ways. Sometimes “the world” can refer to money, other times it refers to selfishness or difficult (sometimes even referred to as “negative”) emotional reactions to life experiences. Particularly when emotions rather than actions or objects become wrapped up in the meaning of “the world” individuals in the CJC culture can begin to feel unworthy or unfaithful when they experience normal human emotions such as fear, sadness, or anger.

***Happiness and joy vs. sadness and grief.*** Despite examples in scripture of Christ weeping and being “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isaiah 53:3) and a command to “mourn with those who mourn” (Mosiah 18:9, Book of Mormon), there is



often a shame response to sadness in the CJC culture. “Men are that they might have joy” (2 Nephi 2:25, *Book of Mormon*). In context, this scripture refers to the “Plan of Happiness” (Alma 42:8 *Book of Mormon*; Oaks, 1993) in which God intends for man to find joy in following him in this life, and also in the life to come. Some interpret this to mean a condemnation for feeling anything other than joy and that man should feel happy all the time even amidst difficult times. Some think that if they have enough faith in the Plan of Happiness, then they would never feel sad especially after a loss of a loved one, so sadness and grief can then become an indication of a lack of faith or spiritual weakness.

***Happiness and wickedness.*** ”Wickedness never was happiness” (Alma 41:10).

This scripture explains that even if there is temporary pleasure and feelings of happiness in doing wicked or seeking first for “worldly” things, it will never lead to lasting happiness as following in the Lord’s way will. Some members in the culture take this a step further to mean that if there is not happiness then there must be wickedness present as if unhappiness is a punishment for wickedness and therefore can bring feelings of shame, frustration, and inadequacy.

***Fear vs. faith.*** Fear and doubt are also looked on as the opposite of faith in CJC culture. Here again, the culture focuses on the presence of the emotions or thoughts of fear or doubt rather than deliberate action in response to the initial emotional or mental experience (for example, acting in faith in spite of the existence of doubts, or acting in faith anyway in response to fear). The experience of fear or questions can bring feelings of shame about one’s amount or level of faith, despite acting in faith, which may have

implications for those who experience debilitating anxiety or questions about the religion on their missions.

**Anger.** Anger is often viewed as evil culturally. To follow Christ it is said that you must be “slow to anger” (Psalms 103:8) and “not easily provoked” (1 Corinthians 13:5). “He that hath the spirit of contention is not of me, but is of the devil” (3 Nephi 11:29 *Book of Mormon*). When members experience the emotion of anger they may feel that they are evil for having that automatic response even if they do not act out of anger and do not revel in it.

**Sinful thoughts.** “Whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). Culturally, this scripture can be interpreted to mean that having thoughts about a sinful behavior is just as sinful as actually engaging in the behavior. This specific cultural belief may explain why there is anecdotally a disproportionate number of young adults in the church suffering from obsessive compulsive disorder and scrupulosity around “sinful thoughts.” Contrarily, Jeffrey R. Holland, an apostle of the CJC, explained that the doctrine is not so focused on not having thoughts of sin, but rather our response when those thoughts occur: do we “throw wide open the door, serve them tea and crumpets, and tell them where the silverware is kept” through rumination or daydreaming or simply let them go and refocus to more valued thoughts (J. R. Holland, 2010)?

**Impact of cultural understandings.** The cultural focus on controlling the existence of internal experiences may be problematic for many. The amount of control one has over emotions and thoughts is limited by the confines of the human body and the

autonomic processes of the human brain. Trying to control the appearance of thoughts and emotions likely leads to frustration and failure, whereas purposefully *responding to* internal automatic processes when individuals become aware of their thoughts and emotions is a skill that can be cultivated through mindfulness and clarified values or, in a CJC context, through “listening to the Holy Spirit” to guide actions.

Cultural understandings, judgements, and interpretations of internal experiences surround members of the church where the church is predominant daily. This part of the CJC context likely plays a major role in how ERMs respond to their challenges both on their missions and when they return home, especially where the CJC is predominant. Cultural expectations in the CJC context may be less salient as long as members of the culture are similar to each other and follow the expectations. In the case of missionaries who return home before the anticipated time is up, the expectations are violated and these cultural assumptions can be a major source of shame, judgment, or confusion, especially because it cannot be hidden as well as emotions or thoughts can be. For ERMs who return for depression or anxiety, the shame could be exacerbated in the culture.

### **Recent Perspectives of Early-Returned Missionaries from General Authorities of the Church of Jesus Christ**

The perceptions of many in the CJC culture are interesting in light of recent counsel given by Elder Jeffrey R. Holland (2016a) of the CJC Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. Elder Holland encouraged all ERMs to consider themselves as having served a full mission, to have pride in the mission they served, no matter the length of time, and to never feel that they are a failure. Further, he stated that he and the presidency were

“irritated” with those who degrade others with regard to their mission experience or lack of experience and described such judgments as “unconscionable.” The contrast between Holland’s words and the difficult experiences ERMs commonly face within their church communities highlights a difference that may exist between CJC doctrine, leadership, and culture.

### **Previous Research on Early-Returned Missionaries**

Research on CJC ERMs is extremely limited. Doty et al. (2016) and Drake and Drake (2014) are the only two identified studies to focus on early-return CJC missionaries. The Doty et al. study was recently published, and Drake and Drake’s study is not published, but was presented at a conference for the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychologists (AMCAP). A recording of the presentation can only be accessed by members of the association. Both of these studies focus almost exclusively on descriptive data about ERMs and their experiences.

Doty et al.’s (2016) study included interviews with 12 male ERMs from the Utah County area about their mission and early-return experiences. The missionaries were sampled through the snowballing method, starting with two ERMs known to the researchers and continuing with those referred by those two. The age range of missionaries interviewed was from 19 to 65. Thematic analysis after the interviews was used to construct a survey about ERM demographics, experiences, and attitudes. The survey was distributed via social media and word of mouth. Data from 348 ERMs ages 19–65 were collected. The interviews and surveys were completed just prior to the age

change in 2012.

From qualitative interviews and survey results, Doty et al. (2016) asserted that the homecoming story is often very different for a missionary who returns home early. Fifty-eight percent of ERMs felt that they were indifferently or poorly received by their congregation or ward. Thirty-one percent felt the same about their experience with friends and family. Slightly over one third of ERMs experienced a period of “inactivity,” a time when individuals do not participate in church functions or do so very infrequently. Of that third, a third of them had never returned to activity in the church at the time of the survey. Indeed, almost half of all ERMs surveyed felt that they were not as active in the Church after returning home early as they were before serving their missions. The reception upon their return as well as the process of returning early may play a key role in the decision of ERMs to disengage from the church.

In Doty et al.’s (2016) interviews with 12 male ERMs, many expressed hurt and anger at a perceived lack of support from their communities when they returned home. Some ERMs shared that they were not invited to speak about their mission experiences at the pulpit to their congregations or “report” to the church leaders in personal interviews, and reported pain, separation, and feelings of failure. For many, the first Sunday back in their church congregations felt awkward and reminded them of their perceived failure. Within the context of the church, some encouraged ERMs to repent for leaving their missionary duties, be stronger, and return to the mission to complete the amount of time they were originally called on to serve. Others were not sure how to approach the ERM and ignored or avoided these young men. “They felt the people who should love and

support them the most were not always supportive and helpful, or they lacked the unconditional love and acceptance the ERMs needed during a difficult time” (Doty et al., 2016. p. 41). Many of the ERMs interviewed could not recall specific examples of being responded to poorly and admitted that they were hypersensitive about being an ERM in social encounters following their return. Overall, Doty et al. speculated that parents, friends, and church leaders, often well intentioned, may shame these individuals for returning home early and make assumptions about the person and/or the reason they returned home early.

Doty et al. (2016) is currently the only published study to address the experiences that ERMs face at multiple points in their ERM journey (before, during and after their mission). The survey conducted provides a broad range of the relevant experiences ERMs have had in current years and also includes ERMs from over 40 years ago. The interviews provided some rich descriptions of the contexts and emotions associated with the ERM experience and drew out important issues that had been unacknowledged by many, especially within the context of the CJC. The study seemed to spark interest in CJC media and began a discussion about the struggles that ERMs face. Previously ERM struggles were more silenced and avoided (Missionarieshomeearly.com; Olsen, 2014; Petersen, 2015).

Though the qualitative data is helpful for understanding some of the major themes related to ERM experiences, Doty et al.’s (2016) study is nevertheless limited in a number of ways. First, Doty et al. did not include women in the interview portion of their study, and only 19% of their survey participants were women; thus the voice of many

ERMs are not represented in the study. In addition, since the study was conducted before the 2012 age change, data may not be accurate for describing the experiences of current ERM in an evolving CJC culture. Thus, Doty et al.'s study encompasses a needed initial broad and inclusive understanding of ERM experiences but may not speak to what is most common or currently experienced. Furthermore, Doty et al. only hint at aspects of perceived identity (such as "failure") and a difficulty adopting the identity of RM.

Discussions with ERM regarding how others view them remains predominantly detached from their effects on narrative identity. Additionally, qualitative work by Doty et al. sheds light on some of the silenced experiences of ERM, but was conducted for the expressed purpose of survey development. Doty et al.'s qualitative inquiry was not focused on giving a voice to ERM to express their identity and what their experiences mean to them and about them.

Drake and Drake (2014) worked closely with CJC mission administrators, the missionary department for the CJC, and missionary health care providers to collect data for 528 randomly sampled CJC ERM from all over the world who had returned home within a 2-month period. They set out to learn how many ERM returned early for emotional/mental challenges, including those that the authors believed were "masked" by a physical reason in their release notes. Drake and Drake analyzed mission applications, mission president notes, MTC notes, area medical advisor/area mental health advisor/nursing notes, in-field representative notes (notes from the contact person between mission presidents and general authorities of the church), and the release summary for each of the 528 ERM. Drake and Drake report that 38% of the 528

missionaries were released for mental health reasons alone and 62% were released early for physical health reasons. Of those who were released for physical health reasons, 55% were identified as including an underlying mental health component. Thus, the authors conclude that about 72% of ERMs had a significant emotional or mental health concern that contributed, either directly and indirectly, to an early release.

Some notable cultural and gender patterns were found among ERMs in Drake and Drake's (2014) data. Women returning home early were overrepresented in the ERM category (45% compared to 30% of young women in the missionary field). Both international women (11% of missionaries) and North American women (19%) were overrepresented in the category of missionaries who were released early due to emotional or mental health challenges (26% and 19%, respectively). In regards to physical health, international men (26% of all missionaries) were underrepresented in the category of those released for physical health complaints (only 10%). Conversely, missionary women from North America (19% of all missionaries) were overrepresented in the group released for physical health reasons (35%). Additionally, 57% of all missionaries released early for physical health reasons but with an unreported major emotional component (based on the release notes) were women and most of those from North America.

Through looking at the personal health records of each of the 528 ERMs, Drake and Drake (2014) found that a significant number of women with physical health releases complained of physical symptoms that health professionals and Drake and Drake identified as being related to stress and mental illness, such as stress-related gastrointestinal issues, neurological issues (primarily headaches), and undiagnosed



orthopedic pain (chronic back and shoulder pain). Clinicians, medical staff, and nurses indicated no identified physical causes for their symptoms. Drake and Drake concluded that many of the physical complaints from missionaries, especially women from North America, are associated with somatoform disorders, physical symptoms with a psychological rather than physical origin. Drake and Drake speculate that women, primarily those from the United States and Canada, are particularly sensitive to a stigma around mental health and may complain of physical symptoms related to stress and mental illness rather than express struggles with mental health.

Additionally, data from Drake and Drake (2014) showed there are no significant differences between the rates of missionaries returning home early from those serving in the U.S. and countries outside the U.S. or in language-learning missions vs. native language missions. Cross-culturality did not seem to significantly impact whether a missionary returned home early or not. Thus, vulnerabilities to mission-related stressors or other physical or emotional difficulties may be associated more with individual circumstances than the context of the mission.

Drake and Drake's (2014) presentation has a number of significant strengths. They served as mission area mental health advisors and in a mission presidency and worked for the missionary department for the CJC. This allowed them access to many confidential records and the ability to randomly sample from the ERM population. These are two very powerful strengths in their study that contribute to a more current and broad understanding of ERMs in the church especially since the age change.

Drake and Drake (2014) raised several questions from unexpected data

concerning North American women. Their analysis and speculations regarding North American women and somatoform disorders were based on little evidence and appear to reflect a strong gender-bias. There are many ways that gendered power and privilege endemic in the U.S. likely played a major role in procedures, decisions, reporting, and note-writing for mission leaders and medical and mental-health professionals in the mission field (the overwhelming majority of whom are men). The researchers did not inquire of the actual ERMs at any point in their study, which greatly limits their data and understanding of the reasons ERMs return home and how those decisions were made and perceived. Additionally, Drake and Drake did not include (either purposely or by chance) ERMs who were released for reasons unrelated to physical or mental health. Drake and Drake's study, though well-intentioned, may be a continuation of the silencing and prejudice that ERMs, women in particular, experience within the CJC.

## **Identity**

### **A Brief Introduction to Identity**

In psychological literature, by far the best-known researcher in the field of identity remains Erik Erikson. Erikson (1950) developed a psychosocial theory of development that is still referred to today as a foundation for understanding identity development. In his theory, Erikson separated the human lifespan into stages with developmental tasks for each and considered personal factors, societal factors, and personal identity within society. Erikson asserted that the developmental task for adolescents ages 12-19 is to establish a sense of self and their roles and place in society.

During this time, adolescents explore many different identities.

### **Emerging Adulthood**

Marcia (1966) worked from Erikson's psychosocial identity theory and created an identity status paradigm that included four main statuses, not to be understood in any order. In the identity diffusion status, adolescents show apathy and disinterest in identity issues. Foreclosure describes a status in which adolescents conform and commit to an identity that was provided or recommended by others with little exploration. Moratorium status involves exploring many different identities and not committing to any one of them, while identity achievement involves committing to an identity after a period of exploration. Though these statuses by Marcia referred to identity formation in adolescents, in 1968, Erikson suggested that in industrialized societies, this search for a sense of self may continue into young adulthood. Individuals between 18 and 25 are often referred to in the western psychological literature as "emerging adults" who are not adolescents anymore but have yet to reach a state of adulthood according to themselves or their society (Arnett, 2000; L. J. Nelson & Barry, 2005).

Smith and Snell (2009) described characteristics of emerging adulthood as a time of "intense exploration;" a focus on self; a sense of liminality, possibilities, and hope; but also a time of confusion, anxiety, transience, and emotional devastation as young adults encounter shifts in roles and challenges to their identity. Emerging adulthood may be seen as an extension of the moratorium status experienced in adolescents. Therefore, the developmental tasks of emerging adulthood center on moving out of moratorium and into a state of identity achievement and individuation of a life-course (Schwartz, Cote, &

Arnett, 2005). Culture may play a large role in determining the amount of time that individuals continue to explore their identities and life-course during emerging adulthood (Arnett, Ramos, & Jensen, 2001). For example, in western society, life courses or events that once were more structured—like marriage or religious transitions—are increasingly left up to emerging adults to decide on their own, which may lead many individuals to delay identity formation tasks (Schwartz et al., 2005).

**Emerging adulthood in The Church of Jesus Christ culture.** L. J. Nelson (2003) completed a study in which he investigated factors within the CJC faith and culture that affected whether young, single, CJC university students felt they had reached adulthood. In Nelson's survey of 484 single CJC students between the ages of 17 and 25, he found that the CJC cultural and doctrinal emphasis on caring for others and promoting the family unit provided structure for identity formation that others in the majority western culture may not have. Additionally, he noted that acts of exploration and rebellion such as substance abuse and sexual promiscuity occur at much lower rates among CJC youth and young adults compared to the national average. These two factors may truncate the time spent in moratorium before adopting a more stable identity. Interestingly, however, only 24% of CJC single emerging adult students felt they had reached adulthood as compared to 37% of their non-CJC peers (Arnett, 2001). Though the context of the CJC doctrine and culture provide guidance in identity formation, emerging adults, like those serving CJC missions, may still be exploring who they are within the context of their CJC faith, and their role as a missionary.

**Identity configurations in The Church of Jesus Christ context.** Identity

configurations is a term that Erikson (1968) used to acknowledge that each person has several identities such as gender, race, religion, ethnicity, sexual identity, etc., and that some of these identities may be perceived as conflicting. Each of these identities intersect with each other in unique ways and conflicts between multiple identities affect the developmental process. Individuals may feel unorganized and fragmented and these conflicts must be navigated as part of the identity development process (Erikson, 1968). In the CJC context, there are many different identity configurations that may occur. For example, being a member of The CJC is a different experience for individuals who call themselves “converts” to the religion versus those who are “born in the covenant” and raised in it. Holding a return missionary identity or an early-return missionary identity may impact the way individuals experience their church membership identity as well. Perhaps the most salient configuration of identities applicable to this study is the effect that gender may have on the experience of being a missionary, an ERM, and a church member. As was previously discussed, being a female non-RM is viewed very differently from being a male who did not serve a mission. Identity configurations can make individual exploration of identity more complex than the study of one or multiple identities one at a time.

### **Identity Challenges**

When individuals have difficult life experiences, it can impact their sense of identity. Pals (2006) defined “difficult life experience” as any experience that does not fit with the previous understanding of the story of one’s life or identity and termed the experiences “identity challenges.” Events or social interactions that threaten self-concepts

tend to elicit strong emotions, experiential avoidance, and a need to reconcile identity with experiences (Mendolia & Baker, 2008). Van der Kolk (1987) theorized that a firm sense of identity may make individuals less vulnerable to psychological stress that may occur during identity challenges, which is why children and adolescents may experience more distress from difficult life experiences than adults. Since emerging adults are often still struggling to form a stable identity, identity challenges may be associated with significant psychological distress as they wrestle with making sense of their ever-changing experiences and sense of self.

ERMs and full-term missionaries face many potential identity-challenging experiences during their missions. For example, many missionaries serve in different countries and cultures from what they are used to. Even after short periods of time in cross-cultural mission trips, young people report experiencing a new kind of cultural self-awareness, positive and negative reactions to their own cultural identity, personal growth and learning, and the need for adjustment to a new kind of self (Walling et al, 2006). For some missionaries, additional culturally focused identity challenges, such as language learning, may be extremely stressful and play a part in the stories ERM tell themselves about who they are even if their time in the mission field was short.

### **Narrative Identity**

Narrative identities are the stories individuals create or adopt to make sense of their experiences and identities and the reflexively defining interactions between them (Singer, 2004). Rather than attempting to access an objective identity or identity as others perceive, narrative identity studies explore how the storyteller wants to be understood and

provides a window into the intentionality and experience of the self of the participant (Bamberg, 2012). The telling of the story can be viewed as an act of “identity practice,” which is a modest, yet important, part of identity.

Research findings from a longitudinal study by Pals (2006) suggested that how individuals narrate their difficult experiences or identity challenges in emerging adulthood has implications for maturity levels and subjective well-being assessed later in life. In Pals’ study of 87 women, being open to change in identity was correlated with maturity, and coherent positive resolutions to difficult life experiences were correlated with a greater subjective sense of well-being.

**Redemptive stories.** Bauer, McAdams, and Pals (2008) found that those who expressed a subjective sense of eudemonic well-being (well-being in terms of meaning and self-actualization, not the presence of happiness or the lack of pain) tended to include three things in their narratives. Firstly, these individuals tended to focus on personal growth in their stories. Secondly, identity-challenging experiences were framed as opportunities for learning about the self. Thirdly, the narratives followed a linear progression and represented their life-story as a stair-like or upward spiral from suffering to a culturally bound sense of redemption. These three components are part of a “redemption story.” Redemption is usually defined by the larger culture’s values such as moving upward in social class, freedom, recovery, or self-actualization (Bauer et al., 2008). In a study completed with 125 college students, McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman (2001) found that redemptive narratives of difficult life events were indicative of higher levels of self-reported well-being on several measures. The authors

define redemption as a story which starts with negative affect and transforms into a positively charged ending or a sincere hope or expectation for redemption in the future. Interestingly, redemption stories were more indicative of higher levels of well-being than positive affect or affect intensity.

**Missionaries, ERMs, and redemption stories.** Not surprisingly, redemptive stories in missionaries have been linked to positive adjustment upon returning home and lower distress levels upon re-entry to their prior ways of life (Kimber, 2012). A particularly significant redemptive story in Kimber's study of 102 RMs (non-CJC) included a feeling that God had called them to go home at that time despite the struggles and stress of returning home. In contrast, missionaries who expressed stories of disappointment with God, fearing rejection from God, or difficulty trusting God tended to also have higher levels of distress upon returning home. Both of the aforementioned redemption and "contamination" (a story that starts with positive hopes and expectations and ends with a negatively charged, disappointing ending) stories may be applicable to the experiences of ERMs, particularly in their relationships with God and how they perceive others see their relationship with God.

Currently, there is no published research that specifically investigates the narrative identities of ERMs, though there is one study (Doty et al., 2016) that investigates the subjective experiences of ERMs and hints at probable redemptive narratives. The interview data from Doty et al. revealed that ERMs face often painful identity challenges such as being called a quitter by family or not feeling that they could call themselves a "returned missionary." Yet, surprisingly, when asked what they would



change about their experience, all 12 of the participants interviewed said they wouldn't change a thing about their ERM experience. Instead many focused on the growth they had gained through the ERM experience despite intense emotions, feelings of failure, and perceived lack of support that ERMs expressed in the narratives of their experiences. Bordelon (2013) found similar results in returned CJC missionaries who served full-term. Despite expressing mostly experiences of great stress and disappointment, RMs tended to express narratives of interpersonal, personal, and spiritual growth. Based on the limited research available, ERMs and RMs alike may tend to author redemptive narratives.

**Other factors in narrative identity.** Aside from redemption and contamination stories, other narrative identity factors may be associated with the well-being or struggles of ERMs. Congruence between a personal narrative identity and the narrative identities missionaries perceive others to have about them have been indicative of resilience in non-CJC RMs (Selby et al., 2011). For example, if RMs felt they were not special and felt that the community agreed, or if they felt special and felt the community adopted this view as well, the individual tended to be resilient and adjust well to the experience of returning home. Those who felt disparity between how they viewed themselves and how family, friends, and faith communities viewed them (whether special or not special) tended to be less resilient and experienced more distress upon their return and adjustment to post-mission life.

**Perceptions of self.** Research on the internal experiences of ERMs post-return come from Doty et al.'s (2016) survey and interviews which showed that 73% of ERMs experienced feelings of failure and 66% felt uncomfortable in social settings. A greater

percentage of ERMs tend to be seen by mental health professionals compared to their peers who serve full term (Doty et al., 2016). Additionally, Selby et al. (2009) encountered themes of disenfranchised grief and loss of identity among missionaries of varied faiths who had recently returned from cross-cultural missions. This appears to be relevant for CJC ERMs as well with 46% not considering themselves as “true returned missionaries,” an identity that is held with great pride in CJC culture and an identity that is expected and highly anticipated upon serving a mission.

### **Early Returned Missionaries and Mental Health Professionals**

Because 72% of ERMs may experience significant emotional and mental challenges that contributed or caused their early release (Drake & Drake, 2014), mental health professionals may play a major role in helping this particular group, both in the mission field and after their return. Doty et al. (2016) found that of those surveyed who listed mental health as a reason for return, 83% received psychotherapy on their mission. Of the 83% who received therapy, only one third felt that it was effective. Half of ERMs who were interviewed reported receiving therapy on the mission, some by video calls or phone. At least half of those who had received therapy shared briefly that they lacked a therapeutic alliance with their therapist and did not feel understood.

### **Summary**

The ERM experience is often difficult for young women and men who are still trying to figure out their place in the world, especially with many men in the United

States entering the mission field straight out of high school. It is unclear in the literature what identities ERMs adopt throughout their ERM experience and even more unclear what helps and hinders the healing and sense-making process. Current literature is minimal and, as a result, mostly descriptive of the ERM situation and appears to be grounded in a patriarchal majority perspective and gives little voice to ERMs and their experience. No literature specifically explores the narrative identity of ERMs in any depth, and the experience of female ERMs is completely unknown. The present research seeks to go a step further than previous broad and descriptive work to understand the kinds of stories that ERMs, both men and women, are telling about themselves within the context of their experiences, interactions, and relationships with others.

Further, while the mental health needs of ERMs are significant, there is no research investigating how ERMs view mental health services throughout their experiences. What mental health services are helpful and unhelpful? What do ERMs need and want from mental health professionals to help them through their challenges? With an understanding of how mental health services affect and are perceived by ERMs before, during, and after their ERM experiences, mental health professionals may be better able to provide effective services to these individuals. ERMs, both female and male, need a voice to express their narrative identity, specifically in the mental health field in order for mental health professionals to be of better service to this marginalized group.

The following research questions guided the study.

1. How do early-return missionaries in the CJC construct their identity throughout their early-return missionary experience from pre-mission to the present? What redemption or contamination stories are shared?
2. What experiences were helpful or unhelpful for ERMs for developing

redemption stories about who they are within the context of the ERM experience, and what would ERMs recommend to help others in similar situations and contexts?

## CHAPTER III

### METHODS

#### Philosophical Assumptions and Worldview

There is need for descriptive exploration at the beginning of this niche of study. Wrestling with identity configurations, identity challenges, and the integration of ERM experiences into individuals' identities are all examples of private phenomena and can only begin to be described from that individual's point of view. However, these private phenomena are also shared on some level across individuals. An approach that allows each individual their own voice while also relating to other's experiences is ideal.

There are many ways to view the construct of identity. One popular lens in the field of psychology and qualitative investigations is *phenomenology* (Giorgi, 1985, 2009; Polkinghorne, 1989). Phenomenology is an interpretive approach that is most associated with the works of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Alfred Shutz (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). I echo the words of Giorgi (1986):

Because it is my conviction that this philosophy can do more justice to the difficult double demands of scientific rigor and psychological reality... Phenomenology is the discipline that devotes itself to the study of how things appear to consciousness or are given in experience. (p. 6)

Rather than adopting a dualistic positivist view of reality that contains an objective and subjective truth or a postmodern view that commonly resists a truth outside the subject, phenomenology reflexively ties together the lived experiences of several individuals to describe a common meaning of an abstract concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth,

2007). The present study focused on the phenomenon of meaning making of identity, experiences, and relationships in ERMs as they experience it, situated within a CJC context. A phenomenological approach to studying the ERM identity experience allows this marginalized group to both have a voice in the articulation of their unique identity processes and experiences and also create a sense of unity among them in ways that could potentially encourage greater understanding of others in similar circumstances.

The assumption of the phenomenological worldview is that one can uncover the “essence” of a phenomenon through dialogs of a shared language and reflection within context (Schram, 2006). The process of finding the essence of a phenomenon or experience includes both abstract concepts (individuals who have returned home from a CJC mission before their expected return date) and particular aspects (found in individuals’ personal meanings behind the ERM experience). A collection of several congruent personal meanings of navigating the ERM identity helps to define more abstract concepts such as the definition of the ERM identity-developmental process, just as the essence of the ERM identity-development process shapes individuals’ experiences of it. Phenomenology allows investigators to describe the fundamentals and a meaning of navigating the ERM identity directly from the individuals who experience it in a way that can then be communicated abstractly (but never objectively) outside of individual particulars of the experience (Schram, 2006).

Identity through a phenomenological worldview, therefore, is interested in several individuals’ experiences of identity and not other’s labels, categorizations, frameworks, or theories about who those individuals are, unless individuals express how others’

perceptions affect their own experience of self. To access the phenomenon of identity formation and process in this way, investigators must engage in contextualized reflection of dialog and meanings from those individuals.

A narrative approach to identity provides communication for the lived experience of identity required by a phenomenological theoretical worldview. Bamberg (2012) suggests that stories and questions regarding changes or stability of identity after a sequencing of events, especially identity-challenging events, beg for stories to make sense of such experiences of self. Thus, I focused on the narrative identity of ERM in the context of the events and relationships involved with returning from a CJC mission early. CJC missionaries return home early for various reasons, but each is likely an identity-challenging event that may lead to change in self-identities. My interest in phenomenology is to explore the essence of the phenomenon, the string that connects the experiences of participants who describe themselves as ERM in the CJC context. However, though I focus on the shared essence of the phenomenon, I do not intend to ignore the uniqueness or counter-themes found among the participants. Narratives are optimal for such situations because they add structure, linearity, and wholeness to important aspects of experience such as past identity, complications, resolutions, and closure (Bamberg, 2012).

### **Qualitative Design**

The method adopted in this study is narrative inquiry that involved gathering stories about ERM's experiences. I gathered and analyzed data with identity specifically

in mind. Bamberg (2012) made an argument for qualitative researchers in psychology to shift a focus from the actual content of narrative inquiry of experiences to understanding how narratives are navigated and relate to the self-identities of individuals. In the current study, the focus was not only on the content of the experiences of ERMs, but also the narratives they told about their identity throughout their experiences of preparing for a mission, on the mission, returning home early, and at the time of the interview.

Additionally, ERMs' experiences with and attitudes toward mental health services and how these services helped or hindered their identity challenges were explored. Narrative inquiry gave participants who had returned early from their mission a voice that is not often available to them within the CJC culture. Delgado (1989) asserts, "class-based isolation prevents the hearing of diverse stories and counter-stories. It diminishes the conversation through which we create reality [and] construct our communal lives" (p. 2439). The narrative inquiry methodology gave ERMs, a group predominantly silenced within the CJC community, a voice to share their experience, how they view themselves, and the reflexive relationships between experience and identity over time.

### **Researcher Roles**

There are many ways that an investigator's perceptions can influence the meanings found in the context and dialog of narrative stories. Given that the focus is on identity development as it is experienced by individuals and not as it is understood by others, researchers using phenomenology make efforts to be aware of their personal ideas, biases, and lenses in order to suspend beliefs about the identity or process until the



fundamentals of the phenomenon are founded on consensus and meanings of those who have lived the identity-navigation experience. The process of acknowledging and setting aside researcher beliefs is what Husserl called “epoché,” more commonly referred to as “bracketing” (Creswell & Poth, 2010). Bracketing functions as an exercise to make me, the researcher, aware of my perspective and therefore able to be “surprised” and to experience the stories of participants freshly by constantly checking the accuracy and relevance of my own perspective.

Bracketing is also important for maintaining a sense of a “living presence” rather than empirical existence or “knowledge.” Bracketing is a process of both exposing biases, values, and experiences of the researcher and informing the reader of the researcher’s perspective, thereby providing means to analyze findings for themselves.

I identify as belonging to the CJC, regularly participate in church activities and services, and have taught classes in missionary preparation in the church. I have lived in Utah for most of my life, surrounded by CJC culture. However, I have also experienced being one of the only CJC people in my community while I spent time living in the “Bible Belt” of the U.S. at the peak of my adolescence and in brief periods during my undergraduate degree experience. During this time of moving back and forth between Utah County and Tennessee, I cultivated an acute sense of differences between global CJC doctrines and more contextual “Mormon cultures” which sometimes seemed to view the application of doctrine differently from place to place. I also have noticed that how doctrine is applied or not applied is different among individual members, regardless of their cultural backgrounds. In fact, during my undergraduate years, I worked closely with

and researched theological topics in psychology alongside a professor, Jeffrey Reber, who wrote a book on the topic of CJC culture versus doctrine. I am passionate about compassionately clarifying differences between culture and doctrine within the CJC community.

Ideally, doctrine, church policy, and member actions and attitudes would all be in sync. However, my experience is that in reality, sometimes they are not aligned and even appear clearly conflicting. I attribute this to the reality that humans are not always good at living up to or understanding our ideals or acting in line with our value. It has always been difficult for me to watch individuals or groups of individuals use gospel doctrine to judge other people when the doctrine preaches humility, equity, love, and compassion for others. When I see individuals misrepresenting CJC doctrine because of culture or individual imperfection, I tend to want to defend the aforementioned principles of the doctrine. Similarly, I tend to have an uncomfortable emotional reaction when others judge the Church by the doctrine-inconsistent behaviors or attitudes of members of the Church. With an understanding of the differences between doctrine and culture and church procedures, I am both able to cultivate compassion for imperfect people and to maintain my allegiance to the aforementioned principles of the gospel doctrine. I consider myself an ally to all those who are put down or judged, especially by those who are members of my religion. This is perhaps what sparked my interest in studying ERM and giving them an avenue to share their voices.

I have not served a full-time CJC mission and at one time experienced social stigma related to not serving a mission during the time the CJC changed its age policy. I

worked as a resident assistant and office staff in the same housing complex that was simultaneously being used as a makeshift expanded MTC during the influx of missionaries after the age change. I shared facilities, transportation, and resources with hundreds of missionaries during that time. I have a few friends who have returned home early and I have witnessed and even, I am disappointed to say, participated in the stigma associated with returning home early. I have since become an ally to many who struggle with feeling like “second-class citizens” in the CJC community in various ways.

Many of my close friends and family members have served missions. In fact, during the course of working on this study, someone I am very close to unexpectedly decided to serve a full-time mission. I will refer to her as Elizabeth. At the time of analyzing the data, Elizabeth was serving in the western U.S. Her service and letters from the field impacted how I saw the experiences of my participants as I found connections between them and the experiences more personal to me. For instance, reading letters from this missionary brought more emotion and attention to aspects of the mission experience that were shared by my participants such as the struggle to adapt to changes in schedule, responding to rejection, and feeling “more special” than their pre-mission identity. I was aware of how my emotions impacted the emphasis I gave to certain shared aspects of mission life from my participants and, in response, was careful to look out for differences and unique experiences in the data.

During the time of writing the results of my analysis, Elizabeth returned home early. My personal experience of her early return impacted my analysis less since it was completed at the time of her return, but increased the importance of this topic and made

very real to me the need for understanding and honoring another's story as meaningful and uniquely their own. My experiences with Elizabeth and other CJC community members since returning home early have amplified the care, honor, and concern I feel towards ERMs, and frustration and empathy for community members who are not sure how to be supportive and felt awkward interacting with Elizabeth. It was difficult for me to separate from the curiosity I felt about what happened. I wanted to understand how she was feeling about her situation and empathize with her; I also wanted to respect Elizabeth's privacy and not assume she needed extra support—adding to the stigmatic belief that an early return meant something went “wrong.” As a result of completing this study, I feel more equipped and confident to respond to and communicate with Elizabeth in a way that can support her in her own unique journey to reconnect with a sense of self, integrate her experiences into her narrative identity, find redemptive understandings of her experience, and feel acceptable to God and the CJC context. This experience gave me hope that a deeper understanding of the ERM identity experience can help others become more confident ERM allies as well.

My role in this study was to listen to the stories of these ERMs, to recognize my biases and background in the CJC culture and psychology, and to use judgment and consultation as I used my experience in the CJC and psychology to understand the unique challenges and strengths within the ERM context. An understanding of values within the CJC culture is vital to understanding and recognizing aspects of redemptive and contamination stories particularly (Bauer et al., 2008). That being said, it is equally vital that I be able to be surprised by the values adopted by individual participants. Because

ERMs are identified as a silenced group, my immersion in the CJC culture can be both a tool for understanding and, if I am not careful, a tool for hearing only what I expect to hear as part of the culture that participates in the silencing of these individuals, even if unintentionally. This study was meant to provide ERM with a voice to be understood how they would like to be understood according to their psychological reality and investigate the process they undergo to develop that understanding and identity in their contexts.

I also believe I played an important role in the experiences that participants had with the methods of the present study. Singer (2004) emphasizes the physical and mental benefits of narrative self-disclosure when coupled with meaning making of experiences and identity. There is reason to believe that participation in the study may have been therapeutic for participants and led them toward a more meaningful concept of self and narrative of their ERM experiences. My role as researcher in this study also included the responsibility to facilitate such a therapeutic encounter in my interactions with participants. I felt privileged to be trusted with such personal, sensitive, and powerful narratives of each of my courageous and unique participants.

## **Procedures**

### **Participants**

The inclusion criteria for participants were that they had returned early from a mission within the past 5 years but longer than one year at the time of the interview.

Participants were recruited through flyers on campus, the Utah State University SONA

research system—an online research recruitment system for on-campus psychology research projects—and the snowballing method in which friends and ERMs whom I know passed along information about the study to other ERMs they knew that fit the inclusion criteria.

To broaden our understanding about female experiences of the ERM identity, I hoped for at least two female participants. Females make up a disproportionately large percentage of ERMs and are likely to experience difficult identity challenges as well, though they may be somewhat different from male ERMs concerns.

During recruitment, 12 potential participants sought to be involved in the study but were ultimately not interviewed or included in the study. Most could not participate because they did not fit the inclusion criteria. For example, four had returned home shorter than a year from the time interviews were scheduled to occur, and two had returned longer than five years from the time of contact. Five individuals expressed interest but either did not respond or felt their schedules were too busy to give time for the interviews across two weeks. There was one individual who expressed excitement about participating in the study but changed their mind before their scheduled interview because they recognized that they did not feeling ready to talk through their emotional experience. Due to the in-depth and time-consuming nature of the qualitative method I stopped recruitment of participants when I reached six, which consisted of three males and three females. All participants were White, fit within the “emerging adult” age group, and had grown up in areas in the western United States where the Church was either the predominant religion or at least was well-represented in their community. The

participants' pseudonyms, the length of their mission, general mission location, and reason for early return are presented in Table 1.

### **Data Collection**

I conducted two interviews per participant in a private clinic room on the university campus. Participants were given the option to meet in a quiet place wherever they were comfortable; however, every participant preferred to meet on the campus in a room I provided. Each interview was guided by identified interview questions, audio recorded, and transcribed for later coding. The first interview centered on ERM narrative experiences pre-mission, during mission, early-return experience, and at the time of the interview and how each ERM made sense of their experiences in respect to their identity. These stages coincide with the stages of van Gennep's (1960) rites of passage with the addition of the time period relating to the time of the interview to provide further insight. An emphasis on experience of events and relationships allowed the story to be heard, for a trusting relationship to be developed, and for giving context to a later, deeper discussion about identity. A copy of the interview

Table 1

#### *Participant Overview Information*

Pseudonym	Mission destination	Approx. time on mission	Documented reason for return
Aaron	Southwestern U.S.	3 months	Anxiety/depression
Alexis	South America	9 months	Hip problems
Benjamin	Southwestern U.S.	6 months	Anxiety
Crystal	Western U.S.	6 months	Anxiety/depression
Emma	South America	3 months	Unidentified severe health concerns
Rocky	Eastern U.S.	32 hours	Anxiety

questions are included in the Appendix.

Following the method outlined by others in educational and cultural studies (Bartlett, 2005; D. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Scanlan, 2010), the second interview invited participants to bring two items (an artifact, writing, drawing, photo, etc.) that represented their identity preparing for a mission or being on the mission, and another that represents their identity after the early-return experience. The second interview focused on why they chose each item to represent their identity before and after their mission experience, and what the identities mean to them. Artifacts were theorized to be both an aid in the formation of a discussion on identity and a symbol used to maintain or contend with identities that are placed on them by society (Bartlett, 2005). Objects we surround ourselves with often serve as a kind of language to others about who we feel we are and yet are partially defined by the cultures we participate in. This makes artifacts an optimal tool to study identity within a cultural context. A copy of the second interview agenda and questions are also included in the Appendix A.

Additionally, I kept a researcher journal in which I expressed my thoughts, views, and experiences of the interviews. The researcher journal was an important tool for understanding my perspective and being aware and thoughtful of my biases and context throughout the processes of data collection and analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Member checking is one way to make sure that the data is correct and trustworthy before engaging in analysis. Following the transcription of the interviews, I asked the



participants to check the transcripts to make sure that they were accurate with their experience of the interview and what they intended to express. I received a response and confirmation from four of the six participants. One participant wanted to add an excerpt from a journal they kept at the time they were in the MTC to better express what they meant to communicate in the interview. The other three participants accepted the transcript as it was. Two participants did not respond to attempts to contact them with their transcripts.

A qualitative research computer program, MaxQDA, was used to manually code each transcript through a narrative identity lens. I was specifically looking for redemption/contamination stories, information relating to specific identities (roles, relationships with family, community, companions, leaders, belonging, hopes, worries, expectations, etc.), themes relating to experiences (stigma, reasons for returning early, experiences with a new culture, spiritual experiences), perceived challenges/ confirmations to identity, desires for change, helpful/unhelpful experiences, and the role of mental health services. Although the mentioned codes initially guided the analysis of interview data, I was open to other important, unanticipated themes or information such as their participation experience and common CJC phrases that were the topic of focus participant after participant.

I went through each of the 12 interview transcripts for coding no less than 14 times: An initial reading of the transcript was focused on discovering any salient themes or codes I did not already have organized in my code list in MaxQDA. No new themes arose from the transcripts after coding the fourth participant's transcripts, therefore

suggesting saturation of themes among the ERM participants. Each additional time I went through the transcripts, coding was focused on recognizing a different small group of pre-existing codes I was interested in analyzing across participants (such as “helpful” and “unhelpful” or “pre-mission,” “during mission,” and “post-mission”). Interview coding was checked an additional two times after coding was finished for all interviews to avoid overlooking applicable codes in any interview, allowing applicable codes to be compared and contrasted across participants. When new codes arose from the transcripts, transcripts coded before the code’s creation were re-evaluated with the new codes in mind.

Finally, MaxQDA allows for viewing all data assigned to a specific code or groups of codes across all selected transcripts. All excerpts from all transcripts that were coded with a specific code were viewed one code at a time to check that all excerpts accurately fit with the code it was assigned in-context of the interview. Multiple codes were also able to be checked at the same time to find any redundancies in codes. Redundant codes were either combined or made more distinct from each other, and data tagged with these codes were re-assigned accordingly within the revised code system.

To address my first research question about how ERMs construct their identity from pre-mission to post-mission, each of the codes was also sub-coded by time period: before, during, or after the mission experience. The codes were used to identify common and unique topics of discussion in each stage of the ERM experience and identify specific excerpts from interviews that give voice to common and unique experiences of ERMs. For each participant, I took excerpts from their transcripts that were coded with the topics/experiences and reorganized them in a linear order. I then used a combination of

those quote excerpts from the transcripts and my own paraphrases of their quotes to link together the participants' experiences and perceptions into a story synopsis, making sure to include all topics that were most salient for each participant's narrative individually. I used this method and structure to re-write each participant's story so that common and unique perspectives and experiences could be easily compared across participants but retain their story structure and unique voices of the participants.

After all participant story synopses were complete, I analyzed each participant's story with a narrative lens, paying particular attention to expressed participant values across time and redemption and contamination stories in their respective narratives. I then analyzed excerpts coded with "contamination" or "redemption" looking for major themes within redemption or contamination stories across participants. .

To address my second research question, I analyzed coded data for major themes that seemed to aid or discourage ERM in making sense of their identities throughout their experiences of returning early. Using data coded with "identity challenges," "identity confirmation," "values/identity confusion," "values clarification," "helpful," and "unhelpful," I arrived at three major themes related to identity-development processes. Lastly, data coded as helpful or unhelpful were analyzed for deeper themes and specific helpful experiences, particularly as they corresponded to each aspect of the identity development process themes previously identified. I also consulted with my advisor throughout the coding and theme identification process to improve the trustworthiness of the analysis process.

## **Ethical Issues**

The study was approved by the Utah State University Institutional Review Board prior to seeking participants. There were a few anticipated ethical issues involved in this study. One of them involved the personal nature of the information that would likely be shared by participants who are stigmatized in their culture. To aid in the protection of their identity, I invited participants to create their own pseudonyms to be referred to throughout the study from data collection to publication and left out specific details such as mission destinations and hometowns. Given the tight-knit community to which I belong, another potential issue might have arisen if any of the participants had a relationship with me prior to participation in the study and may have felt social pressure to participate or to share beyond their comfort level. It was important to me that each participant felt free to not participate and to share only what and how much they felt comfortable. To decrease any pressure to participate, I excluded any ERMs with whom I had a pre-existing relationship. Lastly, in an effort to be sensitive to difficult emotions that may have arisen, I offered to provide the participant with a flyer of affordable counseling resources in the northern Utah and Utah County areas along with some national resources that could be helpful for participants who might not live locally. I did this at the end of the first interview and offered again if the second interview became highly emotional. None of my participants expressed interest in the resources and felt they had sufficient resources elsewhere.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES**

The first objective of the study was to explore how ERMs make sense of their identity and experience within the CJC context. The current section introduces the brief individual participants' stories of becoming ERMs from the beginning as they saw it, to the time of the interview (within 5 years of returning home). Each story begins with the participant's understanding of their identities and hopes for their identities before their mission. The stories highlight the individuals' unique experiences, as well as some they share with some or all other ERM participants. They are shared in alphabetical order of the pseudonyms each participant chose. No information is altered or changed from the data; however, identifying data such as specific names, dates, or specific mission call destinations are simply omitted or are referred to vaguely.

As was briefly described in the methods section, to create these stories, I first coded the participant interview data by time period being discussed by the participant relative to their mission (data about before, during, or after mission experiences). Within each time period code, I coded the data by common topics, which included both common and unique experiences related to the topic. Some of these topics included relationships, church community, decisions, stigma, coping, gender, expectations, hopes, spiritual experiences, companions, cultural interactions, and pressures. Each story was then re-storied, following a before, during, and after timeline and highlighting the most salient aspects for each of the participants. The words in each story are largely the participants' and are indicated by quotes. Other parts of the stories are paraphrased, though I attempted

to stay true to the meanings that the participants intended as I tried to be aware of and remove any interpretation from their stories.

I also coded the data with “narrative codes” such as redemption stories, contamination stories, wishing for a “rewrite” (regrets), and re-storying (changing the meaning that was previously given to an experience). From the narrative codes, I was able to analyze the stories from a more meta-perspective and see the impact of the narratives on their sense of identity and the values ascribed to them. After each participant’s story, I include an analysis of how the participant seemed to make sense of their experience and identity from a narrative and values-based framework. I focused on redemption and contamination stories participants used to make sense of who they are in their contexts because of being an ERM, the values tied to their identity over time, and how the identity and values interacted with their experiences. Following the individual stories and analyses, I conclude by discussing major themes found across all the participants’ redemption and contamination stories.

One participant, Rocky, said that even though there are blogs and websites in which many ERMs share their stories, “nothing is ever the same” and each ERM has their own personal story. Consistent with a phenomenological inquiry, my analysis has been focused on finding the threads or essence of the ERM identity process that run through all the participants’ narratives. In finding commonalities though, I had to be aware of the uniqueness of each story and the diversity found within common experiences. It was a pleasure and honor to be trusted with the personal and unique stories of Aaron, Alexis, Benjamin, Crystal, Emma, and Rocky.

### **Aaron**

Aaron had been on student council in high school and enjoyed being a well-known leader in his community. Though he struggled with and was treated for depression in high school, he had accomplished a lot and was excited as he expected to continue accomplishing things in his future. Serving a mission was one of those accomplishments he expected to complete. He said, “I had made this plan. I didn’t think anything was going to change and it felt like it was what I was supposed to do.” He had “believed in the things [he] was taught growing up” and saw a mission as something he was expected to do in his church and family, but also something he wanted to do. Aaron admitted that in the back of his mind, he worried that his prior experiences with anxiety and depression might make the mission difficult for him, but he never planned on coming home early. He mostly felt that the worries were swallowed up in the excitement of receiving a call to serve in a Spanish-speaking southwestern United States mission. He was so excited to receive his call that he chased down the mailman he saw in his neighborhood and asked the mailman if he had any mission call envelopes. When the mailman gave him his call from the mail truck, Aaron opened it in his neighbor’s yard where his parents happened to be at that time.

When Aaron arrived at the MTC, he was assigned a leadership position, which he felt comfortable with, but he also felt anxious and “trapped” at times. Without a “physical tool” to comfort him, such as a phone to contact his family or a movie to relax with, Aaron felt that spiritual comfort was not enough to calm his overwhelming experience of anxiety. Over time in the MTC, he began to settle in a bit and had less anxiety or was

better able to tolerate it.

When he got into his mission field in a predominantly Spanish-speaking area, however, the anxiety returned, became debilitating, and led to symptoms of depression as well. He frequently felt like he needed to “escape” and that he could not measure up. He did not understand the language and was unable to communicate. He said, “I just didn’t talk.” Suddenly Aaron had gone from a place where everyone knew him and looked to him as someone who could help them to “this place where I didn’t know anyone and where I was unable to communicate and speak the language like I was a week earlier.” This shift made him feel like “flailing and panicking.” He could not understand why he could not lead as he had before, and felt like “just this little insignificant kid” who could not make a difference in his mission area. Aaron attributed a major cause of his anxiety to his sense of being unknown and unable to impact others.

Aaron did not share exactly how the decision was made to come home after 3 months on his mission. He said his mission “really did mean a lot” to him, but “at the same time, it didn’t feel like it was working for me.” He often wondered after returning home if he had given it enough time. “I think, looking back, I wish I had just given it one more chance because maybe it would just take me a little bit longer [to settle in like happened at the MTC]. But at the same time, I think, it might have just gotten worse.” Aaron also said he wished he could have “lost [himself] in the work,” been more present, and been able to take the mission day by day, but he said, “Just at the time, I felt like I couldn’t.”

Coming home “was almost harder than the mission itself” because Aaron “felt so



bad about myself, and not only about myself, but I felt that I had let down a lot of people.” Aaron felt that his mother blamed herself for his early return. His father, on the other hand, was his “rock.” He treated Aaron with love and did not care about the fact that he came home early. “He saw me and my potential, regardless of whether I served a mission or not.” Though he talked to his father sometimes, he mostly described pushing others away and “sulking” within himself. He said that he thought other people were judging him, “which may be true,” and shared that he had judged missionaries who had returned home early. Then he said, “but I think I maybe magnified that too much [feeling judged] like, ‘Oh these people hate me. I’m a horrible person.’” Opening up to others whom he feared were judging him was difficult, especially since he had spent the previous month talking very little.

Aaron had a spiritual experience that led him to attempt to go back out but to a mission closer to home. After one week in the mission field, “the powerful feelings of darkness and entrapment” hit him even harder than before and he returned home early a second time. Aaron did not tell many people that he was going back out on his mission because he feared what they would think of him in the case that he came home early again. He made sense of his second experience by relating his willingness to go a second time to the story of Abraham and Isaac from the Bible. “Maybe it’s kind of like Abraham and that all that was required was to go. ‘Are you willing enough to go out and do this and if you are, great. But you don’t have to kill your son.’” Aaron was willing to go, but then was told by God that he did not have to go through it again, but only do the best he could again. Through his entire painful search for meaning in his ERM experience, Aaron

held onto this fact: He wanted to be on a mission. He said, “Even though I felt like I couldn’t really do it the way I wanted to, I think that’s something I needed to hold onto now...knowing that I did try. I gave my best.”

After the second return, Aaron had difficulties reading or studying scripture because he feared that he might have “these same feelings” that he experienced on the mission. He was confused and angry with God at times for not “making this [depression and anxiety] go away.” He was confused as to why God did not make him the missionary he was “supposed to be” and worried about what God thought of him just as much as what others in the church thought about him. He felt very separate from the church, like he was a “different category” of person in the church. Pressure to go to church meetings and activities and yet feeling that he could not be part of it because of his ERM “label” was an ongoing conflict. Aaron was rejected and judged by others. Girls were not interested in dating him because he returned from his mission early. Others spoke about ERMs and what they “should” or “shouldn’t have done” in church Institute classes “like no one had done it [come home early from a mission].” Still others taunted Aaron with teasing like, “Oh, did you miss your mommy?”

Aaron still wonders why he could not stay on his mission. He said he chose a college close to home because he had fears of leaving home again and having the difficult feelings return. He also feels more disconnected from God than in the past. However, where Aaron felt he was confident before without humility, he feels like he has the humility now to be more empathetic and understanding. His struggle now is in not being “so humble” that he feels like “crap” about himself.

A large part of his healing came through work with a mental health professional who seemed to understand what it was like to be “different” in the church culture. This professional helped Aaron to recognize that he did not have to be like others or have their approval to have worth. Aaron connected with a metaphor about being one crayon in a box full of many colors, all important and unique. “I’m turtle green,” he said after pulling one crayon out of a box of 64 crayons with his counselor. He brought the turtle green crayon to the interview as one of his artifacts. Aaron said he realized that he had been living his life based on what others thought of him and that since he had come home from his mission, he had been “trying to find [himself] through other people,” and trying to “impress” them. He made excuses to justify things that happened for him “to make them feel better” about him. From the time he recognized that he relied on others for his identity, he worked on a list of traits that *he, Aaron*, wanted to see in himself and who *he* wanted to be whether or not anyone else approved or was impressed. He said, “Four years later, I still am trying to figure out who I am and just to be comfortable in my own skin.” He shared that he still struggles and catches himself trying to do things for other people to like him, but he is better able to correct and refers himself to his list often.

### **Identity-Focused Analysis of Aaron’s Narrative**

Aaron had been excited to serve a mission defined by values of making a difference and being an important part of something bigger than himself through reaching out and leading. It was valuable for him to be a person that members of the community knew well and trusted as an important source of help and leadership. His sense of worth

was very tied to the acceptance of the community. On his mission, he felt disconnected from his values of being an important serving leader in the community and experienced paralyzing anxiety and a reoccurrence of depression, which deepened his disconnection to his values. The intense anxiety led him to return from his mission earl

y, where he experienced disapproval from the community he so valued before. Aaron felt that he was no longer an important part in the community, that he was different, and that others did not like him. On top of feeling disconnected from his values, he felt immense shame and isolation.

After returning a second time from his mission, he found redemption in a *Bible* story in which his willingness was enough, making his second mission service meaningful to him, though he hid it from others in the community for fear it might amplify ideas that he was weak or incapable. With the help of a mental health professional, Aaron clarified his values and was able to let go of the community's definition of ERM and find his own. He reconnected his ERM identity with his more genuine values by holding fast to the truth that he wanted to serve others and complete his mission, no matter what others said. His genuine desire to serve others made his inability to serve the way he wanted less controlling of his identity and less disconnected from his values of service. He found a more internal and values-based source of identity instead of looking to the external experiences to define it. He saw his service-oriented desires and values as being acceptable in the CJC context and now values the exploration of his identity more independent of CJC community members.

Aaron also has some contamination stories in his narrative. He shared feeling

disconnected from his values of leadership and sometimes felt that some parts of his definition of the ERM identity are not acceptable within the CJC context or with God and often feels he cannot connect with God like he used to. He seemed to associate the ERM identity partly with weakness or an inability to “push through.” He responded to this contamination story in the interview by reminding himself of the unimportance of serving a mission for salvation or church membership. However, it appears that his ascription of weakness to his ERM identity and his definition of leadership are at the roots of his contamination story and are unacceptable (or at least considered second-rate) to himself and the CJC or broader contexts. The definition of himself as not strong enough also kept Aaron from considering going to school or working away from home because he was not sure if he could handle it.

### **Alexis**

Before her mission, Alexis described herself as a “free spirit” or “wild child.” She enjoyed freedom and nonconformity. She was active in the CJC because she felt pressured to attend meetings and did not want to remain active in the church during her teenage years. She even had “an escape plan” out of the church her junior year of high school. During her senior year, she was unsure about where to go to college and prayed for guidance. During that prayer, she received a distinct impression that she needed to serve a mission. When she told her parents, “there was no backing out. They try to be like really supportive of whatever you do in life, but really they were very... ‘Oh I’ve been praying and I had that feeling too.’” She said she had wanted to back out a few times but

felt like she could not change her mind because it made her parents so happy. Growing up, Alexis felt like the “black sheep” of the family and believed she was a “disappointment” to her parents. She said, “They were really supportive but I could tell that they wanted me to be different so I figured, ‘Let’s do this, and when you come back you’ll be that person they’ll be proud of.’” Alexis stated that one of her driving motives for going on a mission was to change herself and be a daughter that her parents could say, “Yeah, that’s my kid!” about.

Alexis admitted that she grew a lot spiritually once she was in the MTC, but she did not enjoy all the rules and conformity. Alexis felt that “forget yourself and go to work” meant that she could not bring any of her old self to her missionary identity, including her sense of humor. She was also very concerned about her weight. She said she was “already bulimic” before starting her mission and the mission “just heightened everything.”

You’re at the MTC and you have all this extra pressure of like looking perfect, all these things that cause like body image problems on top of trying to learn a language, trying to learn how to be a missionary.

In the field (a South American Mission), Alexis frequently felt “lost.” In addition to culture shock, being expected to follow strict rules, feeling confused about reasons behind what they were doing, and feeling behind in learning the Spanish language, she had very “intense” companions with “really high personal standards.” She felt that no matter how hard she tried, she “was just under the bar.” She began to “hate” herself for not being able to keep up and being “the weak link” holding others back, and she felt that bad things that happened to her were punishment from God for not being good enough.

She looked at others and wondered what was wrong with her that others seemed to be having an easier time than her. She said,

Because you're young, you don't understand that it's okay, we're all on our own pace. At that point in life when you're 18-19 years old, you don't understand that. There's a lot of self-loathing.

Seven months into her mission, however, Alexis came to understand and speak the language better, understand the host culture and the mission culture, and she felt she was able to keep up with what was required of her. She said that the best feeling on the mission was when she felt, "I'm finally a missionary. I'm the person that the mission president doesn't have to worry about anymore. I'm the person that everyone's like, 'You're going to be this person one day,' I'm finally that person, finally." Alexis felt "on top of the world" and like nothing bad could happen because she was a good missionary. When bad things did happen, she perceived them as part of a larger plan that was for her good and saw them as blessings. She described it as a "blind happiness" to finally feel "good enough."

Just as she began to truly enjoy the mission, she developed a physical problem that made it difficult for her to walk and required expensive trips to the nearest large city for physical therapy. Suddenly she felt "like the anchor again, just dragging everyone down again." Alexis wanted to be there on the mission but felt bad that she kept her companion from working because she had to stay home with Alexis most of the time. As her condition improved, Alexis jumped right back into work, which then led to her physical condition worsening. At this point, she described feeling depressed, suicidal, and wishing that something would happen to make her go home. She was released for

physical reasons shortly thereafter to go home to rest, heal, and receive the proper treatment. When she called her parents to tell them that she was coming home early, they said they would “do everything in our power to get you healed so you can go back out there, because you have to go back out on your mission. You have to do this.” Alexis remembered “bawling.” She said her parents thought she was crying because she didn’t want to come home, but really she was thinking, “No. Don’t make me do this again!”

Before her flight home, the mission’s mental health provider met with her and told her “Yeah, people are going to make assumptions. That doesn’t mean anything about who you are as a missionary or any of those things.” Alexis found this reassuring and helpful when others judged her wrongly. Many of her friends and community members did not believe that she came home for a physical condition. They would ask her later “what *really* happened.” Alexis said she did not blame them for thinking she came home because she was “unworthy” because she understands where they were coming from, having seen her as a “free little wild child.” Others made assumptions that she was not as valuable as a missionary was or that God was angry with her. On the other hand, Alexis’ stake president was supportive when he officially released and “de-tagged” Alexis upon arriving home. She said her mother was finally okay with Alexis not wanting to return to the mission after the stake president said,

You did what you could. It doesn’t matter if it was the full 18 months. You served a mission. Now you can just look at your opportunities.... You served a mission. You can’t be angry at that. You can’t be disappointed at that.

Alexis healed physically but her mental health worsened and became a more salient part of her identity and experience after returning home. She went to college



where she felt alone and different from others. She had a manic episode in which she engaged in behaviors that were contrary to the teachings of the CJC. She shared experiences in which her family requested no contact from her and others in the community rejected her and thought differently of her for what she was going through due to her mental health challenges. She felt “judged and ridiculed,” and “isolated.” She coped by turning to strangers, “and I would go and drink and smoke and do just really risky behaviors with complete strangers just so that I wasn’t alone, because I was so suicidal.” Often she would go to school and then sleep until school the next day. She felt a conflict within herself between the missionary identity she had wanted to become and her more genuine identity at the time of the interview that did not fit with the “cookie-cutter” CJC identity. She said she was fighting being herself or accepting herself because “there are repercussions” and “judgment that happens...for people of nonconformity.”

Eventually her family accepted communication with her again, and she learned to accept herself as a “work in progress.” She began to see self-improvement as a process of “decisions and revisions” that allowed for mistakes. She also described herself as more “open and vulnerable,” able to recognize when she needs help, and able to make plans and boundaries now but still be able to be flexible with them. She has learned to re-cultivate her sense of humor to cope with her early-return experiences so that others in the CJC community see her as confident and having “overcome” something instead of pitying her. Although she loves and respects the church, she has distanced herself from church activity because she cannot do the “obsession with perfectionism” that she indicated is in “the culture.”

She said she sees herself as “strong” for what she went through as an ERM and needing to make hard decisions and difficult revisions along her journey. She said, “I think that’s a part of strength is learning that you have a past and you have a present, and a future and learning how to find a balance between the three.” She felt that her mission was powerful and she has a unique ability to help others understand people who are not “cookie-cutter” in her community, especially as she hopes to support her younger brother on his own mission and help him support other people who might be “different” or having a hard time on his mission. Alexis said that overall, her mission did not need to be 18 months to be “strong.” She would like others to view it, “not as something that never got finished like an old art project,” but as something that was “amazing each step of the way, and it just ended at nine months.”

### **Identity-Focused Analysis of Alexis’ Narrative**

Alexis stated that one of her driving motives for going on a mission was to become a better person and to try to earn the pride and acceptance of her parents. Right about the time she felt she had finally achieved the identity of missionary, her physical condition kept her from doing “good” missionary things and she felt disconnected from her values of family acceptance and self-improvement. She felt immense shame and loneliness that were compounded by the serious mental illness she experienced upon returning home. She even described this time as feeling “disconnected” from herself.

Eventually she learned to understand self-improvement as a process of “decisions and revisions” that allowed for mistakes and imperfection. She began to see herself as a

work in progress worthy of love and care. The ERM identity was redefined as a series of decisions and revisions and part of the process of bettering herself and becoming a stronger, more empathic and thoughtful person. As Alexis began to accept herself and her ERM identity as a work-in-progress, she discovered that accepting herself was more important to her than the acceptance of others. Her ERM experience became meaningful for clarifying the value of self-acceptance and personal progress for her. She felt values of progress and self-acceptance were acceptable in her broader understanding of what it means to be CJC. Even though she experienced judgment and was shut out from her family at one point, she felt that she still ought to be accepted and loved based on CJC doctrine. Not being accepted by so many in her context was extremely distressing to her and contributed to her decision to leave the church; however, she was not experiencing shame about her identity and felt she was progressing and continuing to develop her identity effectively one decision and revision at a time.

### **Benjamin**

Benjamin was very academically focused and successful in high school. He said he always felt more mature than other kids his age and was focused on his future. Like a “spring,” Benjamin said he was “wound a little tight.” Being wound a little tight was a “motivating” force for him that drove him to succeed. He was active in the CJC and he particularly enjoyed the historical aspects of the church and memorized many church history facts and could recall them in conversation about church topics. Though his family were members, Benjamin described his family as “not super hard-core” CJC.

Many of his extended family members were not active in the church, and were maybe even a little “antagonistic” towards it.

Benjamin attended university for a year after high school. There he got involved with a discipline he enjoyed and thought he should “just go straight on through,” work in a lab, and continue taking courses. However, he also felt immense pressure from the culture that told him that he was “supposed to” serve a mission. All his friends were leaving on missions and he had a “lion of a bishop.” The message Benjamin received from his bishop and the culture was that if he did not serve a mission, “all hell will break loose.” Others told him to pray about it. When he prayed, he felt he had an answer that “no, this isn’t really the thing to do.” However, others told him that it was actually the thing to do, “it’s an obligation with the priesthood,” and “you need to go or you’re going to go to hell.” Benjamin decided he “didn’t want to go to hell, so I guess we’ll do it.” He hoped to spend the 2 years, “get it over with,” and move on. Both Benjamin’s parents seemed indifferent about the idea of serving a mission, while his uncles were vocal about their position that serving a mission was “dumb.”

He did not have any fanfare or celebration when he received his mission call to an English-speaking, U.S. mission. Benjamin was happy that he was not going to a third-world country but felt a little “annoyed” that he was not able to learn a new language because others seemed to advertise their ability to speak another language from their mission experiences while Benjamin “wasn’t given that opportunity.” Benjamin said he was not worried about the mission as much before he left; instead, he was “just kind of sad” because he would not get to “do all this cool stuff” with the lab he hoped to join in

his area of study. Just before leaving on his mission, he went through sacred CJC ceremonies in a CJC temple that symbolize special promises made to God, a requirement in the church before serving a mission. Benjamin felt forced to make sacred promises with God and did not enjoy the experience, particularly because he felt “bullied” into it.

As soon as he arrived at the MTC, Benjamin felt that everything was “weird.” He was especially taken aback by how “fake” everything seemed to be. New missionaries practiced teaching by role-playing and pretending to teach others as if they did not know about the gospel. He said the “forced” nature of the training felt “weird” and he was “not impressed” by the immaturity of the other new missionaries. When he first got out into the field, Benjamin and his companion were heavily involved in service projects that involved physical labor. He liked serving because he could feel that he was “being useful,” and could see immediate, clear-cut results of his efforts, much like a report card. However, when it came to proselyting, such as teaching or giving out copies of *The Book of Mormon*, Benjamin felt anxious and refused to speak or engage in teaching activities with his companion. At the time, Benjamin thought that as a missionary, he was supposed to tell other people what to do to get into heaven, and he was not sure he believed in what he was supposed to say. He felt that teachings from the church were “good things,” but he was not sure it was “the best and only way for everybody.” He hoped that the mission president would let him do a job he felt better suited for, like working in the mission office doing paperwork, but the mission president said he could not.

Benjamin also began to worry for his own soul on his mission. He had made sacred promises to God; he felt that because he was pressured into making them, he

might have made a promise he was not sure he wanted to make or might be unable to keep, and therefore he might be “damned to hell.” He was very concerned about the fact that he did not seem as “appreciative” towards or excited about spiritual things as others seemed to be. He worried that what he was doing was perhaps “sinful” and that he might be part of “a cult.” His intense fears furthered his aversion to teaching others on his mission because he was afraid that he might be part of convincing someone else to make promises they would not be able or want to keep.

I didn't want people's blood on my hands, so I felt in some ways I was saving people from this horrible experience I had by not trying to convert others. Essentially, even if it was too late for me, at least I wasn't convincing anyone else to join.

After 2 months in the field, Benjamin felt he “literally went crazy.” Looking back on things he had done and thought at this point of his mission, he feels they were completely out of character for him. He described it as a state of “psychological turmoil,” and feeling “psychologically disturbed, and emotionally exhausted.” He said that the spring that he felt he was before got under too much stress, got wound too tight, and just “broke.” All of the turmoil and fear was “almost exclusively all going on in my head,” he said. To others, Benjamin thought he might have just looked like a “sad lost little soul.” He said, “But I really was afraid that I had lost [my soul], and that I'd made some sort of bargain of evil with some supernatural power.” Benjamin was able to see a mental health professional on his mission, and he said it seemed to be helping him; however, his “numbers” from symptom questionnaires were getting worse. He also tried a medication but promptly quit taking it after he experienced significant side effects.

Benjamin was given the option to go home several times. However, he felt that he

would go to hell if he went home early and did not complete his assigned mission. He described his situation this way: “I was a bird in a cage. It was like they were saying, ‘Well, you’re free to go.’ The door is open, but there’s this giant cat outside, and it’s like, ‘Well, do I stay inside the cage or do I go out and deal with the cat?’” When given the option, he chose to “stick it out” every time. In retrospect, he wished that they had sent him home earlier and not given him the choice. Eventually around Benjamin’s 6-month mark, the mission president, as encouraged by a doctor, told Benjamin that he would need to go home. Benjamin voiced his concerns about returning home and his mission president said, “If there is any sort of blame, I’ll take the blame. We are telling you: you need to go home to sort this thing out.”

Benjamin was both relieved and a little nervous. On the way to the airport, the mission president’s wife tried to be reassuring and suggested that she would see him back out there soon. However, Benjamin did not plan to go back out after he got things “sorted out” and thought to himself, “The hell you will! That’s not going to happen.” He later found out that the mission president had struggled to know how to explain what was going on to Benjamin’s parents when plans were being made to send him home. The mission president told Benjamin’s parents that he thought that maybe Benjamin was gay and that might explain why he was having a hard time and had difficulty talking about it. Benjamin did not identify as being gay and felt it was inappropriate of his mission president to speculate to his parents that he might be gay, especially because his parents were “extra conservative and not appreciative to that kind of stuff.”

When Benjamin got home, he was happy to not have any fanfare. His parents took

a quick picture and were ready to go before other missionaries got to the area. When he did a final exit interview with his stake president, Benjamin felt the stake president was much like his “bully of a bishop.” He gave Benjamin several instructions, one of which was to not grow a beard. The stake president seemed to be trying to be “buddy-buddy” with Benjamin, but Benjamin was annoyed with what the stake president was telling him and thought, “I don’t want to be your buddy.” For several months after returning, this stake president became a “helicopter stake president” and tried to make sure that Benjamin was going to church, which were unwelcome “efforts.”

Benjamin said that others did not seem to know what to do with him when he came home early and he said he was generally “annoyed” at everyone. Because the mission president waited to send him home at the end of a “transfer” period, Benjamin missed the deadline to register in school for the semester he returned home. He said he mostly played video games and “bummed” for a month or two to “get [his] mind off of things.” After about two months, he got a job as a CNA and a substitute teacher and enjoyed the work. When school started in fall, Benjamin’s grades were good as usual. However, in the spring, his academics quickly started to slip, and he was struggling to pass his courses. He said, “I do feel like it was kind of a result of my experiences that I’d had on my mission, just kind of unresolved conflict and what-not.” Benjamin described that how he felt had started to affect his grades: “I feel like I kind of lost faith in myself, in others, in society, in church, in God. Like I was just kind of like, ‘I give up.’” He found that he trusted help from people in academia to help him figure out what was going on but felt very uninterested in help from anyone in a religious role, even if it might be



helpful advice.

Spiritually he felt “hurt or betrayed” and “wasn’t really happy with the church.” He attended part of the Sunday church meetings every once in a while, but he felt anxious that he might go to hell for “failing,” or leaving early, or not appreciating spiritual things like he felt he should. He mostly stopped attending altogether when his stake president called him to tell him that he shouldn’t leave church early. He said, “Spiritually, [my mission experience] killed me.” Whereas he used to be “skeptical,” he now feels “cynical.” He did attend church a little bit more consistently when he had a new bishop who seemed more understanding: “At least he wasn’t like ‘You’re going to go to hell,’ like the other one said.” He continued to feel like he could be honest about his opinions at church. He said he doesn’t hate the church, and he still feels like he might want to be part of it in some ways, but at the same time he doesn’t think it is okay to be a “buffet Mormon,” so he tries to avoid religion. He tries to “kind of be on the fence” because he is afraid to choose the wrong side; however, he feels he is getting “shot from both sides.” At the time of the interview, Benjamin felt he was using the “temporary fix” of avoiding the conflict he has with the church. He had questions and unresolved issues that were still, at the time of his interview, “bubbling” under the surface.

When asked how he would like to be seen by others as an early-returned missionary, he said he wished that no one saw it. Benjamin “strongly dislike[s]” the label of missionary and is bothered by the meaning behind the word “missionary.” He wishes he had never gone and that he could scratch his mission service off his church records. The focus on missionary work that is found in church services is another reason

Benjamin tends to avoid church meetings, because those reminders of his mission are very distressing and he would like to forget it. Benjamin did feel like he is able to be more empathetic to others now as a result of his experience, but he would have rather learned that lesson some other way. Most of all, he feels that his “agency was violated” and that he was “forced to” serve a mission when it was not the best thing for him mentally, physically, emotionally, or spiritually. He quoted a few verses from Section 121 from the Doctrine and Covenants, a book of CJC scripture:

We have learned by sad experience that it is the nature and disposition of almost all men as soon as they get a little authority as they suppose that they immediately begin to exercise unrighteous dominion... No power or influence can or ought to be maintained by virtue of the priesthood, only by persuasion, by long-suffering, by gentleness and meekness, and by love unfeigned; By kindness, and pure knowledge, which shall greatly enlarge the soul without hypocrisy, and without guile...

Benjamin felt that he could have “probably eventually” been persuaded to do things a certain way in the church, but because he experienced it as “ram jam, do it right now fast thing,” it pushed him away from the church “more than it maybe needed to” and created animosity that might not have been there otherwise. “Logically” he says he knows that his experiences were about individual people and particular experiences, not the church as a whole; however, “it’s sometimes hard to emotionally come to terms with that.”

### **Identity-Focused Analysis of Benjamin’s Narrative**

Success in school was one of Benjamin’s highest values before his mission. He also valued beliefs about the afterlife and connected serving a mission and making sacred

promises to God to avoid hell. However, he was unsure if he was able to keep those promises and was not sure they or the actions required of missionaries connected to his values. Additionally, he felt he was coerced to serve a mission and make sacred promises that conflicted with his strong values of agency and independence. He saw his own disinterest and disconnect from the promises as “bad” in God’s eyes began to worry that he was damned and could not belong as a member of the Church. He was given the option to choose to go home several times, but he felt that choosing to leave the mission might also send him to hell. His values of a positive afterlife and his values of agency were in constant conflict for him.

After returning home, Benjamin rejected all forms of the missionary identity and wished he had never been one. To him, the missionary and ERM identities carried a strong connection to coercion, a value that he was vehemently against. However, he still values being on good terms with God, something he feels is connected to missionary service and sacred promises. He expressed confusion, feeling stuck, and being unsure what to think about his relationship to God or the CJC context.

He stated that he avoided church events because he is reminded of his unacceptability to God and the broader CJC community, despite having experiences within the context that were accepting and encouraging. He also feels bothered by his decisions of not attending meetings, confessing, or repenting. He feels stuck and tries simply to avoid being reminded of the CJC part of his identity. However, he admits that this is a “temporary fix,” and often does not save him pain, but maybe causes less pain than he would feel if he were to make decisions about his identity, doctrines or values,

and communities he wants to be a part of. He also felt this conflict was affecting his motivation, confidence, and performance in school, and he witnessed his grades drop dramatically, another recent disconnection from his values of academia associated with his mission experience.

During the interview with Benjamin, most of his stories were those of contamination, where things were ended poorly with Benjamin feeling isolated, confused, ashamed, and fearful within the CJC context. At one point Benjamin attempted to create a redemption story by connecting his ERM experience to the value of empathy. He had more empathy for people who experienced coercion. This redemption story was unsatisfying, however, because it did not make sense of the conflict between his values and the sense of coercion that defined the missionary identity and his experience with it. His potential redemption story also did not make his identity feel more acceptable within the CJC context or to God. The shame, confusion, and isolation of the contamination storyline permeated his narrative identity regarding his ERM identity and the CJC context.

### **Crystal**

Crystal was almost 19 and living with some family friends as a live-in nanny when the CJC changed the age that females could serve missions from 21 to 19. After the age policy change, she awoke to the possibility that she could go, but she was not very interested in going on a mission. She said she “just kinda got this feeling like, ‘You should go. You should go.’ I was like, ‘I don’t wanna!’” Then she decided that she would

probably “end up going” because she believed it was what she was “supposed to” do as directed by spiritual promptings. When she received her call to a west coast, United States, Spanish-speaking mission, she said she “did feel like that was where [she] was supposed to be.” She felt some pressure only from her mother, who had served a mission and had a good experience. Crystal said, “I also feel like it was a lot of, ‘This will keep you on the path of righteousness.’ So I probably would’ve been a bit more stressed about it if I had been living with my parents.”

As she prepared for her mission, she took a mission preparation course offered by the church and tried to pray and study her scriptures more. Though Crystal had been active in the church her whole life, she did not feel that she knew the CJC scriptures as well as she would have liked. More than anything, she worried about whether she would be able to “handle” the mission experience. Before the mission, she felt “rather sheltered” in a predominantly CJC community and socially insecure. “Going out and doing things and meeting new people and stuff was something that kind of worried me,” she said. Crystal also worried about the strict schedule of the mission, especially waking up on time, both things she said she “wasn’t very good at,” sharing that she was late arriving to the MTC. Crystal wanted her mission to be about “turning [her] will over to the Lord” and prayed often on her mission for more opportunities and ability to turn her will over to God.

Crystal said she had struggled with perfectionism before her mission, and that her struggles increased when she entered the MTC. She envisioned that once she became a missionary, she should become a “Super Mormon” who “would always be feeling the

Spirit,” “always be having good feelings, and always be getting along [with companions].” When she was placed in a companionship of three, she frequently felt left out or like she did not belong even though she saw them try to include her. Feeling as if she did not belong was a common experience with her peers for most of her life. When she felt sad or angry or when she got annoyed or frustrated with her companions, she would “spiral” with self-criticism and think, “You’re not supposed to feel like this” or “Why are you being such a terrible person, you’re supposed to be a nice person.” She said these feelings would build up until she felt unable to handle “my emotions and myself.” She would have times when she would “end up sobbing” and then she would feel better as the “smaller waves” built up again and the cycle continued.

During one of her “high tide” moments, her companions refused to go out until Crystal shared what was going on with her and what she was feeling. Crystal often used journaling as a way to get the emotions and thoughts out of her head. During this particular occasion, as she wrote the random thoughts coming to her head in a fury, she wrote the words, “I want to go home.” She stopped and said to herself, “What? No. I already told myself that I don’t want to quit. This is not an option.” However, the more she pushed this idea out of her mind, the more she felt a prompting and a feeling that she needed to go home. After arguing with the prompting for a little bit, she finally told God, “Okay, fine, you say I’ve got to go home? I’m going home.” Immediately after this decision, she said, “I felt something within myself switch over to be like ‘I’m not doing my will anymore.’ So my one experience of turning my will over is when I’m told I have to go home.”

Her companions were supportive of the decision. She received a priesthood blessing from nearby elders (the title given to male missionaries) that very specifically confirmed Crystal's decision to go home, as did her patriarchal blessing. One of the elders who gave her a blessing had also struggled with his mission and shared how his father had helped him to make sense of his own experience:

You know, if God could figure out exactly when he needed to create a star so that the time it takes for the light of the star to reach earth the same day that his Son was born, he could figure out where you're supposed to be." Crystal said the explanation "worked really well" for her and that it was "something I understand. And so that really helped.

Her mission president, parents, and stake president discounted the words of her blessing to be simply the elder saying what he thought she wanted to hear, saw her decision to return home as "quitting" or "coming from the wrong place," and accused her of saying the prophet was wrong for giving her the mission call she had. Crystal saw things differently. "The way I see it is the prophet got the inspiration for the calling, but he's not the one who called me and if I was called by my Christ, then He can dang well tell me to go home."

However, Crystal said she was a very obedient child, and agreed to stay after talking to her parents. She felt suicidal the next day because she felt like she had "screwed up so badly" by making the decision to stay, against the clear prompting and confirmations she had received. When she told her companions about the suicidal feelings, one of her companions immediately called the mission president, who then told Crystal that she would be going home the next day. When Crystal heard this, she said all the turmoil she had been feeling about making the wrong decision "immediately felt

better, like completely. Everything, all the stress, all the, ‘Oh my gosh, I made the wrong decision and I know it, how could I be such a stupid person?’ All of it, just gone.”

When she got home, she felt confident that she was doing the right thing and said she did not struggle adjusting back to home life. She was worried about how her parents would receive her, but when they picked her up at the airport, she said, “they gave me these huge hugs and it was just like, love. And I was like, ‘Okay, it’s gonna be okay.’” She said she did not have to deal with much stigma because her parents had moved into a new ward during her mission, so no one really knew Crystal or that she had returned home early. She also immediately moved into a new singles ward where no one knew her or her ERM status either. She said that not having to deal with as much stigma from others was helpful. Unfortunately, though, Crystal did not get to give a homecoming talk in church. She had been looking forward to the tradition of sharing her testimony in Spanish over the pulpit. She said she did not know if it was a miscommunication between leadership of the new family ward and new singles ward, or a deliberate decision, but she said,

It almost made me feel like I didn’t complete what I was supposed to do. And I didn’t have an honorable discharge, because you’re supposed to have a homecoming when you get home, and I never got one. That one was a struggle that I had to go through for a while, just because I never got what everyone else gets.

Crystal also shared some bitterness toward her stake president because he thought she had quit, even though she knows she needed to come home “for both the medical standpoint and spiritual standpoint.” Overall, Crystal does not regret any of her experiences from her mission and return. She was grateful to learn about and have help



for her struggles with anxiety and depression before they impacted her in bigger and more stressful life events such as marriage or having children, and to understand that there wasn't something "wrong" with her. She said, "Things lined up, they were supposed to for a reason, and what was supposed to happen, happened."

Ultimately, Crystal felt she learned to trust herself more from the mission because she "needed to have an experience where I had to make a hard decision...whether or not I was supported." She has a "stronger core" and is "more willing to stand up" for herself sometimes. Though she feels like she still struggles sometimes with insecurity and perfectionism, she is getting better at calming herself down and deciding in the moment if she can be okay with imperfection. "Just having those little booster experiences every once in a while that go, 'Oh, so I can do this!'" really helped her. After she accomplishes something hard, she now looks back and sees how much she has grown, and it helps her to continue doing hard things and being okay with herself.

### **Identity-Focused Analysis of Crystal's Narrative**

Crystal wanted her mission to be about giving her will to God. The very act of deciding to go on a mission was not something she had originally wanted, but only wanted to do since she felt it was God's will for her. When her mission became very difficult due to significant perfectionism, she rejected the thought of going home. The idea conflicted with her values of persevering and doing God's will. Crystal still defined her mission as God's will for her. However, as she recognized the constant and strong impression that she needed to go home as God's new will for her, she immediately felt

that going home connected her to her value of doing God's will and felt a spiritual confirmation despite her fears. After talking with her parents and mission president, she was convinced to stay and this decision was no longer in line with her values. She felt depressed to the point of having suicidal thoughts. Her mission president then accepted Crystal's previous decision to go home early, which felt immediately redemptive and re-aligned with her values.

Because going home was an act of turning her will over to God, Crystal had redefined her experience of the ERM identity as God's will for some missionaries, and no longer a sign of quitting. Because her new definition of ERMs was acceptable to her understanding of the CJC doctrine, she felt acceptable in the CJC context regardless of members within the CJC community thinking that she had quit. She narrated a redemption story for her feelings of social disapproval in the CJC community. She believed the reason others did not understand, approve of, or agree with her decision to return home was so that she could have the experience of doing God's will even when it would disappoint others or make her seem unfaithful in their eyes.

### **Emma**

In high school, Emma was on her school's student council, liked to serve others, and did not feel that she was particularly materialistic, but more people-focused. She said she had expectations of things she was going to accomplish and felt she could achieve her goals. She was very confident in her abilities and the plans she had for her future. She said, "People told me that I was going places. I thought I had it all figured out. I had a lot

of aspirations and the willpower and determination to do them and make them work.” A mission was one of the things she had felt she was supposed to do since she was 13 years old, and she was very excited to serve.

Emma’s family was very active in the CJC community. Her father had been part of local leadership, and Emma felt very connected to God through her church activity and associations within her church community. She expressed that she never felt any pressure to serve a mission, but always felt very supported by her family and community. She felt that missionary service was “a sacrifice,” and “a manifestation of love for Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ.” For a year after graduating from high school, Emma worked several states away as a nanny where she came to value her relationship with God even more. She said that her relationship to God meant “pretty much everything” to her.

When Emma put in her papers for a mission call, she wanted a “hard mission” that would require much from her such as serving in a foreign and less wealthy country. She received a call to an area in South America that fit well with her desires. She enjoyed the MTC experience where she felt a sense of heightened spirituality, and her excitement to get into the field grew. However, she also felt her knowledge of Spanish was far below her peers. She worked very hard to catch up with her peers, and during this stressful time she sought comfort and direction in the Book of Mormon. She said she began to read the scriptures “in a way [she] never had before.” The experience was powerful for her and she said she “never wanted to lose that.” Emma shared that this sort of study became a solace for her in the coming trials.

When she first arrived in her mission field, she felt alone, unable to communicate

well, and “scared to death.” “No one really talks about that part of a mission,” she said. Because no one had warned her or spoken of the difficulties, particularly in the first couple months of adjusting to the mission, she felt that something was wrong with her and that she “should be able to handle” the culture shock and language challenges. She cried often and was “set off” by small things throughout the day. She said she was “shocked that no one had bothered” to tell her that her feelings were normal. “You have to ask about it,” she said. When she did ask about it, she found that the other missionaries confirmed that they also did not understand anybody for months and that the transition was difficult for them at first as well. With that information, Emma became more and more tolerant and accepting of the difficulties and trials of the mission and learning the new language.

Just as she started to be more comfortable and enjoy her mission life, she became seriously physically ill. She was unable to walk very far without passing out and lost partial function of her hands. She felt frustrated because she could not serve the way she felt missionaries should. She saw some doctors, but the tests yielded no conclusive results or treatment options. She did not want to leave her mission but knew that if the tests continued to provide no answers, she would need to return home for more specialized medical care and testing. There continued to be no answers for Emma or her family, and Emma had to leave her mission and go home to focus on healing.

Upon returning home, Emma was afraid of the judgment that she might experience from others. Though her mission president told her, “You’ll think people are judging you, but 99 percent are not,” Emma amended that statement by saying, “A better

way to say that is that 99 percent are trying not to.” Despite her concerns about judgment, she was invested in defending her ward members and tried to be understanding and empathetic to the struggle of not judging her for returning home early. “I mean, who wouldn’t be [judgmental]? It’s hard when you don’t know the story or when someone looks fine.” She did not want to show up at church unannounced, making it difficult for ward members to process her early return and think of ways to react after an initial reaction of judgment. Her first Sunday home, she attended another ward where those in attendance did not know her. Meanwhile, her ward bishopric announced her early return to her own congregation, and later that day she was met with support and visits from friends and neighbors in her home ward. However, she still worried what others would think of her as she began to recover. If she went to a movie with her family, she feared that others might look at her and think, “Well, you’re well enough to go to a movie, why aren’t you going on a mission?” She admitted that perhaps others were not thinking that, but “it’s just hard not to feel that. Those thoughts come to your mind, so it’s hard for other early-return missionaries to feel accepted.”

Since returning home, Emma’s life and identity have revolved around her illness’s impact on her, doctor visits, tests, and treatment. She still, at the time of the interview, had not been able to learn the nature or causes of her illness, and new debilitating symptoms had developed as time has gone on. She was unable to return to her mission, work, or go to school, which made her feel like she had no purpose or meaning. Emma could see judgment in the faces of others who did not understand what she was “doing” with her life when she had been so “successful” before. She said that she used to be a

“people pleaser” and tried to explain herself and her situation to others. A friend pointed out that she did not need to justify her decisions to those who were not involved in her care, and Emma realized that she “wasn’t taking into account my own opinion or feelings. And, you know, that’s ultimately what matters most. I mean, they don’t know how I feel or what I can handle.” At that point, she started to make more of an effort to be understanding of herself and her experience and to trust her decisions and opinions about her identity both related to her ERM identity and how she handles her illness.

Emma continued the habits she had gained on her mission and had hoped to return to the mission after her recovery. Through studying *The Book of Mormon* in an intense and powerful way and sharing her insights with others, she began to see that she did indeed have the difficult and complete mission that she had wanted in the beginning, characterized by the same values she had wanted most to define her mission experience and identity, though not in the way she had expected.

Over the last 18 months, I think that I’ve learned the same amount of things and struggled with the same amount of hardship and grown closer to my Savior and to the Lord in the same way that a missionary does. So, I’ve borne my testimony and shared what I’ve learned so how does that make my mission less? Just because my mission is different doesn’t mean that it is of any less worth. So, I don’t think that just the 24 month, the routine mission, is the only way to serve a mission.

Additionally, she learned more about “where worth and purpose lies, and it’s not in any of these things that we see so much.” Emma noticed that she had been taught by “the world” that success, purpose, and meaning were found in what you were doing on the outside. She learned to focus less on what people were doing or not doing, but more on what was inside them, though she acknowledged feeling hurt when others judged her. She feels that she is not as confident in labeling or describing her identity as she was

when she “thought [she] had it all figured out,” but she feels now that her identity is more flexible and growing like rereading a book over and over again (the artifact she brought to the interview). “You can always go back and reread the parts you don’t understand.” Emma feels like her identity before her mission and the one she would like to further develop because of what she has learned from becoming an ERM co-exist with the latter “growing stronger” as she “feed[s] it more.”

### **Identity-Focused Analysis of Emma’s Narrative**

When Emma decided to go on a mission and put in her papers, she had wanted a “hard mission” that would require much from her. Giving a big sacrifice to serve a mission in a foreign and less wealthy country connected her to her value of serving others, choosing God above all else, and coming closer to him. When she became seriously physically ill on her mission, her plan felt frustrated and she felt disconnected from her values of serving and sacrificing for God. Instead of doing what she thought a missionary ought to be doing, she had to focus on healing and returned home. However, through studying the Book of Mormon in an intense and powerful way and sharing her insights with others, she re-storied that narrative. She then saw that she did indeed have a difficult and complete mission characterized by the same values she had wanted most to define her mission experience and identity. Though not in the way she had expected, Emma’s experience reconnected her to her values of sacrifice, service, and love. Emma redefined the ERM identity to be included as a subtype of missionaries, not something different from or less than a “missionary.” Since she perceives the CJC doctrine to accept

all missionaries, she felt included and accepted in the CJC context as an ERM even as members within the context “tried” not to judge, but occasionally failed. In the end, she felt closer to God, and felt she had served as much as any missionary who served their full 18 months.

### **Rocky**

In high school, Rocky was an organized and highly scheduled person. He was “always doing something.” He had many different friend groups that included some Church members and some who were not, and he was interested in many different things, but most of all, football. He enjoyed that he had so much variety in his life. When he thought of the future, he felt his options were wide open. Rocky was a member of the CJC but did not attend church or seminary class (a scripture study–based class for high school age students). He started to date a girl who was “super LDS” and slowly started going to church with her before his senior year. He then joined a new friend group with peers who went to his girlfriend’s ward. At first, the others at church wondered why he was there, and so did Rocky. After a bit of time, however, he felt like a part of the group and considered his church activity another way that he was “more well-rounded.”

He had two groups of friends, “all the ones who were going on a mission, and then all the ones that weren’t.” Neither group knew which way Rocky was going to go. During his senior year, Rocky decided he would serve a mission after high school. He said he thinks it started by trying to make his girlfriend happy, but after a while, many of his friends were deciding to go and he started to think, “Yeah, I think I should go. I think



it would be good for me.” He was not sure what he wanted to do next after high school, so he felt that a two-year “break from school” would be helpful. He said that both groups of friends were a little surprised but happy for him and supportive. Rocky said his mother, whom he is very close to, was also very supportive of whichever way he chose to believe or chose to act in regards to religion. He received his mission call to an area in the Eastern United States, English-speaking. By the time he left for the MTC in August, Rocky was “good.” He had “changed a lot,” attended church regularly, read all the books of scripture, and done “all the stuff you’re supposed to do.”

However, when Rocky got to the MTC, he was not very excited, and he noticed that his friends who were going into the MTC the same day as him had had very different experiences with the church up to that point than Rocky had. He felt rushed in his goodbye to his parents. He was “starting to freak out” at this point because he “felt like cattle,” being shuffled from place to place so quickly with all the other new missionaries. He said of that time, “I’m very close with my parents so just that quick throw-ya-out... I did not like that.” He started to feel anxious as he was introduced to his companion, with whom he felt he was “not compatible at all.”

The rest of the day Rocky felt in a daze. He said, “I went to the corner and I just stood there. And I thought it was only for a couple minutes, but it had been like half an hour and I just stood there and I was having a panic attack.” Not long after arriving at the MTC, he attended a meeting in which he was “supposed to fake teach a fake investigator” of the church. He said that someone walked in and asked, “What’s the first thing you should ask her?” The “correct” answer he heard from the group was, “Will she be

baptized?” Rocky was confused and thought about teaching a little differently. He thought that as a missionary he was going to get to know people, help them, and “let them figure out for themselves what they want.” He was anticipating helping people “come to” the gospel instead of “forcing” or “getting them to accept it.” He felt “trapped” and like the MTC was a “prison,” complete with “guards” and a “fence.” He said, “I was honestly just going to run. I didn’t even care. I just needed to be out.”

At night, he lay awake on top of the mattress until morning. He was too anxious to eat. The next morning, Rocky told his companion that he needed “to talk to somebody.” He ended up being sent to a counselor. Rocky had a very difficult time “opening up” to the counselor, but he felt it was important that someone know what was going on. The counselor suggested that Rocky “should probably go home and get everything figured out” before he came back again, “just to make sure” he was “ready.” Rocky mentioned that he was worried that he would be disappointing people. The counselor replied, “You won’t be. You’ll be honorable-returned. You can come back if you want.” After the counselor said that, Rocky could feel the stress was immediately “gone.” He called his mom to tell her that she needed to come pick him up. His mother tried to encourage him and tell him that he could do it. Rocky stopped her and said, “Mom, Mom, I just can’t.” His mom, father, and sister all came to pick him up from the MTC that night.

Rocky was invited to wait 3 hours at an empty desk alone for his family while the other missionaries were in meetings. Rocky enjoyed being alone with no one asking him questions, knowing his parents were coming. However, when his mother arrived, she was

very upset that Rocky had been left there alone. On the drive home, it was “dead quiet” until his mother asked him what happened. Rocky explained. Rocky’s mother said that whoever had called her had just told her that Rocky “quit.” The same message was sent to the stake president who officially “released” him of his call the next morning. The first thing the stake president said was, “Did you have sex?” Rocky replied, “No, that wasn’t it, but thanks for asking how I am.” At home he “just stayed in” his house for 2 weeks and did not tell anyone that he was home, including his girlfriend.

Once it “got out” that Rocky was home, he warned his girlfriend that if she also came home early, “people are going to talk.” Many were supportive of Rocky, including his coach and friends from football. Another friend Rocky had was also a member of the CJC, had tattoos, and was “not churchy,” and did not judge. He found Rocky and they “just drove around for a couple hours.” Others were not as supportive. Rocky’s father received a note from someone “blaming” Rocky’s father for Rocky’s return home. The note said, “If you were a better dad, he wouldn’t have” returned home early. His parents became “super bitter” towards people and the church because of how Rocky was treated.

Rocky’s stake president pressured him to go back out on a mission. At first Rocky considered doing a “service mission” so he could stay at home, but after about a month, Rocky decided that he was not supposed to go on a mission. The stake president continued to pressure him, saying it was Rocky’s “duty” and that he needed to “be an example to the kids.” After Rocky told him “I can’t go,” the stake president stopped talking to him, which Rocky felt has been “super good.”

At first Rocky was very bitter and went through an “I hate everybody phase.” He

said it was “a needed phase,” because when he was bitter, he “didn’t have to focus so much on what everybody else was thinking.” He was able to accept help from family and “not really care anymore about what other people started thinking.” After some time, Rocky learned to cope by making jokes about his ERM experience and “brush off everything.” When he hears of others leaving on missions, Rocky says, “Well, the record for the quickest come-home is 32 hours so if they come home early, they’d have the record.” He said that some people are uncomfortable with his jokes, and others try to make them with Rocky. Rocky does not appreciate other’s jokes and said that if someone has not “been there,” they cannot make jokes. He tried mental health services to cope with anxiety but did not find it helpful. He also did not appreciate medications that a doctor prescribed “especially when they sat down with [Rocky] for five minutes and just assumed” he was depressed. He copes with occasional anxiety best sometimes by using homeopathic remedies that his mother taught him.

Rocky said he thinks he was the first to return home early in his small town, but shortly after his early return, there were “a bunch of kids coming home” early. He found purpose in being there for them, helping them navigate the judgment that they would face from others, and helping them find humor in the situation. As a football coach, he makes sure the young men know that he supports them before their mission and if they come home early or do not go. He tells them to call him if something happens and they find themselves home early.

Rocky said he wishes he was not as bitter toward the church and was able to “handle” the people in the church better. He also said he was a bit ambivalent about how

his busy lifestyle and diverse interests have changed since returning home early. Rocky does not feel as “well-rounded” anymore and feels like he is “only one thing.” He said, “I kind of lost the feeling that I could become anything or do anything.” Instead, when faced with a choice, Rocky says he tends to “just go [with] the easier one, because the last time I tried something hard, I ended up having to come home.” Some days he is content with this, other times he thinks he should change his routine and do something challenging, but he says he never ends up doing anything different.

When people ask Rocky if he served a mission, he can tell if they really care or not. If they do not seem to really care, he either says “yes” and does not tell his story or says “no.” Sometimes when people assume he went on a mission, he just goes along with it and makes up a story about a full-time mission in the place he was called to. When he can tell someone really cares and wants to know his story, he will tell them about his early-return experience. Being an ERM gives Rocky a “more personal” mission experience. He likes that it is very unique from others’ mission experience, that he doesn’t have to share it with others, and that it can be more private because it isn’t like the stereotypical mission time or experiences that others could relate to or make accurate guesses about. It is an experience that is all his own.

### **Identity-Focused Analysis of Rocky’s Narrative**

When Rocky decided to become active in the church and go on a mission, he was partially seeking to make his girlfriend happy, but he also genuinely wanted to become more well-rounded, be open to new experiences and groups of people, and help others.

When he arrived at the MTC, he was shocked by some MTC instructors who seemed to put baptism goals above getting to know and serving others. This disconnect in values intensified Rocky's anxiety about being separated from his family. When a mental health professional encouraged Rocky to go home, Rocky worried that being an ERM would be against his desires to please others. The professional told Rocky that he would be honorably returned and could go back out on the mission later if he wanted to. This redefinition of ERM eased his mind, and he decided to return home.

When he first returned he felt bitter towards the CJC community because he had adopted a definition of the ERM identity to mean something honorable by doctrinal standards and felt that he ought to be accepted in the CJC context. However, he was not accepted by many—especially those who blamed and treated his parents poorly. Rocky connected with his values of openness and helping others by embracing his ERM identity and helping to support other young men who are preparing for and returning from mission experiences. Rocky, at the time of the interviews, was not very active in the church. In his mind, the CJC identity was both made up of the doctrine and the people within the CJC community. The conflicts between the two aspects of the CJC context made Rocky feel bitter and unsure what to do about it.

Rocky also felt afraid to try difficult things or meet challenges after his perceived inability to complete his mission. He seemed to assign “unable to do hard things” to his definition of his ERM identity. Not doing hard things he didn't have to do was acceptable within the CJC context, and he did not express feeling shame, but simply chose the “easier routes” in his life and did not stray often from his routine. However, sticking to a

routine also sometimes conflicted with his value of being well rounded, and he experienced ambivalence about that aspect of his ERM identity. In this contamination story, Rocky may feel disconnected from some aspects of his values and identity because of his ERM identity definition. Another minor contamination story is that he feels bitter toward the church now but wishes he was not. He still values the CJC context and is frustrated by the members of the community who do not share his values of openness and who treated him and his family poorly because of his ERM identity.

### **Conclusion**

The participants' stories are raw and invoke a plethora of feelings, varying from anger, sadness, and disgust, to warmth, compassion, and gratitude. Participants' narratives all consist of a mix of redemption and contamination stories intertwined like fibers within a rope. Stories focus on different aspects of the participants' experience, values, or self. Crystal, Emma, and Alexis seemed to have found redemption in nearly every aspect of their narrative, though some of their redemption stories were created fairly recently. Aaron and Rocky seemed to have more mingling of both redemption and contamination stories. Benjamin shared mostly contamination stories and only offered one potential redemption story that he found dissatisfying.

A redemption story starts out badly and ends well. For ERMs after returning home, the experience began with disappointment, confusion, and unexpected changes in identity labels that had negative connotations. To develop a new identity, participants were seeking ways of narrating all the aspects of their experience to feel that they were

more connected to their values, had a positive conceptualization of self, and were acceptable within their context. Each redemption story corresponds to core values participants felt were most salient in their expected mission and ERM experience, or connected to a new value they identified as more important. Emma, Crystal, Rocky, and Alexis felt they were moving forward in valued ways because of their early return, and they appreciated their mission experience and accepted it as part what makes them who they are.

Redemption stories result in better understanding the self through the lens of clarified values and with a sense of worth and acceptance within their view of what it meant to be members of the Church. Redemption stories also do not connote a finished project or static identity, but rather a foundation from which to build in valued and flexible ways. With their redemption stories, participants reevaluated their sense of belonging and acceptability. A sense of belonging could exist for participants even as members of their cultural context rejected them. Redemption stories allowed participants to perceive the rejecters as misguided, and to continue feeling acceptable in the cultural context anyway, whether or not they chose to remain involved in it.

For Emma, Alexis, Crystal, and Aaron, there seemed to be an explicit difference in meaning between experiences with the people who make up the CJC community and the values and ideals associated with what it means to be “CJC” in a doctrinal sense. Redemption stories tended to look to doctrine to decide whether an ERM could be acceptable and be “truly CJC.” Crystal, Emma, Aaron, and sometimes Alexis used the CJC doctrine as a guide for judging whether they were acceptable and could be a part of



the CJC context and/or community. For example, though Aaron and Crystal experienced judgment, they believed that at its core the CJC context *should* not be judgmental because of the ideals and values attached to the CJC doctrine despite the inability of the members of that context to actually live up to those ideals of love and acceptance for all.

Using doctrine as a guide for acceptability in the CJC context did not necessarily coincide with the decision to remain active in the CJC community. Emma, Crystal, and Aaron remained active in the CJC at the time of the interviews, while Rocky, Benjamin, and Alexis did not. Rather, using doctrine to determine their decision to be part of the CJC community was related to their contentment with the decision and their level of shame experienced. For example, as Alexis felt her ERM identity was acceptable within her context based on doctrine and should be accepted in the CJC community, she felt more content about her difficult decision to leave the church and less shame when she visited or was with her active CJC family. Emma felt secure with her decision to remain in the church and expressed compassion and empathy for individuals in the church who were judgmental.

Contamination stories exist when an experience begins with hope, excitement, or enjoyment and then ends negatively in disappointment, confusion, or lack of an adequate sense of closure. Contamination stories related to the ERM experience tended to reflect identity or value confusion, value conflicts, or an acceptable sense of self. Contamination stories had an essence of shame, stagnancy, confusion, and isolation. For instance, Aaron shared how he was not sure why he could not stay on the mission longer and truly wished he could have. Rocky wished he was not bitter towards the church and was unsure how to

change it. Aaron and Rocky were both unsure if they could handle the challenges of new situations after returning home early. Benjamin felt unsure how to move through making sense of his experience and unsure if he even wanted to face it. The conflict he felt was affecting several areas of his life including dating, academics, and his spirituality, and resulted in him feel disconnected from his values and “stuck.”

Even when others in the CJC community accepted participants and recognized positive aspects of their identity, contamination stories made participants unable to perceive, value, believe, or contact acceptance of themselves. Even after being told that he was okay for returning home early, Benjamin feared he might go to hell or that something was wrong with him. Rocky and Benjamin mentioned feeling unacceptable in the CJC context and expressed struggling with their decision to distance themselves from the church. Aaron chose to remain active in the church but expressed feeling disconnected and uncertain at times, particularly when he worried about what God or others thought of his acceptability.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **EARLY-RETURNED MISSIONARY IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

The second objective of the study was to learn what was helpful and unhelpful for ERMs in the identity development process after having returned home early from their missions within the CJC context. The interview data were coded by “helpful” or “unhelpful” experiences related to identity development. Overall, what was identified as helpful were the redemption stories themselves and the actions or supports that helped participants to develop their redemption stories.

Although participants’ redemption stories were all unique to their experiences and values, the supports and aids in the development of redemption stories fit within three main themes identified from the data within the “helpful” and “unhelpful” codes. The themes each captured part of a process or task, rather than simply characteristics of redemption stories, and as such, I use the terms *theme* and *task* synonymously.

Within each of the three themes, additional codes were identified that shed light and add depth to the theme. After a brief overview of the process, each aspect of the process will be elucidated and actions and situations that aided or disrupted that part of the process will be discussed. Included are commonalities and unique counter-experiences interpreted from the participants’ narratives as well as suggestions made explicitly by ERMs for mental health professionals or those who may be working through similar experiences to the participants. Last, I discuss the data from participants regarding how their participation in this study impacted their identity development process.

### **Identity Developmental Process**

Each theme is defined by a main task within the redemption story and identity development processes. Participants needed to (1) connect to an identity outside of the ERM identity, (2) redefine the ERM identity in accordance with their own values and experiences, and (3) evaluate how their new definition of ERM fits within the larger CJC context. All participants interacted with these aspects differently. While this could appear to be a directional progression, these processes tended to occur simultaneously with aspects becoming more salient depending on the participants' context. Each of the following sections summarizes one theme and then offers specific beliefs and behaviors that participants identified as helpful or unhelpful related to the theme.

#### **Connecting to an Identity Outside “Early-Return Missionary”**

Most participants expressed needing reprieve, support, a steady relationship, and tools to help them simply stay afloat or find their footing in the identity crisis and chaos they were experiencing upon returning home early from their mission. This typically involved distancing participants' sense of self from the messages they had received about what it means to be an ERM and finding a self outside of the ERM identity from which to view, explore, and make sense of the new ERM identity and experience.

Stepping away from the negative definitions of “ERM” and finding other positive identities provided hope and energy to engage in other aspects of their lives and move forward with making sense of their experience. It allowed participants to feel safe enough to explore difficult emotions less judgmentally and search for answers to questions about

their worth and belonging concerning their multiple identities. Moving away from the negative perceptions of ERMs also played a role in changing participants' perspectives of ERMs or others in the community. Without separating themselves from the negative definitions of ERM or giving weight to other aspects of their identity, participants tended to adopt the shame associated with the ERM label within their cultural context and focus almost solely on the ERM aspect of their identity. The following are the ways participants identified as helpful or unhelpful in seeing themselves as other than a "failed missionary."

**Unconditionally loving relationships.** Several participants shared the importance of relationships that expressed love and care unaffected by the ERM identity. After returning home, all participants except Crystal mentioned that they withdrew from others for a period of time. Some amount of withdrawal seemed helpful for recovery from the mission experiences and to have some time to step away from the potential judgments of others. However, prolonged withdrawal encouraged rumination and prevented participants from having positive experiences and interactions with others. Aaron shared what was happening for him during this time of withdrawal.

When I got home, I just shut everything out and I was like this person that didn't communicate with anybody. And I could feel it happening and I think my family could feel it happening, that I was just pushing everybody away and just kind of sulking in myself. "What am I doing? I let all these people down."

Aaron stated that it was the nonjudgmental and empathic friends he had who pushed him to engage with them and join them in activities. After engaging with those friends, he was able to engage with others and to withdraw less and less. Many other participants said that nonjudgmental friends and church community members who

welcomed them with love and excitement helped as well.

A particularly important and powerful relationship was with a parent who treated them with love regardless of their mission-serving status. Participants described that the biggest impact of these relationships was to help them recognize that they had an identity outside of the ERM status that was lovable. With the support of unconditional acceptance, participants were more able to separate themselves from the ERM label, allowing them to explore it with less shame and fear. Aaron said,

My dad, he just honestly, he didn't care, just because he loved me for who I was. He saw me and my potential regardless of whether I served a mission or not. Which helped me the most because that's what I needed. I needed to feel like I could do things. That my life wasn't over just because I didn't serve a mission... So that was really, really good to have.

For Crystal, unconditional love was important to have immediately upon returning and put her more at ease about her future. She shared her experience with her parents when she got off the plane. Particularly after her parents had tried to talk her into staying on her mission longer, Crystal was very concerned that she might not have their support.

But I got off the plane and I found them. And they were fine with it. ... They didn't lecture me about anything or they didn't seem disapproving. Like I just came over and they were just like, gave me these huge hugs and it was just like, love. And I was like, "Okay, it's gonna be okay."

**Empathy within the Church of Jesus Christ context.** Most participants expressed a sense of being different and that others in their context did not understand what it was like to feel different and judged in a group they identified with, which made the ERM identity more salient to them. It was difficult to connect with an identity outside of the ERM identity while participants felt so different from others in their context.

Unconditionally loving relationships were important, but another specifically identified important relationship was a connection with others who understood what it was like to feel different, judged, and misunderstood. Rocky shared that he particularly enjoyed the non-judgmental companionship of a friend in the church who was also “different” and understood.

...he saw I was there so he was like, “Kay, get in my car.” I’m like, “Oh okay...” “Just get in my car.” So we just drove around for a couple hours. And he’s not churchy at all. He is LDS but he parties, he has a bunch of tattoos, and that’s what I like: he doesn’t judge. And so it was super good.

Aaron found it particularly helpful to have a counselor who seemed to understand the judgment he felt from others within the CJC context. It seemed to increase his trust and hope in being able to work through his difficult situation and his feelings of being “different.”

I met with another psychologist that was really, really good for me. I think he had kind of been there in a sense of the whole Mormon feeling and having a shift of mindset...I felt like he just kind of knew what it was like to be judged or to feel like you’re being judged. And so he helped me work through a lot of things like that.

**Offering empathy to others.** When participants found themselves in a position to offer hope and a non-judgmental ear to others, they shared feeling a sense of purpose. Although the empathy and purpose stemmed from their experience of returning early from their mission, reaching out to others was experienced as part of a self that was bigger than the ERM identity. This was particularly important for Rocky, who was the first to return home early in his town and felt quite isolated until other missionaries started coming home early and he saw himself in a position to help them through the experience.

It was kind of nice that I was able to help them through it. Like, “Hey dude, people are gonna be mean, it doesn’t, just make jokes. It’ll be okay.” So it was kind of nice... It helps me, just knowing that there weren’t very many people for me but still there’s people, so I can do the same.

**Humor.** Alexis and Rocky both explicitly mentioned humor as a way to cope and distance themselves from the negative meanings and judgments attached to the ERM identity. Rocky said:

After a while I learned how to block it out, usually I would make a joke...and if there was ever somebody who’d bring it up, I’d be like, “Well so-and-so’s leaving on a mission and the record for the quickest come home is 32 hours so if they come home early, they’d have the record.”

Humor gave Alexis a way to express her experience in a way that repelled the negative connotation tied to the identity of ERM and sent the message that she was independent, normal, strong, and didn’t need others to feel sorry for her.

I’m able to take the bad things that have happened and turn them into jokes. ... So I’m learning to find ways to tell my story where people aren’t like, “Oh that’s heavy.” Ya know? They’re able to be like, “Woah, that’s cool that you’ve overcome that.” So finding a way to explain it for other people to see it in a positive light.

It was important some participants to use humor to cope and make light of their situation on their own terms. When others attempted to make light of it, make jokes (even the same jokes the participant had told), or otherwise teased them, it was unhelpful, harmful, and damaged relationships. As Rocky said, “I can make jokes. You can’t.”

**Holding on to what is known about self before early-returned missionary identity.** As participants connected with parts of who they felt they were and values they held before their mission, they felt peace and relief that gave them energy and courage to explore more about their experience as an ERM and what that meant about them.



Participants pondered parts of their pre-mission identities that they still valued and tried to reintegrate those identities back into their post-mission life and self. Alexis talked about how she could not be as funny or laugh as much on her mission because she felt she had to be serious most of the time. Coming home, she revisited the value of humor and decided that she wanted it as part of her post-mission identity.

I ended up looking for ways to find that identity of before my mission and that led me to think about how happy I was back then, and how people always commented on my laugh and humor so that sort of started to bring me back from that dark spot.

For others, habits that were learned during the mission were familiar and felt like some ground to stand on when trying to figure out how they wanted to navigate post-mission life. For Emma, it was important to hold onto the scripture study habits and values of her missionary identity that still made sense to her. Particularly because her illness prevented her from doing things that she had cared about before her mission, she clung to aspects of her missionary identity as a lifeline and all she felt she had left.

A lot of it was.... So, after I came home I was a different person. I tried to keep those same habits that I had learned as a missionary.... So, I just focused on getting to know Christ and helping others come to know Christ and that's kind of what I decided to do.... It was really important to me to keep that part of my identity because that is really all I had left. Or it felt like it.... I felt so broken and lost and I just didn't know what else to do. It's helped me find some purpose, when life made me feel like I didn't really have much of one, and it's just given me a reason to carry on.

**Health behaviors and pharmacological support.** Health behaviors such as eating and sleeping well were important to functioning well for participants. Additionally, pharmacological support for decreasing anxiety and depressive symptoms was helpful for some, but not all. Alexis mentioned that post-mission, medications helped

her but she had a mixed relationship with them. Ultimately, she described them positively as “a reminder of who I am now and that I am a person who is open to accepting help.”

Rocky found that he did not like medications, but more homeopathic remedies gave Rocky a sense of having something that fit for him that he could go to when he was experiencing anxiety. Rocky: “I still do it now and it’s nice to have something that was able to calm me down a little bit.” Paying attention to physical health needs connected participants to a part of their identity as a human being with a body, and outside of being an ERM.

**Nonjudgmental expression of internal experiences.** In the midst of the identity crises, participants described that they would get stuck in a downward rumination cycle of difficult thoughts and emotions and a host of conflicting ideas and feelings. Journaling, letter writing, and talking to others were identified as helpful ways of venting frustration, validating experiences, and then being able to let it go or not feel alone in their internal experiences. Non-judgmentally allowing for each emotion to be expressed connected them to a sense of self outside all of the “shoulds” and “should nots” associated with the ERM identity. For concerns, worries, and difficult emotions that did not go away after independent interventions, professional help seemed beneficial. Benjamin said, “I do think it was helpful for, just as far as like, having someone to kind of bounce things off. Because I know before, during, and after, like I’m in my head a lot....”

Participants shared a broad range of experiences with mental health professionals, some more helpful than others. Overall, psychotherapy was viewed as helpful for interrupting rumination, expressing emotions, and asking questions that participants were

unable to share with others in their communities who may have been judging them.

Crystal said,

Something that was helpful, was just being able to talk and get it out in a safe place and not have to worry about backlash of any sort.... I don't have to worry about you judging me or telling me I'm an idiot or anything like that.

Alexis expressed that for her, being in her head more and recognizing her emotions and thoughts less judgmentally was actually helpful for her to identify her needs. Being able to notice her internal experiences without ruminating was a skill that she developed on her mission that helped her cope when she returned home. “It definitely helped with my ability to recognize those moments where it’d be like, yeah, no, I need help. I realized there was a problem. I don’t know what it is exactly, but I know that I need to go see someone about it.”

**Numbing vs. soothing.** Although taking a break from difficult emotions and thoughts was soothing and helpful for being able to cope with day-to-day tasks, some participants struggled with numbing behaviors such as substance use and excessive sleep that got in the way of relationships, goals, and values. Others took breaks from difficult internal experiences by doing things for the purpose of fun, relaxation, connection with others, or comfort rather than for avoidance of discomfort. For instance, Crystal shared creative arts that she engaged in to connect with interests and parts of her identity that she enjoyed before her mission. Some participants shared that it was difficult to avoid numbing because soothing activities seemed unavailable, undeserved, or not powerful enough. Aaron said, “I did a lot, and not in a very healthy way, a lot of numbing myself, my feelings, just so that I could function day to day and have normal conversations with

people.” Shame and isolation made soothing activities seem like they were not an option, especially when participants did not feel a sense of community and support. Alexis particularly struggled with not wanting to “live the life [I] have.” She said,

I just felt judged and ridiculed and so I was just. [tears] And it was bad, ya know, so I turned to strangers and I would go and drink and smoke and do just really risky behaviors with complete strangers just so that I wasn’t alone ’cause I was so suicidal..., so you just kind of use substances and other things to avoid that.

### **Redefinition of the Early-Return Missionary Identity**

As participants were able to separate from the negative definition of an ERM, they sought to understand how being an ERM fit within their broader sense of self. Participants essentially tried to answer the question, “Am I okay as an ERM?” This typically involved exploring their emotions about being an ERM, clarifying the values behind their emotions and perceptions of their experiences, and then redefining the ERM identity to mean something different than it had previously that fit better within their conceptualization of themselves at the time of the interview. This process reduced feelings of shame and made it possible for participants to reconnect the ERM identity to personal values and integrate the ERM experience into their life narrative.

Aaron said it well when he described the difference between before his mission and when he came back home as an ERM. He had to take a closer look at what values he attached to the ERM and missionary labels, because now he was attaching them to himself.

[Before,] what I was doing was in line with what everybody else thought I should be doing. And then all of a sudden you hit this bump in the road, you’re not. Now what? You have to figure out for yourself, “Okay, where are you going to go now.

Who are you going to be after this trial?”

It is not simply the negative labels attached to the ERM identity that must be reevaluated, but also the perceived loss of the positive values attached to the RM identity they were expecting to have post-mission. This was especially true for Alexis, whose biggest motivator for going on the mission was to improve herself and become all the good things she attached to the RM identity. Alexis wondered if she could still be those good things if she could not have the RM identity that she had wanted.

You come home and think, “Well what am I?” You’re like, “oh I’m gonna be a like missionary and like I’m gonna be an RM” and all these things and then it dies, and you’re like “uhhh, what’s going on? What am I?” And it’s just like an identity crisis thing. You’re like, “well what do I do with myself?”

Participants engaged in unique ways of modifying the negatives associated with the ERM label, coming to view being an ERM as a positive, or both.

**A more complex understanding of difficulties.** Participants who came home for mental health–related issues did not understand the symptoms they were experiencing and quickly assumed that it was something wrong with them that they couldn’t just “snap out of it.” With psychoeducation and a more complex understanding of mental and physical processes, their experiences felt more understandable and less shaming. Being an ERM became more related to the processes of their body and mind instead of a personal failure. Greater understanding offered hope, making their symptoms seem less overwhelming and more manageable. The largest theme that came out of ERMs’ suggestions to mental health professionals was the desire for more understanding of potential symptoms (e.g., anxiety and depression) and wanting concrete coping skills throughout the mission experience. Emma said, “I think I really would have benefited

from some skills or from some like identifying [anxiety and depression], you know? Going through what was happening.” Several other participants mentioned the same thing.

**Getting outside of the comfort zone.** As participants got back into things like getting a job, going to school, or participating in social activities, they built up their confidence and recognized positive values that they could hold at the same time as being an ERM. Crystal said,

Just having those little booster experiences every once in a while that go, “Oh, so I can do this,” even having the occasional little victory really helps to remind me that it’s not always gonna be easy and it’s okay and that I still can do stuff.

Reengaging in their lives also helped participants to have experiences with which to evaluate and clarify their own likes and dislikes. For example, Benjamin missed the opportunity to start school when he came back, so he got a job and said it was good to get “back into being [himself] and productive.” Aaron said that setting goals and focusing on discovering the person he wanted to be helped him to see returning early as something that allowed him to be healthy enough to reach other worthy goals. “Just going through experiences and realizing that it wasn’t the end of the world and I can still be a normal, nice, kind, smart person. But it did take time, was just the biggest thing. Eventually people forget, ‘oh big deal,’ kind of thing.”

**Community support for individuality and self-responsibility.** When participants described helpful interactions with others, they almost always included a friend or family member highlighting the personal agency, individuality, and trust in the participants’ self-understanding. Through these relationships, participants were

encouraged to explore their own thoughts and feelings about what it means to be an ERM, and gave them permission to believe being an ERM is different from what others might think. Aaron's experience with the crayon metaphor by his counselor explicitly gave him permission to be the only "turtle green" in a box of crayons, and the only Aaron in his community. Emma's friend questioned Emma's need to explain herself or justify her decisions to others, especially those who did not know her or were uninvolved in her care. She realized from this interaction how much she felt she needed to be what others thought she should be and how much she had adopted others' views of her ERM status. Aaron's and Emma's experiences gave them permission to be different and be the experts on themselves.

Other participants arrived at a more independently derived redefinition of the ERM identity through community simply not pressuring them and letting them come to their own decisions with support. Benjamin said,

My family and some of the ward members and what-not, they weren't like, "kay well you gotta go to church now" and all this stuff kind of thing. They were okay to be able to take a step back and kind of just see what was going to happen. And I felt like that was probably more helpful.

Some participants went along with the pressure, feeling disconnected from themselves. Others described feeling so "turned off" by the pressure that they acted in an opposite manner irrespective of their own values and wishes. Benjamin shared how being pressured pushed him in the opposite direction.

It's like, I could probably eventually be persuaded that way but I feel like that just because it was so ram-jam, 'do it right now' fast thing that it just kind of pushed me back way further than it maybe needed to."

Loving suggestions like invitations to activities or warnings and concerns about

ineffective coping strategies tended to be received well by participants as long as individuals' agency was trusted and love was clearly communicated. When suggestions or warnings were communicated in ways that alluded to shame or judgment, participants found exploring their own ideas more aversive and isolating and were more likely to engage in avoiding behaviors. Benjamin stated that suggestions given in a judgmental tone did not respect his ability to make good decisions for himself, but felt like "you can choose to do whatever you want as long as it's our way."

**Time with self.** Different from ruminating on worries or venting emotions, participants described the value of separating themselves from the ideas and pressures from others and, instead, spending quality thoughtful time with themselves. Participants described writing in journals, meditating, and in prayer with the aim of self-reflection and understanding about being an ERM. The focus is on having time alone to investigate and sitting with the experience. Emma found studying and writing in her Book of Mormon to be vital in understanding herself outside of what others were telling her.

I felt like I didn't know who I was. A book was kind of where I turned to. I just read and read and really did a lot of searching and writing down my thoughts as they came, like little pieces of myself as they would come. It's kind of like a piece of my soul. I'm learning to trust myself or I'm learning that you really have no idea what anyone else is going through. And I'm learning that it's important for me to make decisions and trust them.

Rocky expressed going through a "phase" in which he allowed himself to feel angry with others who judged him. He described this as a "needed phase" because it allowed him to care less about what others thought of him and gave him time to figure out what he wanted to think of himself.

**Focus on the heart and desires.** When ERMs were able to focus on the "desires



of their heart,” a common phrase within the CJC community, they were able to see their ERM identity in meaningful ways. This was most salient for Aaron, who clung to the knowledge that he did want to serve a mission even though he could not do it the way he wanted to. Alexis, Emma, and Crystal also mentioned the power of looking inward at their sincere desires in order to find meaning in their ERM experience.

Emma came to see her mission as no different or of less worth than a missionary out in the field doing the same things she was doing at home in different ways. She found a richer and more flexible identity when she focused on ways of being rather than specifically what she was doing or not doing.

Additionally, an internal focus allowed some participants to feel grateful for their ERM experience because it gave them opportunities to reconnect with the desires and values of their hearts. Still others shared gratitude for their mission and return experiences because of the new values they learned about and were able to exercise in a very meaningful and personal way, such as empathy, humility, agency, and faith. Focusing on the values and abilities they learned from their experience instead of the actual events that took place or didn't take place gave the ERM experience value and purpose in their present and future life. Crystal shared how looking at what she gained internally affected her ability to accept and be grateful for her experience.

Some of the experiences that I had that I was like, “I don't understand why I'm struggling so hard on my mission,” I do understand now and I've been able to accept that and be like, “This was hard, this was rough. I needed it.” And then be grateful for it and be able to move on and remember it fondly instead of being like, “Well, why was it so hard for me? I thought I was being a good person.”

### **Acceptability Within the Context of The Church of Jesus Christ**

With a new understanding of themselves as ERMs, participants considered whether their values and identity as an ERM were acceptable within the CJC context. Redemption stories of being acceptable in the CJC doctrinally based context were helpful because they allowed participants to question and cope with the judgments of CJC others and feel that they had the option to stay within the CJC community if they wished to. They also had the option to not be an active part of the CJC community if they wished, but the separation was less due to shame and more due to values-consistent behavior for the participant. An other-member or community-based understanding of the CJC context was typically unhelpful to participants because it increased a sense of shame in the CJC context. Focusing on the CJC community experiences to discover worth and acceptability in the CJC identity also led to confusion about identity because members seemed to have varying reactions to ERMs.

The doctrine-based concept of the CJC identity serves as an overarching set of values that are said to guide, but are separate from, church policies and guidelines and the individual actions of members and leadership within the church. Some participants redefined their ERM identity to hold values that fit well with their conceptualization of the CJC doctrine (and therefore CJC identity) and felt acceptable within it. Emma, for example, redefined the ERM identity to simply be a different but equal version of the “typical” missionary and therefore felt it was acceptable within the CJC doctrine. However, that did not necessarily extend to all individuals acting within that context.

The apparent values and judgments of other CJC individuals within the

community influenced participants' decision to remain involved in the CJC community or not, helped them to redefine the ERM identity, and helped them to step back from negative definitions of the ERM identity or not. Other CJC members also had an impact on how participants interpreted the CJC doctrine and whether they associated the CJC identity primarily with doctrine or other members. This section includes themes that helped ERMs develop a sense of acceptability within the CJC context.

**Being treated like any other returned missionary.** Multiple participants shared that they were more likely to feel that they might be acceptable when others within the CJC community treated them with the same respect, interest, and excitement as they did with other RMs. When an ERM was associated with the same values and honor as any other RM, the doctrine tied to RMs was also more easily tied to ERMs, making ERMs acceptable within CJC doctrine and context. Labels and differentiating treatment on the other hand made it difficult to feel belonging in the CJC community and context. Aaron:

It's almost like a label. Like, "Oh, he returned early." If you don't get over that, it can really have a damaging effect with your relationships with people and with your church that you believe in. If you let that linger like, "Oh that's who you are. You returned home early, so you're not as worthy or you're not as belonging as some of us." I think that was kind of a weird thing, too, was trying to overcome that sense of being labeled as a "missionary that returned early. So he's different."

The acceptance from church leaders in particular had a major impact on participants. Being told that he would be honorably returned after 32 hours in the MTC, all of Rocky's distress about returning home was "just gone." This was also helpful to family members of ERMs. Alexis's mother had been distressed and wanted Alexis to return to "finish" the mission. However, when their stake president said that Alexis had served a mission even if it was shorter than 18 months, her mother was suddenly more

accepting of Alexis's choice to not return to the mission after her recovery. Conversely, when church leaders treated ERMs differently, it sent the message that the broader CJC community does not or should not find ERMs as acceptable either.

In her interview, Emma made an explicit request of others in the CJC community along these lines.

I'd like early-return missionaries to be seen as just normal people or normal missionaries because that's really what we are. We're not some taboo, or like broken community. If they wanted to understand, or do something to help us, the best they could do is to not treat us like it didn't happen, or not treat us like we didn't serve a mission, but just treat us like we are the same and not broken.

**Talking about stigma and shame.** Several participants shared that when others acknowledged the stigma they might face, it made participants better able to label the negative assumptions of other members as “stigma” instead of necessarily CJC doctrine or as a reflection of their acceptability. Rocky pointed out the stigma to other ERMs as they returned home to prepare them to not take it to heart and gave tips about how to handle it without falling into believing that they are not good enough. A mental health professional spoke with Alexis about stigma that people might have. She found this very helpful later as she experienced the judgment of others.

However, the last day, like the day before I got on the plane to go home, she came to the president's house so that she could talk to me and be like, “Yeah, people are going to make assumptions, that doesn't mean anything about who you are as a missionary or any of those things.” So that was really good.

Talking about stigma separates the negative assumptions and connotations experienced by ERMs from the CJC doctrine and makes it more about individual people who are not responsible for the definition of the ERM identity.

### **Expanding or deepening meanings behind common Church of Jesus Christ**

**phrases.** Common Church phrases came up multiple times with almost all participants.

They often came up at first as phrases that felt like proof that there was not room for them in the CJC context, but then later came up in redemption stories as their meanings had been explored, expanded, or deepened. Emma found the phrase “every member a missionary” to be helpful in understanding how her ERM experiences were acceptable to her CJC context. She saw this phrase to mean that she could be just as important a missionary at home as she could in the field.

“Forget yourself and go to work” was a common phrase that made many participants feel ashamed because they had been unable to forget about their personal concerns or continue on their mission. Crystal said that the ways she had previously understood “Forget yourself” was not possible for her though she tried as hard as she could. She later discovered that the moment she stopped doing her will was the moment she decided she needed to go home early and felt peace and a spiritual confirmation that she was doing the Lord’s will for her. Forgetting herself and getting to work then became more about doing God’s will, which for her meant taking care of herself and going home.

For others like Alexis, the phrase “forget yourself and go to work” or “In losing yourself, you find yourself” meant that the self and aspects that make a pre-missionary unique are bad or lower, and should be set aside for the mission experience. Alexis found that when she let go of her preoccupation with trying to be good enough, she found herself acceptable. As a missionary, she had seen her uniqueness as “of the world” and lower in worth than a perfect missionary. When she returned and learned to accept herself

and the unique gifts she has, she wanted to re-interpret the phrases “forget yourself” and “don’t be of the world.”

I think there’s a miscommunication within leadership, not necessarily the leaders of the church or the mission president, but I think amongst the missionaries, where they teach you to forget yourself as in forget who you are as an individual and as a person. They forget that who you are is the whole reason why you were called to the area you were called to. And so I think that was really hard to have leaders tell you that you’re not supposed to be the person who you were before, so there’s kind of an identity crisis. Like if you’re being yourself, like who you were before, you’re just being a bad missionary and you’re slacking off on your calling, and you’re being “of the world.”

Participants’ reinterpretations of these common phrases turned them from tools of judgment, shame, and isolation into tools of acceptance, inclusion, and personal guidance.

**Helpful and unhelpful assumptions.** Assumptions about why participants came home, their strength or capabilities, or their feelings about coming home were all spoken of as unhelpful. Particularly painful were the assumptions that the choice to return was easy and desired, that returning home early was entirely sad or disappointing, that they engaged in sexual sin or other mission-banned behavior, or that the missionary simply quit or gave up. People assuming she was quitting was painful for Crystal who found meaning in the fact that she chose to do God’s will for her to return home. Some participants were annoyed by others who assumed they wanted to tell their story of coming home, while others felt isolated when no one seemed interested, talked behind their back, or did not ask them about it. Emma, Alexis, and Rocky mentioned that they did not mind being asked if they would like to share, if the intention was kind and genuine. However, they did not want to feel pressured to share their story.

Helpful assumptions identified by participants included assuming that people did

not know the whole story and therefore could not judge. Recognizing and acknowledging that no one except God or Jesus Christ knows or understands the divine plan in full allowed participants to feel that understanding could be found in the CJC doctrine and church context, even if it was not found within the community or themselves. Emma reminded herself, “You don’t know them,” when she caught herself judging others. She said that her “honest belief is that we are all doing the best we can,” which helped her to both be less judgmental about others, and to be understanding when others judged her.

Many participants also felt it powerful to include that God does know and is divinely directing the paths of ERMs. This was a powerful redemption story, so long as the participant believed they were cared about by God. Crystal came upon this way of seeing her situation when another missionary shared with her how he made sense of being unable to serve in the mission area he had expected.

The companion he was with had been [waiting for a visa] for Argentina; he was having a really hard time with the fact that he'd gotten a calling to one place but was in California. His dad wrote back and said, “You know, if God could figure out exactly when he needed to create a star so that the time it takes for the light of the star to reach earth is the same day that His son was born, He could figure out where you're supposed to be.” And that worked really well with me.

This belief about God’s knowledge, understanding, and guidance allowed Crystal to sit with the unknown “whys” that still existed regarding her mission experience. If God was directing her path and understood her situation better than herself, then surely there was room for her in the CJC context regardless of her missionary status.

### **Impact of Study Participation**

Many participants mentioned that involvement in the study gave them the

opportunity to clarify aspects of their identities into a more organized and/or inclusive story. Emma said,

I liked your questions a lot. They really made me think and go back to certain spots in my life and pull experiences from them. Just kind of to be able to talk about everything and your questions kind of clarified so much. Like it was summed up.

Participation was a rare opportunity for some participants more than others because some felt that they could not, or should not, talk about their ERM experiences in their communities. Crystal said she had developed her redemption story before even getting off the plane when she returned home and felt at peace about it personally. Since then, she has shared her story many times with others and stated that participation in the study felt familiar to her. Rocky felt he would not have been able to talk about his experiences or identity as much a year prior to the interview, before he had started to develop a redemption story on his own. He might not have taken the opportunity to talk about it before he had more understanding of its meaning to him. Alexis, on the other hand, found that the opportunity to talk was the very mechanism of creating a redemption story for herself.

It felt good talking about it, because I feel like there's been so many people who told me to not bring it up. And so normally for me, I share my story if questions are asked, and so to have that opportunity where someone was asking questions about it and where I really got to think about it and process that and understand it better I think. I feel like I really understand that whole situation better and I do have a brighter outlook on it. It was healing to accept it, to open up to that, and to give myself that opportunity to really come to terms with it. I feel like I hadn't been given that opportunity before. And so it was a really valuable experience for me.

Having participants bring an artifact to the interview seemed to allow participants to explore, identify, process, and organize more emotional aspects of their story. For



every participant, artifacts highlighted the participants' most salient values through which they storied or re-storied their ERM experiences and identity. For some, the redemption stories were clearly somewhat different and perceived as richer after the artifact exercise, as was the case for Alexis and Crystal. For others, the artifact simply provided deeper explanations of the redemption or contamination stories they had told before, as it seemed for Benjamin, Aaron, and Rocky.

Participation also aided in redemption story development for some participants simply because of their reasons for wanting to participate. One of the redemption story themes was that of reaching out to others to help them feel less alone. Aaron saw his participation as reaching out to communities to educate them, hopefully making the culture friendlier for other ERMs. In a different way, Benjamin wanted to be involved in the study to find hope and belonging in the redemption and contamination stories of others. He seemed to hope that hearing other's stories might provide him with the insight and permission to create one for himself.

That's why I want to read your study and see how many people turn into 'heathens' like me and how many are able to recover and that kind of thing. Well part of it is, I want to see what the other peoples' stories are so I know how 'crazy' I am, or so I can see that hopefully some of them have some kind of hope.

### **Conclusion**

The three major themes within "helpful" and "unhelpful" coded data clarify tasks that were helpful to participants in the process of navigating their identities and developing redemption stories about their ERM experiences. Redemption stories in the data are not simply a way of characterizing narrative structure, but seemed to be integral

to successful identity developmental progression. Where redemption stories were found, grounded but flexible narratives of identities were present also. They seemed to reflexively define each other. Similarly, inflexible or unstable identities were found with contamination stories, defining each other reflexively as well. Helping an early-return missionary to develop redemption stories helps them to progress toward a healthy identity development trajectory.

The three tasks or themes seemed to occur on three levels of identity. Connecting to an identity outside the ERM identity takes place on the level of individual identity and personality traits. Redefining the ERM identity takes place on the level of the ERM experience that includes belonging to a group of individuals. Acceptability within the CJC context takes place at an even larger group level of the CJC identity that each of the ERMs identified with to lesser or greater extents. Each theme examines the identity process in each of the intersecting identities most relevant to the ERM experience.

Because the identities are intersecting and impact each other, the processes affect each other and occur simultaneously and fluidly. For example, whether participants felt acceptable in their context or comfortable with the ERM identity tended to affect the way the participants attempted to cope and whether they were able to see themselves outside of the culturally ascribed ERM identity. Additionally, a sense of belonging that arose from determining that they were acceptable (whether or not they felt accepted) within the CJC context also reduced shame and made the redefinition process less difficult or necessary. Connecting to an identity outside the ERM identity provided a safer standpoint from which redefine the ERM identity and what it means to be a member of the Church.

Redefining the ERM identity influenced the values that the participants ascribed to their individual identities and how they fit within the larger CJC context. The interplay between the themes and levels of identity emphasizes the role that identity configuration plays in developing a narrative identity of being an ERM in a CJC context.

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONSIDERATIONS**

#### **Discussion**

This is the first study to focus on the narrative identities and identity processes of ERM. The study fills a gap in the literature and provides some insight into questions many counselors and community members struggle with concerning ERM and how to play a more helpful role in their transitions to post-mission life. Anecdotally, counselors I have spoken with have expressed that they would like to understand more about how ERM make sense of the disruption in their expected identity and difficult experiences upon their return, and how to better help them in the process of sense-making. Narrative dialogs about identity-challenging experiences contained in the present study may aid clinicians in clarifying broad goals and identifying the strengths associated with this population (Pals, 2006), including those familiar and unfamiliar with CJC cultural and doctrinal contexts.

#### **Identity Configurations**

The three themes or tasks of ERM identity development identified from the data fit well with the literature on configurations of intersecting identities in that there are multiple identities that all effect how each identity is experienced and organized or integrated into a single whole self-conceptualization (Erikson, 1968; Juan, Syed, & Azmitia, 2016). Erikson's theory suggests that any process that occurs during identity configuration development may be adaptive so long as the process is successful in

accomplishing its goal.

An individual identity and an ERM identity influence each other and exist within a broader CJC context, yet the ERM identity is not only systematically silenced, but its existence and understanding of its impact on other identities is swept under the rug and uncomfortable for many in the CJC community to talk about. This aspect of the ERM's experience reflects Erikson (1968) concept of "selective repudiation." Identified as one of three processes that occur during identity configuration development, selective repudiation involves the suppression or rejection of one conflicting identity in order to alleviate a fragmented sense of self. Aaron expressed sometimes suppressing his own valued personality traits like "leader" or "strong" when they conflicted with his definition of his ERM identity. Benjamin engaged in this process as well. Benjamin coped with his inner conflict by desiring to simply reject his experience and identity as a missionary. Selective repudiation was not successful, and ultimately did not aid in the development of redemption stories between identities for Benjamin within the CJC context because the importance of a missionary or ERM identity is culturally embedded and not easily suppressed within the community or within a relationship with God. The stories of selective repudiation lacked closure or a sense of wholeness and seemed more associated with contamination stories.

Crystal's or Emma's redemption stories demonstrate Erikson's process of mutual assimilation, in which conflicting identities are merged without rejecting or neglecting either identity (Erikson, 1968; Schachter, 2004). Emma redefined her ERM identity as simply a different kind of valued mission experience, which allowed her to feel

acceptable within the CJC context as a “good member” by doctrine standards, and connected her to the traits she valued as an individual (service, close to God, learning). Crystal redefined the ERM identity to mean following God’s will, which connected her to her personal values and is also acceptable within CJC doctrine. In the ERM context, mutual assimilation seemed to come about by redefining the ERM identity to be less conflicting with both the participants’ individual and the CJC identities.

The third process Erikson (1968) describes in identity configuration development involves maintaining both conflicting identities as separate enough that they conflict less. Conflicting identities are organized in the self almost like leading a double life where both identities are valued and acknowledged but do not come in contact with each other and do not share contexts. McAdams (1997) retermed this process “confederacy.” This kind of process did not seem to arise in the data. This may be because the CJC context is all encompassing and difficult to separate from a communities where The CJC is predominant and in families in which most or all family members participate in The CJC. If there is conflict between participants’ ERM and CJC identities, the ERM identity cannot exist outside of the CJC context.

On the most individual level, ERMs focused on the personality traits that make up their individualized identities. When creating their narratives, participants seemed to focus their attention on personality traits required by the mission experience or in relation to what changed from pre- to post-mission life. The most salient personality traits identified by participants were obedience/disobedience, perfectionism, “Type A”/“Type B,” service-orientation, people pleasing, and extroversion/introversion. Each participant

talked about their pre-mission personality in terms of what did and did not fit with their experience of the traits required for their mission. Upon returning home, participants had to reassess their identity and how the ERM experience could be integrated. Participants often emphasized personality traits that had changed, for better or worse, as a result of their experience. Personality traits less salient within the ERM and missionary identity were more likely to be ignored as the ERM identity became a magnified identity or a point of fixation upon returning home early (McGuire & Padawer-Singer, 1976). Even before their mission experience, participants described themselves in ways related to their subsequent mission experience. Other aspects of themselves that were not highlighted by their mission experience, such as creativity, were mentioned only in side conversations. Thus, participants may have many other aspects of themselves that were not captured in these interviews.

Prior to their experience, participants had a stereotypical view of ERMs. Consistent with the out-group homogeneity effect, participants saw ERMs as being a homogenous group that all shared a single story (Park & Rothbart, 1982). Upon returning home, an important part of the identity process was an exploration and redefining of a group (ERMs) that was previously experienced as an “unwanted other.” The outgroup homogeneity phenomenon towards ERMs was also seen in members of the CJC community who did not understand the ERM identity or experience. After returning home, Rocky demonstrated the outgroup homogeneity effect toward ERMs, viewing ERMs as having unique stories and individualized experiences but believing ERMs to all have the same mission story and even ascribing similar personality traits to a majority of

“them” with little variability. On the other hand, Emma seemed to find healing, connection, and unity in the church context by explicitly recognizing the uniqueness of every mission experience whether an ERM or not. In the redefinition of the ERM identity, increased beliefs of heterogeneity seemed to be associated with greater acceptance of participants’ experiences.

Participants’ affect and attitudes towards the ERM identity appeared to be similar to common themes found in models of identity development for marginalized identities. Salazar and Abrams (2005) investigated several models of marginalized identity development and found that they all include

- 1) beginning with a negative view of oneself [negative view of being an ERM]; 2) questioning of stage 1 beliefs [questioning the negative view of oneself as an ERM]; 3) immersion in one’s own culture [exploring the ERM identity and wrestling with a new ERM definition. Feeling negatively about other’s judgments]; and, 4) positive view of self and others [redemption story and feeling acceptable to the larger context]. (p. 50)

Participants mentioned going through stages of feeling ashamed of their ERM identity, then feeling anger toward the CJC community or culture as they questioned the messages they had received about being an ERM. Rocky particularly demonstrated immersion as he embraced the ERM identity and sought out other ERMs in his community.

Redemption stories included the fourth theme of finding a way to integrate or appreciate both the CJC identity and ERM identity.

ERMs also needed to navigate where they fit within the broader CJC community. While they had previously belonged to the community, their status had changed as a result of becoming an “unwanted other” within the group. Participants reported feeling like second-rate CJC members based on situations that felt largely out of their control.



Their values were accepted within the CJC context, and yet they felt that returning home early from their mission was viewed as unacceptable. For many participants, the difference between how their values were viewed and how their circumstances were viewed seemed to expose a dichotomy between CJC doctrines/beliefs and CJC socially acceptable behaviors or culture. For some participants, the realization of the dichotomy became redemptive as they sought belonging within the doctrinal aspects of the CJC identity. It connected them to their values and gave them understanding and a way to cope with disapproval and isolation from the CJC social culture. An internal focus on CJC values rather than how the values are “supposed to” look externally allowed participants to feel acceptable within the broader CJC context.

Others did not experience the doctrine–social dichotomy as clearly, combining the social aspects of the religion and external circumstances associated with CJC values with the doctrines. A social understanding of doctrine made it difficult for participants to separate from the judgments of others and find a sense of acceptance. A focus on the external aspects of the CJC context was limiting and created a reflexive relationship between the limits of the CJC identity and feelings of estrangement/disapproval. As participants felt more disconnected from the CJC context, they seemed to see the context as requiring external homogeneity, and as they thought external homogeneity was the only way to be accepted, they felt they did not belong all the more. When a religion becomes a “cookie-cutter” religion, as Alexis called it, in the minds of its members perhaps fewer and fewer people feel acceptable within it. In CJC literature, unity is emphasized as a core value. Quentin L. Cook, a member of the twelve apostles of The

CJC, emphasized that one of the teachings of the gospel is equity for all and not judging others' circumstances (Cook, 2018). However, it is clear that while a culture directly aligned with doctrines of equity and non-judgment would be ideal, human beings are imperfect and there exists a need for individuals within the CJC context to conceptualize and understand the frequent conflicts between CJC doctrinal values and the actions or perceptions of the diverse individuals who represent the CJC community.

Other major identity factors that appeared in the narratives and were salient in participant identity configurations were mental health status and gender. Having mental illness stigma on top of stigma related to being an ERM may have had a major effect on participants because they confounded the identity process with shame from multiple directions. Researchers on stigma suggest that individuals with multiple stigmatized identities face challenges that are unique from individuals who claim only one marginalized identity, particularly in regards to effects of stereotype threat (Tine & Gotlieb, 2013).

This is the first study to include female ERMs in a qualitative investigation. All the female participants seemed to develop redemption stories more easily than the male participants. Roadblocks to the men's creation of redemption stories were related to being "weak" or not "faithful" to their "duty." These words reflect the importance of gender roles both in the broader western culture and in the CJC context specifically since there are different expectations around gender and full-time missionary service. It may be particularly helpful for male ERMs to examine gender role expectations and how they are communicated to men and boys to facilitate creation of a successful redemption story.

The current study gives a voice to ERMs who have been silenced and marginalized within the CJC context. The qualitative nature of this study allowed for greater depth of understanding ERM experiences from participants' point of view and was designed to allow for counterstories to the stories of those in power. Additions to this area of research can build bridges between the contexts ERMs participate in and their experiences of isolation, and will provide further validation to ERMs that their experiences and stories matter.

### **Narrative Identity**

The literature on narrative inquiry and narrative identity often mentions the importance of redemption and contamination stories as classifications of narratives within identity and their connections to subjective well-being (McAdams et al., 2001; Tavernier & Willoughby, 2012). Redemption stories are correlated with greater subjective well-being while contamination stories are correlated with low subjective well-being (McAdams et al., 2001). However, outside of Tavernier and Willoughby, few longitudinal studies have been done to demonstrate clear causal relationships between the development of redemption stories and increased subjective well-being.

In another area of investigation, positive psychology holds a similar premise termed "reality negotiation," which posits that a positive reframing of difficult events or internal private experiences is a tool to decrease suffering (Higgins, 2002; Snyder, 1989; Snyder & Higgins, 1988). The present study emphasizes the important role of values in positive reframes of reality or the development of redemption stories. Benjamin's positive reframe was not ultimately redemptive because empathy seemed to be a value

less salient to him at the time of the interview than agency.

The cultivation of redemption stories is as much a mechanism of healthy identity development as a product of it, particularly in regards to the experiences participants shared about engaging in the study. Similarly, redemption stories or the lack thereof seem associated with not well-being directly per se, but progress or stagnation within identity development. This aligns with previous research on the power of narratives to construct identities and self-concepts (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Further, narrative identity development is associated with greater well-being (King, 2001; McAdams et al., 2001; Pals, 2006). Therefore, the construction of value-laden redemption stories may indirectly influence subjective well-being. Further investigation would be needed to better understand these relationships.

The narratives shared in the study fit well with the identity development model by Marcia (1966). Contamination stories are related to the identity diffusion and foreclosure stages of identity development where participants avoided identity issues related to their ERM experiences or accepted what others told them about what it meant to be an ERM. Redemption stories signified identity achievement. Most participants were in the moratorium stage of identity development at several points between the time of returning home and participating in the study. For Alexis in particular, participating in the study allowed her to “try on” different narratives of her experience and move toward identity achievement in some aspects of her identity.

One aspect of the study results that is not explicitly represented in the identity development model is the impact of intersectionality and the importance of flexibility.

McAdams and McLean (2013) assert that the most powerful theme in redemption stories is that of “exploration,” where individuals adapt their life-narratives to identity challenges by emphasizing the exploration that occurred. The redemption stories in this study included a stable, articulated sense of self, one that was open to being re-storied and re-viewed as it was confronted by anticipated future identity challenges. As ERMs construct their narratives and develop redemption stories, they may find it powerful to focus on the value of the exploratory process itself, as Alexis did with her understanding of “decisions and revisions” in the process of personal development.

The simple act of having an opportunity to think about, question, and talk about their ERM experiences in a nonjudgmental and interested environment was enough for some participants to develop redemption stories on their own during participation in the study. Minimally, helping ERMs explore their identity in a nonjudgmental setting seemed to be helpful. Mental health professionals who understand the identity development tasks faced by ERMs, are willing to honor and witness their stories, and can facilitate the process of flexibly re-storying their experience will provide a tremendous benefit to ERMs. Mental health professionals can help individuals integrate their ERM experience as a helpful and strengthening experience for their core sense of self moving forward, whether or not they look back on the experience fondly.

### **Contextual Limitations and Considerations**

The current phenomenological study is situated in a context that impacts the implications of the results. The focus of this study was to capture and shed light on the

identity development process of ERMs within the CJC context. Six individuals participated in the study and consequently likely did not capture all of the nuances of the ERM narrative identity development process. However, saturation of themes was reached after coding the fourth participant's interviews. The understanding of ERM identity development gained from this study reflects the experience of White emerging adults living in communities where the CJC faith is predominant.

The present study hints at some interesting differences in the experiences of male and female participants. Since the primary focus was on the shared phenomena underlying ERM experiences, any speculation about how the ERM identity development processes vary between genders is preliminary. There may be important differences in the identity development process of ERMs for men and women that have not yet been explored.

It is important to acknowledge my role in the analyses and interpretation of the findings. Bracketing is used to be aware of bias and being transparent about how my biases influence how I see the data. Given my education in psychology and my clinical training in therapeutic settings, I have biases that guided how I coded redemption and contamination stories. For example, in my clinical work I tend to emphasize value-laden goals rather than the avoidance of pain in order to connect with a sense of self, though I believe connecting with a sense of self through discovering and living in line with personal values lessens suffering. In analysis, some participants were explicit about redemptive stories, but others simply shared events or relationships that impacted something I perceived as a positive outcome, such as clarifying or acting in line with a

personal value even amidst great hardship. My clinical perspective leads me to look for the role that participant values play in their narratives and identity. I sought to stay true to the participant's point of view when participants were less explicit about their perspective of the redemptive or contaminative qualities of a narrative and used participants' values to guide my coding decisions. My clinical experience also influenced how I interpreted helpful and unhelpful actions when participants did not clarify their feelings about their own actions.

I am also a member of the CJC faith and have awareness of cultural issues in a predominantly CJC community. This was a strength of the analysis in some ways because I was no stranger to the context and common meanings or values behind church and mission experiences, could connect common cultural phrases in the doctrinal contexts in which they are typically used, and could recognize CJC cultural norms and emphases. Personally, I see differences between doctrine or God, the church policies, and the social norms and rules within the CJC context. As mentioned at the beginning of this study, I am passionate about recognizing the differences between these aspects of the CJC context, and this passion played a major role in my perception of how ERMs are tasked to navigate their understanding of what it means to be members of the Church. The dichotomy between doctrinal beliefs/values and external social normative aspects of the CJC culture were demonstrated and expressed by the participants in the data, but I may have been more attuned to seeing the dichotomy as an important piece of the phenomena. Other researchers may not have organized the dichotomy as I did without my understanding of the CJC context already in place. This structure is how I personally deal

with conflicts I see between experiences in CJC communities and my personal values that I ascribe to what it means to be a member of the Church. I may have relied on this structure partly as a way I understand perceived conflicts within church context and partly out of hope that the structure may be of help for others who struggle with the actions of representatives of the CJC.

### **Future Directions**

While the current study adds much to the limited literature on CJC ERMs, the study also raises meaningful questions for further study. It would be interesting to study gender differences in the phenomenon of making sense of the ERM identity. It may also be important to give voice to ERMs who come from areas in the world where they are the religious minority or look more closely at the impact of diversity experiences on the ERM identity development process.

A study of participants who are a minority in other ways such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, or disability status may also provide insight into the complex relationships between intersecting identities. Particularly stigmatized identities may profoundly complicate the identity development process, as seemed to be the case for Alexis, who experienced stigma related to mental illness on top of an ERM identity. Since the majority of ERMs return with significant mental health–related concerns, it seems worthwhile to focus specifically on the effects of mental illness stigma on making sense of the ERM identity and experiences.

It is well known in the CJC social context that RMs who served their expected



amount of time also have to adjust their concepts of self when they come home, with many struggling in the process. It would be interesting to investigate and understand the identity development of RMs who did not return early and illuminate factors that are unique to RMs and ERMs.

Investigations to assess the efficacy of helpful and unhelpful strategies found in this study could provide further understanding of what might be most effective for helping ERMs find redemption stories and a more secure sense of self. In providing services to ERMs, finding ways to put ERMs in contact with each other might help them normalize their experience, provide hope and support, and help them move toward clarifying values, decreasing shame, and addressing stigma. A therapeutic group or workshop may be an avenue to provide them with the non-judgmental experience that participants identified as helpful by participating and perhaps provide a structure for them to get those things that are helpful to their own identity development process. With limited evidence, mental health practitioners are tasked with finding ways to give voice, support, and understanding to a silenced minority within the CJC context.

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APPENDIX  
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS



## First Interview

Focus: Context and experience of events

### Introduction

“Thank you for meeting with me today. I wanted to take some time to talk about and understand your mission experience. I want to start with the period of time before your mission, and then talk about the time while you were on your mission, and then talk about your return from your mission. I really want to understand your experience and what was meaningful and important to you during these times. Do you have any questions before we begin?”

### Before Mission

- Tell me about the time when you decided to go on a mission, submitted your papers, and received your mission call.  
*Listen for: expectations of other, self, and the experience; importance to self and identity; views of other missionaries.*
- What was most important to you or stands out the most about that time?
- What did your planned mission experience mean to you at that time?
- Did you engage in any counseling or mental health services before your mission?  
*Listen for: stigma; views, expectations, and goals of therapy, connections to identity.*
- If you could change anything about your experience at this time, what would you change and why?

### During Mission

- Now tell me a bit about your time on your mission.  
*Listen for: roles and identity; relationships, expectations of others, self, and experience.*
- What was the most important to you or stands out the most about this time on your mission?
- What did the mission experience mean to you at this time?
- Did you engage in any counseling or mental health services while on your mission?  
*Listen for: expectations, attitudes, and views of therapy; helpful or unhelpful? Connections to identity.*
- If you could change anything about your mission experience, what would you change and why?

### After Returning Home

- Now with the rest of our time I'd like to understand more about your experience of returning home from your mission. Tell me a bit about that experience.  
*Listen for: roles, relationships,*
- What is most important to you or stands out to you the most about that time?

- What did returning home early mean to you at that time?
- How were you received when you returned home?  
*Listen for: family, friends, congregation.*
- How would you like your early-return experience to be understood by others?
- Did you engage in any counseling or mental health services after returning home?  
*Listen for: stigma, expectations/goals, helpful/unhelpful experiences, connections to identity.*
- If you could change anything about your experience of returning home, what would you change and why?

### Closing

“Thank you so much for your honest sharing of your experiences. It was an honor to understand a little bit more about how you experienced your mission and the process of returning home. Before we wrap up, is there anything we did not discuss that you’d like to add or would be important for me to know or understand about your experience?”

## Second Interview

Focus: Identity

### Introduction

“Thank you for coming again to talk with me about your mission experience. Last time we met we talked about your experiences before, during and after your mission. Are there any thoughts about our last conversation that you’d like to share, or anything you’d like to add, clarify, or ask about before we begin a new conversation?”

“Okay, in our time together today, I’d like to focus on understanding more about who you felt you were before your mission and who you feel you are now, after your mission and return experience. I asked you to bring in two artifacts to represent yourself before and after your mission, respectively. Is there one that you’d like to start with?”

### Before Mission Artifact

- Tell me a bit about why you chose this to represent yourself before your mission and return experience.

*Listen for: feelings/attitudes toward this identity*

- Could you describe any experiences related to your mission or returning home that really challenged or confirmed this sense of identity?

*Listen for: differences between identity and “supposed to be” or others’*

*expectations?*

- Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about who you feel you were before your mission?

### After Mission Artifact

- Tell me a bit about why you chose this to represent yourself after returning home from your mission.

*Listen for: feelings/attitudes toward this identity.*

- When you think back on your mission and returning experience, are there any experiences that stand out as confirming or challenging this sense of who you are?

*Listen for: differences between current identity and “supposed to be” or others’*

*expectations? Helpful and unhelpful interactions/attitudes.*

- Is there anything else you’d like to tell me about who you feel you are after your mission and early-return experience?

### Perceptions of Others

- How do you think other people see “early-returned missionaries” and how does that affect or not affect you?

*Listen for: how is it the same or different from self-view?*

- How would you like others to view you after your early-return experience?

### Closing

“Thank you again for meeting with me and telling me about who you are and who

you have been. It has been a pleasure getting to know you a little bit. Before we wrap up today, is there anything we haven't discussed regarding your mission and return experiences and your sense of self that you would like to talk about? Do you have any questions for me?"

"In similar studies, some individuals have experienced some distress in discussing some of these topics that we have been talking about. How has this been for you?" (If appropriate, provide handout with available mental health resources in the area).