5. Discussion

‘He who has a why to live can bear almost any how’.

Friedrich Nietzsche

In this chapter a brief overview is provided and the results presented in chapter four are discussed. The quantitative findings are first discussed in detail followed by the qualitative interview. Excerpts are used to illuminate the themes that emerged; findings are also discussed, taking into consideration similar reports in the literature.

5.1. Overview of the study

This study started with three research questions: (1) Are socio demographic factors related to meaning in life for a sample of Mizo women in midlife? (2) What is the level of presence of meaning in life and level of search for meaning in life for the Mizo women in midlife? (3) What do Mizo women in their midlife consider meaningful in their life? This study was designed to explore and describe the Meaning in life of Mizo women in midlife. In order to test the research question, 743 midlife women (defined by the age range of 40 years to 55 years of age) were recruited as volunteers to complete one instrument and a demographic questionnaire. The results of the study were explored by conducting a descriptive analysis of the participants and their answers to the instrument items, by calculating the reliability of the instruments used, and by statistical analyses of the data.
For the first research question, to establish what socio demographic factors contribute to meaning in life in women in midlife, a correlation was conducted among variables. A Chi-Square test of association was run and found statistical relationship with meaning in life and hobbies, education level, family income, religion and post menopause.

The second research question -what is the level of presence of meaning in life and level of search for meaning in life, was addressed by conducting a survey using the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ). For this a correlational and frequency analysis was done of Presence and Search of the MLQ.

Question three is addressed in-depth through qualitative semi-structured interviews with participants. For this a thematic network analysis was applied.

5.2. Discussion of the results

For the purpose of this study we define meaning as – the sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one’s being and existence (Steger, Frazier, Oishi & Kaler, 2006). Meaning in life is understood as an individual, subjective construct. Therefore, participants’ reports of meaning in their lives will be taken at face value since they are the ultimate experts concerning what makes life meaningful for them.
A total of 743 midlife Mizo women participated in this study. Three research questions were addressed and following is a discussion of the results of the data analysis.

Demographic variables were included to establish what demographic factors contribute to meaning between Meaning in Life (MLQ) as the dependent variable and the demographic variables as independent variables (e.g. age, marital status, educational level, family income, employment, occupation, hobby, menopausal) a Chi-Square test was run. In the qualitative interviews marital status was found to be giving purpose. Three of the five participants interviewed mentioned that the relationship they had with their spouse had contributed to their life purpose. Pi Zuali is married to her husband for 32 years and Pi Pari is married for 13 years. When asked about her relationship, Pi Zuali responded:

‘Now in the world, we get married and have children. Then when we are a family we have children. Also as follower of Christ, living faithfully and in my everyday work living and doing things well… Living for my husband and my children is my life purpose’.

(Participant Zuali, 54 years old teacher)

Pi Pari, 47 year old with terminal illness responded:

‘He’s a gentleman. True gentleman, very polite. Not only in public, it’s also in private between us. Very good man. Now a thing like cancer has hit us. This time we went together, spent more than a week cooped up in the hospital together. We were just content together the whole time, this is how we are as husband and wife, unusual couple’.
It is possible that with marital status the participants find meaning with their spouse in the shared experiences as in caring for children and family and in travelling together for the cancer treatment. The togetherness and spouse standing alongside during difficult times gave purpose and meaning to the women.

Education is significantly related to meaning in life for this sample (Smithson, 2011). Findings from this study demonstrate that high levels of education contributed to high presence of meaning in life. As in previous research it is seen that women who had more education find meaning in life in educational accomplishments and careers (Smithson, 2011). Alternatively it could mean the nature of occupation pursued following higher education is likely to be meaningful, or education cultivates a way of thinking and living that increases meaning in life as supported by a study done by Waddell (2012). This was also supported in the participant interviews. Pi Zuali, Pi Rotei, Pi Lawmi and Pi Pari all testified that their work has contributed to their meaning in life, whether as primary school teacher, junior engineer, associate professor in a university and a lecturer in college. Meaning may also be found in the high social status and recognition that accompany higher education level in the small Mizo community (Pinquart, 2002). Pi Vari even though having a post graduate degree had chosen to be a homemaker and at midlife desired to contribute to society through volunteer work and finding a purpose in this. The four married women did not express hardship in combining their roles of mother, wife, and career women. All the women were ‘content’ with who they were, with what they did, not aiming to obtain success or advancement from their careers, but rather were grateful to God. Participants focused on the meaning in life from a godly perspective (Song, 2011).
In this study a significant relation between family income and meaning in life was found. Previous research supports this finding, linking income to well-being and meaning in life for midlife women (Smithson, 2011). Having a personal pay check and professional identity may be important for women in this age group as they evolve and reflect on their lives. For Mizo women this is a paradigm shift from past traditional roles of marriage and staying at home to raise children and care for the family to going out and earning, competing in a man’s world.

In this study a significant relation between hobby and meaning in life was revealed. These findings are supported by observations made by Zhang et al (2013), who suggest that the positive emotions experienced during leisure activities have mediated to the presence of meaning in life. Leisure activities differ between Western and the Eastern culture. Researchers have found that Asian Chinese people tend to prefer passive leisure activities such as reading books and chatting with family members (Yin, 2005); whereas Western people tend to prefer more active leisure activities. Based on previous research leisure is defined as ‘the time given to freely chosen activities performed when not involved in self-care or work’ (Chen et al. 2013). Similarly, leisure activities can be defined as ‘activities that individuals engage in for enjoyment or well-being which are independent of work or activities of daily living’ (Verghese et al. 2006). Leisure provides opportunity to freely initiate doing activities based on personal preferences. Engaging in leisure activity, research has shown that it helps people gain valued meaning in life and enhanced psychological well-being. However research findings also indicate leisure activity may not always benefit
psychological well-being, whereby they are controlled by their passion such as when people participate in gaming and gambling (Lemmens et al. 2011; Petry, 2006). Pi Pari mentioned enjoying reading and when she was waylaid by cancer, reading books written by cancer survivors has helped to prepare her to face her terminal illness. Pi Vari shared about her interest in travelling and reading. Now that her children are older she can leave them to care for her aging mother-in-law and husband too, as he does not enjoy travelling as much. Pi Vari enjoys the new experience that gives broader view and travel allows experiencing different cultures. It also gives her time to reflect on her life, when she is outside her normal life.

To determine if there was any significant difference in the mean levels of meaning in life and different stages of menopause, a one-way ANOVA was calculated. It appears variables of mean of meaning in life based on menopause status did not show any statistically significant relationship for meaning in life in this sample. This could be because menopause is not considered as a threat but a natural event. Amongst the interview participants, health status was not particularly mentioned. Of the five interview participants, two experienced significant health problems. These two participants did not mention that their ill health contributed to their meaning in life, but discussed how their health difficulties and thought of death made them reflect more on their life and the future. Midlife has often been defined based on physical and menopausal symptoms with insufficient attention given to how the experience might be unique for an individual woman (Woo, 2012). In her study of Chinese women executives making meaning in midlife Woo (2012) observed that contrary to prevailing
assumptions that the experience at any life stage is generally the same for all women, the participants in her study demonstrated they were physically fit, attractive, financially independent. Internally they were engaged in self-exploration, realising the need for more time for self. Consistent with the finding of Woo (2012) engaging in self-reflection and self-exploration the Mizo midlife women could look beyond the present and imagine the future and find ways to balance what is important in their lives, leading to renewed energy and optimism about the future. The participants in this study were attractive, fit and always on the go, had an infectious ‘can do’ spirit, were involved in projects outside the home, had alternate interests, were confident in themselves and had a positive outlook. This finding is contrary to how midlife women have traditionally been portrayed in the literature as depressed, irritable, frustrated, and intellectually dull (MacPherson, 1995; Markson & Taylor, 2000). Further, Marcus-Newhall et al. (2001) found in two separate studies that there existed a negative stereotype of middle-aged, menopausal woman associating them with negative moods. The present findings indicate the stereotype is inaccurate and midlife women display similar levels of wellness regardless of their menopause status.

Studies on menopause done across a range of ethnic population reveal differences in social attitudes and experiences, indicating that menopause is a social and culturally constructed phenomena (Im, Lee, Chee, Brown, and Dormire, 2010, Shore, 1999). How women view menopause and respond to it are affected by their cultural background. In the West, menopause in intertwined with aging, loss of youth, loss of sexuality and so there is silence surrounding this (Herzig, 2006). However
women in India, Thailand, Japan, Zimbabwe and Israel welcomed the freedom from menstruation related worries, could go where they want, wear what they want. There is so much relief experienced (Kaur, Walia, Singh, 2004; Punyahotra, Dennerstein and Lehert, 1997).

For the second research question a correlational and frequency analysis was done of Presence and Search of the MLQ. Data presented in Table 14 shows that 72% (n = 534) are searching for meaning and 1.5% (n = 11) have high presence of meaning in life in this sample. This finding is supported by previous research where participants at all age groups reported mean scores above the midpoint in search for meaning subscale (Steger, 2009). The search for meaning in life is associated with lower well-being. One explanation for high search for meaning in this sample could be the women continue to seek out richness in their experiences and the need for new roles in the midlife transition (Steger, 2009). The finding was further supported by the qualitative interviews, where the third global theme states, search for meaning is a lifelong project. Pi Rotei mentioned:

‘I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful- this is somewhat true. I know I can do more to find meaning and purpose in my life but I do not know it completely. Humans we keep changing our life. As long as we live in this world this will never end… in our everyday life there are things that we need to get rid of, we need to dispose of them. If there are things that I know can add to enrich my life I add and this gives the right meaning to my life’.

(Participant Rotei, 43 year old newly married)
A possible reason that women in this study search for meaning, it’s not that their life is devoid of meaning. Rather, they may be continuously exploring avenues to enhance meaning in their lives. This was recognised by Erik Erikson (1959) a developmental psychologist known for his theory on psychosocial development of human beings, who says that in the second half of life people close the circle of their life. This closing is not done linearly. It points to the possibility of a new beginning, to renewal. That renewal can happen in the second half of life. Sometimes the same beginning is expressed as a return to the wonderful traits of childhood: curiosity, joy of life, search for the magic and wonders of nature, and discovery of their meaning.

For the third research question ‘what do Mizo women in their midlife consider meaningful in their life,’ a qualitative data was observed for which in-depth semi-structured interview guide was used. The current study utilised a phenomenological, heuristic approach focused on the experience of five women to gain in-depth understanding of what Mizo women in midlife consider meaningful in their lives. Five Mizo women whose ages ranged from 42 to 54 participated in the in-depth interviews of varying lengths (60 to 75 minutes). Data was obtained from semi-structured interview transcripts, conducted in locations of the participants’ choosing, most often at their homes and one in a quaint coffee shop. An analytic tool for qualitative research, thematic networks was used to organise the data. The women were contacted again to give them a copy of the interview transcripts to affirm and validate that the accounts were an accurate representation of their experiences. Each transcript showed four
global themes that emerged from the present sample: Family care and support give meaning, Serving God provides purpose in life, Search for meaning is a lifelong project, Midlife provides independence and the ability to contribute to society.

5.3. Family care and support give meaning

Contacts with family and social circle give support both physical and emotional which creates a deep sense of meaning and well-being to the women participants in this study. The aspect of connectedness and providing care and support to family is significant in having meaning in life. This could indicate that being in a family as Low and Molzahn (2007) found that emotional support was a significant predictor of purpose in life. A similar trend was reported by Fleer et al. (2006); found among testicular cancer survivors, those who had a partner had higher meaning than those who did not have a partner. The reason could be that the additional support a person gains from a partner helps buffer against the effects of psychological problems. Furthermore a study among 100 married and unmarried corporate employees in north India examined their construct of meaning in life, revealed the married employees perceived their families to be of most important to spend time with and give consideration to in the face of crisis. On the other hand the unmarried employees gave recreational activities the maximum importance (Singhal and Rastogi, 2015). Empirically we see that people usually draw meaning from multiple sources: family, love, work, religion and various personal projects. These multiple sources protect the individual against meaninglessness. Even if family life leads to divorce, the person still has work and religion to furnish meaning
(Singhal and Rastogi, 2015) as we see validated in the life of Pi Lawmi, who was divorced three years after her marriage. She was no doubt in distress, and it was her work, religion and involvement in volunteering that gave her a new lease on life. Other participants in the current study validate the finding that people draw meaning from multiple sources; this protects against meaninglessness.

5.4. Serving God provides purpose in life

Participants in this study focused on meaning in life from a godly perspective. Each of the women interviewed testified that God is central in their life and identified themselves as God’s children. So as a child of God, serves and helps the community they live in. In the quantitative finding, analysis show a similar statistical significant relation between meaning in life and religion. The same is supported by literature findings that presence of meaning is positively associated with religiosity for both students and faculty in South India (Latha, Sahana, Mariella, Subbannayya, & Asha, 2013) as well as among Egyptian college sample have been observed (Abdel-Khalek, A. M. (2011). Emmons (2005) discussed the role of religious and spiritual goals in predicting psychological well-being. These meaningful goals are oriented towards the sacred and are concerned with ultimate purpose, meaning, commitment to a higher power, and seeking the divine in everyday life. Most of the Mizo midlife women interviewed shared of being involved in church activities and regular attendance to church services. This refers to the practices engaged by members of a social organisation, the outward worship, creed and theology, which reflect the understanding of God (Ellens, 2008). There is also the spiritual dimension experienced by the women
in this study; they voiced their belief in a larger plan, something beyond mortal existence, knowing that despite all the ups and downs in life there is something more that gives meaning and value to their lives. Freeman (1998) a Christian theorist said that spirituality ‘...represents concern with the transcendent dimensions of life’. A study in Punjab by Trama and Venus (2012) observed having spiritual transcendence orientation may help adults view life objectively making them see their true meaning or purpose. This was expressed by PVari who spoke of everything passing away, yet still sees a purpose in life – ‘When compared to eternity, nothing is nothing. Because of this, in the back of my mind this thought is always there... lurking. It's always there... while I am here in this earth, in his tapestry I have a place in the weave. God has a purpose for me in this world and I want to fulfil that purpose’. Religion probably fosters a framework of life filled with meaning, a sense of a higher power guiding. Ellens comments that spirituality is used to describe an inner, subjective experience that makes us feel a strong interest in understanding the meaning of things in life (Ellens, 2008). It is the human potential dealing with ultimate purposes, higher entities, God, love, compassion and purpose (Tart, 1975).
Recent research has employed attachment theory as a framework for understanding a sense of closeness to God and has since been applied in analysis of adult relations (Hazan and Shaver 1994). The theory outlines three styles of attachment: anxious, insecure, and secure (Kirkpatrick 2004). The secure attachment style represents relations of love, support, warmth, approval, and intimacy with others. In this way, a loving view of God operates to boost a sense of meaning through perceptions of personal intimacy with God and confidence in God’s concern and care. (Kirkpatrick 2004).

Religion has long been recognized as a central source of meaning in life, providing individuals with core beliefs, expectations, and goals, and placing the individual’s life into a larger, more ultimate context (Batson & Stocks, 2004; Emmons, 2005; Steger & Shin, 2010). Faith is associated with self-reported meaning in life (Steger & Frazier, 2005) and religious belief has a meaning relevant function of well-being (Steger & Frazier, 2005).

5.5. Search for meaning is a lifelong project

Viktor Frankl (1963, 2006) is commonly cited in meaning in life research as a founding inspiration. Frankl argued that people function best when they perceive a sense of meaning and possess a life purpose, a unique mission to strive for throughout their lives. Meaning in life is widely considered to be a critical ingredient in human well-being and flourishing (Seligman, 2011; Steger, Kashdan, & Oishi, 2008). Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are
more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years (Steger, 2012). Meaning in life thus refers to the understandings that we develop of who we are, what the world is like, and how we fit in with and relate to the grand scheme of things (Heine, Proulx, & Vohs, 2006). This echoes what Pi Vari said, ‘It’s always there… while I am here in this earth, in his tapestry I have a place in the weave. God has a purpose for me in this world and I want to fulfil that purpose. I look at life and I know my life’s meaning’. Pi Vari in her self-exploration recognise that she has a place in the grand scheme of things.

Pi Zuali saw her life as senseless and having no meaning, it was meaningless, which an eminent existential philosopher Albert Camus defined as ‘absurd’, as day in and day out we do the same thing over and over again. For Pi Zuali as she continued on her path of self-exploration she came to understand that God had a plan and purpose for each one of us - ‘But then when I kept pondering on this, that God wanted us to be born, each and every one of us. This was a revelation to me and made me see why we were in this world. So our parents gave birth to us and the reason I am born that will give meaning in my life … the way I see it is I am a woman, I have a husband, have children, have a family this is my meaning’. The meaning of ‘meaning in life’ is largely left to the intuition of respondents. For instance, in the current research individuals were asked to rate themselves on items such as ‘I have a good sense of what makes my life meaningful’ (from the Meaning in Life Questionnaire; Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006). Such measures allow us to study the experience of meaning in life in a way that is close to its phenomenological roots, or whatever it is, humans know it when they feel it. ‘Life can be viewed holistically:
The whole of life is meaningful, and therefore, every moment in life is meaningful. As the whole of life has meaning, every person is intended, every person’s situation offers unique meaning possibilities to be fulfilled (Lukas, 1984)

Life calls on us to choose between meaningful and not meaningful. And life expects us to give an answer. Viktor Frankl's book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (2006) which ends with a chapter on 'Tragic Optimism' expresses the view that everything can be taken away from a human being, except the last area of freedom – the freedom to choose one’s attitude toward circumstances.

In a recent study carried out by Steger and his group of researchers (2013) which was contrary to the usual quantitative manner of collecting data. He came up with a 'new method' where he made use of photography to explore the sources of meaning in one’s life. The methods of using photography were of two kinds: auto-photography and photo-elicitation. The former method asked individuals to take photographs of whatever it is that made their lives meaningful, it could be people, places and things; and the latter method engaged these individuals for an interview eliciting responses from them as to what each photograph meant to them and why it was meaningful. The latter method of photo-elicitation revealed a total of 16 sources. They were nature, hobby/leisure, relationships, pets, possessions, everyday necessities, religion, values, education, technology, organisations/activities, physical environment, future aspirations, occupation/work, self and miscellaneous. Steger et al. (2013) stressed the relevance of using a qualitative approach in this study in enriching the data.
Frankl makes it perfectly clear that the meaning in life is an individual thing that changes with time and circumstances: ‘Life does not mean something vague, but something very real and concrete, just as life’s tasks are also very real and concrete. They form man’s destiny, which is different and unique for each individual. No situation repeats itself, and each situation calls for a different response (Frankl, 2006). This is precisely what Pi B resonated that she had a good sense of meaning in her life, but it is not complete, not ended, ‘to do more to find meaning and purpose in my life but I do not know it completely’. Frankl goes on to suggest that it did not really matter what we expected from this life, but rather what life expected from us, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life - daily and hourly (Frankl, 2006).

Much has been learned about how goals contribute to long-term levels of psychological well-being, and how they act as a deep and meaningful basis for people’s sense of continuity (Karoly, 1999). Goals can provide a route for a person’s life; they suggest a mission that can motivate a person for long periods of time, organising their activity toward long-term, highly valued goals. Lent (2004) discussed meaning in life in relation to goals, defining them as consciously articulated, personally important objectives that individuals pursue in their daily lives. The women in our study spoke of having goals that are meaningful.
5.6. **Midlife provides independence and the ability to contribute to society.**

Some life span studies have found that contentment with life goes up slightly with age, pleasant affect declines slightly, and negative affect does not change (Seligman, 2004). As Borysenko (1996) commented, regarding midlife women:

This period of transition, while it involves considerable reflection, is not necessarily a crisis. It is a developmental stage rather than a psychological emergency and for emotionally healthy women it is not a time of crazed acting out, driven by fears of being over the hill. It is a time of calculated, rational action. For some women, however, the normal stress that occurs during the midlife transition does precipitate a psychological crisis either because unresolved problems from previous parts of the life cycle to determine their coping capacities, or unrelated major stresses similarly overwhelm their ability to cope... even reasonably well adjusted women may have periods of feeling “over the edge” when various life stressors conspire to make life temporarily unmanageable. To call this a midlife crisis however, would be a misnomer. It would be a life crisis that just happens to be occurring during a woman’s midlife transition.

Midlife is seen as time for possibilities and not a crisis as we see in the lives of the women participant interviewed for the current study. The women were in a midlife developmental stage and based on their own self-evaluations, were not experiencing a psychological emergency that diminished their usual physical and mental capacities. It is noteworthy that at midlife four of the five women participants were involved in voluntary activity in some form or the other. One woman was involved in training and mentoring marginalised women and women who were HIV positive through assisting in setting up small scale business ventures. One was involved in non-government organisations that provide awareness on prevention of HIV and AIDS and working with youth with depression. Two women participated in the church Social Front activities. For these women their identity as God’s children and attaining of salvation by grace
motivated them to be God’s hands and feet and to serve people who were in need. This also relates to Erikson’s theory (Santrock, 2009) that describes the conflict that arises during middle age of generativity vs stagnation. Erikson coined the term generativity, and defined it as ‘the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation’ (Erikson, 1959). Generativity can be described as giving one’s energy to others, of being intensely concerned about the welfare of others, especially the next generation, through responsible parenthood, mentoring, generation of ideas, and productive activities (Sands and Richardson, 1986). The participants in this study displayed their generativity in helping the youth, training and mentoring marginalised women as in female prostitutes to look at alternative ways for income generation and assisting women with HIV and AIDS to set up small businesses. The women participants wanted to be a positive influence in bringing lost souls to the Christian faith. A national survey done at Baylor University with 1648 samples age range from 18-96 years concurred that pro social behaviour (volunteering) increases perceptions of meaning in life. Suggesting that to find meaning in life, one must be motivated by something ‘greater’ than oneself. The study highlight a self-sustaining quality to pro social behaviour, in that other people’s reciprocity need not be the only incentive for helping. The psychological benefits of pro social behaviour create incentives for helping that do not depend on others’ reciprocity (Klein, 2016).
At midlife the women participants experienced independence and freedom. A similar finding has been reported by Wiggs (2009) where women had freedom, they discovered the ability to transcend the bounds of cultural expectations, a breaking from prior responsibility. Women were no longer bound by raising children and felt freer to express their own mind. Likewise Pi Parirevealed, 'she was not shy anymore'.

In summary this study provides a new vision of how the current cohort of women in midlife ages 40 to 55 experience meaning in life. The women in this study were active, involved both in their homes and in the community and not stagnant and rigid. They were involved in various activities through non-government organisation volunteer work or through church activity. Contrary to some literature menopause was not considered traumatic as in loss of youth or sign of old age or loss of sexuality but rather menopause is seen as a natural phase of life. Midlife was not considered as a crisis but most women in this study spoke of this being ‘a good place to be’. With children grown, the women had more time to enjoy different pursuits, were involved in various ventures especially in empowering younger women.

Even though the sample of women in this study revealed were in search for meaning, this does not necessitate that their life is devoid of meaning as we have seen in the lives of the qualitative study. They do not see meaning is complete, they are in continuous explorations of new avenues to enhance meaning in life.