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Whose Children Are They? Responsibilities for Religious Formation of a New Generation

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Table of Contents

Author Index

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A Pilgrimage to The Motherland: How Pilgrimage Experience Shapes Intersectional Identity Formation of Immigrant Youths and Young Adults

Abstract

This paper explores how pilgrimage shapes the ways in which Korean American youths and young adults develop their sense of intersectional identities by going on a pilgrimage to their motherland. Based on autoethnographic accounts and interdisciplinary analysis, the co-authors argue that pilgrimage as a way of embodied and experiential learning enables the immigrant young people to gain a renewed sense of intersectional identities that fully integrates their racial, ethnic, and religious aspects of their lives. Moreover, we point out the limitation of Korean immigrant churches' heavy emphasis on text-based education and conclude by suggesting how pilgrimage as a spiritual practice could be more widely implemented as a way of more embodied and experiential religious learning.

Introduction

This paper analyzes how pilgrimage shapes the ways in which Korean American youths and young adults develop their intersectional identity by going on a pilgrimage to their motherland. We discuss and analyze how pilgrimage as a model of embodied and experiential learning enables the Korean American young pilgrims to gain a renewed sense of their intersectional identity as Korean Americans with transnational history and heritage. There are two sections in this paper: (1) The first section begins by discussing the brief history and development of the Trip to the Motherland program run by the Korean churches in the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK). Based on the authors' autoethnographic accounts and reflection[1], we thickly describe how second- or subsequent generation Korean American young people experience the trip to Korea as a form of pilgrimage. By employing the framework of the pilgrimage as a developmental process related to transformation, identity formation, and religious education, we examine how these young people engage in the embodied learning process of developing their identities as "pilgrims" as well as deepening their intersectional identities as "Korean Americans" with the transnational Christian heritage and legacy. (2) In the second section, we turn to scrutinize how Korean American immigrant churches have not widely practiced embodied and experiential religious education. The current models of religious education in Korean American immigrant churches are limited to text-based learning, such as Bible study, heritage language education, and discussion of sermons. However, by considering the significance of the Trip to the Motherland program, we discuss emerging need of more embodied and experiential religious education for Korean American youth and young adults, especially as they engage in the challenging process of developing their transnational and intersectional identities. We conclude by reflecting on how providing opportunities for pilgrimages for young people can be a creative and generative way to practice decolonial learning in Korean American immigrant churches more widely.

The Birth and Development of the Trip to the Motherland Program

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[1] Cho participated in the pilgrimage in 2015 and 2018 and Han participated in the pilgrimage program in 2022.

In the late 19th century, protestant Christians who sought to involve in foreign mission work carefully observed diplomatic developments in East Asia. As the paths across the Pacific Ocean opened, American missionaries soon urged foreign mission boards to expand into new mission fields in East Asia, namely China and Japan. Many paid no attention to the small peninsula located in between China and Japan, a country known as "Hermit Kingdom" among the westerners.[2] But in 1884, a young medical missionary from Ohio, Horace Newton Allen, requested the Presbyterian Church in the USA to transfer from his mission post in China to a new mission post in Korea. A year later, due to Allen's friendship with the Korean royal court, Allen established the very first western-styled hospital in Seoul, which became the first official presbyterian outpost in Korea.[3] In the following years, other pioneering missionaries such as Horace G. Underwood, William M. Baird, and Lewis Boyed Tate continued traversing the pacific ocean and laid the Presbyterian foundation in Korea.[4] Since then, the Presbyterian church in Korea has grown to seven million members that, in turn, are sending 10,000 mission workers to 170 countries now.[5] Since the 1930s, a large number of Koreans have immigrated to the United States and maintained their Presbyterian identity and joined in the Presbyterian Church (USA). Over the past three decades, Korean congregations across the Presbyterian Church have witnessed significant growth with more than 430 congregations over 55,000 active members in the United States.[6]

In 1988, several Korean leaders in PC(USA) churches launched the pilgrimage program called, "The Trip to the Motherland" to provide an opportunity for second-generation Korean American college students and young adults to visit South Korea to have an in-depth immersion experience to learn Korea's history and culture, especially the heritage of Korean Christianity. Since then, hundreds of Korean American youths and young adults have been given chances to visit Korea for about two weeks every summer for more than 30 years. It is now funded and supported by both the PC(USA) and the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) in partnership. When I (Cho) participated in the trip as one of the leaders in 2018, 25 Korean American participants across the United States came to Korea and visited historical, cultural, natural, and religious sites located in about 15 different cities. From the capital city of Seoul to the breathtaking nature of Jeju Island, each year, a group of Korean American youths and young adults cultivated a sense of friendship and community, received hospitality with their hosts from the Korean churches, and learned each place's history, culture, beauty, and stories.

What does it mean for young people of Christian faith to go on a pilgrimage? What does it mean for second generation Korean immigrant young people to visit their motherland where their parents and grandparents lived before coming to America? What does it mean for these

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[2] Katherine H. Lee Ahn, *Awakening the Hermit Kingdom: Pioneer American Women Missionaries in Korea* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publishing, 2009). For more in-depth history of Korean Christianity, see Sebastian Kim and Kirsteen Kim, A History of Korean Christianity (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[3] To read more about Horace Newton Allen's legacy and mission work in Korea, see Wi Jo Kang, "The Legacy of Horace Newton Allen," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 20, no. 3 (1996): 125–128.
[4] In the history of Korean Christianity, along with American Presbyterians, American Methodists also laid the Protestant Christian foundation in Korea, such as Henry G. Appenzeller, George Hebert Jones, and Mary Scranton. See Gunshik Shim, "Methodist Medical Mission in Korea" *Methodist History* 46, no. 1 (2007): 34-46.
[5] Eunil David Cho, "The Trip to the Motherland: Bestowing the Legacy Upon the Next Generations," *The Presbyterian Outlook* 199, no. 10 (2017): 22-25.
[6] Presbyterian Church (USA), "Directory of Korean American Organizations," The National Council of Korean Presbyterian Churches (NCKPC), March 28, 2011, https://www.pcusa.org/resource/directory-of-korean-american-organizations-22001/

2

REA Annual Meeting 2023 Proceedings (20230712) / Page 2 of 336

Korean Americans in the period of emerging adulthood[7] to engage in pilgrimage as developmental process related to transformation, healing, identity formation, and religious education? Heather A. Warfield, a clinical psychologist and psychologist of religion, argues that pilgrimage is a developmental process or journey of self-discovery, personal growth, and identity development, especially for adolescents and young adults because they are in the stage of figuring out "who they are becoming" to themselves and their surrounding worlds.[8] From the cognitive developmental perspective, young adults can begin to "manage more complex, and often competing, thoughts and ideas" about themselves and their settings.[9] The pilgrimage experience certainly provides opportunities for "the consideration of paradox and critical thinking,"[10] which is a critical aspect for second-generation Korean American young people who are in the process of making sense of their multiple or intersectional identities related to ethnicity, race, gender, faith, and social roles as minoritized persons in America, alongside their transnational ties to Korea, the homeland of their parents and grandparents. In terms of faith formation, according to James Fowler's framework of faith development, young adults find primarily themselves in the fourth stage called "Individuative-Reflective" faith, where they begin to take responsibility to construct their own spiritual beliefs and practices while "not being threatened by another person's beliefs and practices."[11] Young people in this stage of faith go on a pilgrimage with established beliefs, yet become more able to articulate their theologies, beliefs, and practices with more complexity, precision, intricacy, and refinement. In other words, for young people, the pilgrimage as a spiritual experience may lead to "a new or reinvigorated faith," that they as pilgrims may enter into a new stage of faith development.[12]

The Developmental Stages of Pilgrimage for Young People of Faith

Based on various frameworks of the perspectives of developmental psychology,[13] Warfield examines pilgrimage as its own developmental process, which leads to young people's transformation healing, identity development, and religious education. In developing and presenting the developmental stages of pilgrimage, Warfield explains, "Inherent in this stage model is the recognition that not all journeys are pilgrimages and not all travelers are pilgrims. Furthermore, not all those who go on pilgrimages self-identify as pilgrims," which indicates that the model is intended as a framework for young people who self-identify as pilgrims and trips or

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[7] Emerging adulthood includes both those in adolescence and young adulthood. See Jeffrey Jenson Arnett, *Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[8] Heather A. Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context and Pilgrimage as a Developmental Experience: A Psychological Lens," in Pilgrimage as Spiritual Practice: A Handbook for Teachers, Wayfarers, and Guides, eds. Jeffrey Bloechl and André Brouillette (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), 41-43. See also Joan Erikson and Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton 1998).

[9] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 47.

[10] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context."

[11] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context." See also James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1981).

[12] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 47.

[13] See Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 42-47. Warfield considers the wide range of developmental psychosocial theories on identity development, moral development, and faith development. See Erikson and Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*, Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, Lawrence Kohlberg, *Moral Development: Kohlberg's Original Study of Moral Development* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1994), and Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (New York: Basic, 1969).

journeys that are understood and identified as religious pilgrimages.[14] Deeply informed by the developmental psychological frameworks, the eight stages of the pilgrimage process are: (1) decision to embark on the pilgrimage, (2) preparation for the journey, (3) journey, (4) entering sacred space, (5) experience at the site, (6) completion of the pilgrimage and return, (7) reintegration, and (8) reintegration of the pilgrimage experience.[15] In the following section, we describe and interpret how Korean American young adults begin, experience, and conclude this trip to Korea as a pilgrimage to the motherland.

The first stage of the pilgrimage process begins when the pilgrims make their decision to make a meaningful journey to a sacred place.[16] In many cases, potential pilgrims must be Korean American young people who are members of the PC(USA) Korean immigrant churches. They first hear about this opportunity through their churches and youths and young adults who are interested must fill out applications that require them to write short essays explaining why they want to go to Korea as a pilgrimage, not necessarily as a tour. Each year, about 20-25 applicants are selected by members of the NCKPC (National Caucus of Korean Presbyterian Churches) to go on this pilgrimage. This is a selective process mainly because the cost of pilgrimage for two weeks including food, lodging, transportation, and tickets to various sites and places in Korea is fully covered both by the Korean churches of PC(USA) and the Presbyterian Church of Korea (PCK) except for their airfares to Korea from the U.S. This application process is quite significant for these young people to begin "learning about what it means to be a pilgrim for this particular journey," that they are not visiting Korea for the purpose of tourism primarily, but for them to visit their ancestors' birthplace, where they will explore and learn about their historical, cultural, and religious heritage.[17] After making their own decision to embark on the pilgrimage, in the second stage, pilgrims prepare for the journey, "such as training for long-distance walking, preparing to leave one's family or surroundings, obtaining a visa, and arranging for time away from work or other regular responsibilities."[18] Pilgrims also dedicate a period of time to gather information about the pilgrimage route and rituals, and research about the experiences of former pilgrims, "devoting mental energy to imagining the journey."[19] Normally, each yeah, because Korean American young people who are selected to go to Korea come from different geographical locations in America, they gather online in April and May to receive the orientation on the pilgrimage. These pre-pilgrimage meetings are extremely critical and informative because these allow spaces for these young people to get to know each other, share their stories with one another on why they have chosen to go to Korea as a pilgrimage, and pray together. By having these meetings with leaders and fellow pilgrims, participants alleviate their tensions around the idea of going to Korea (often for the first time) with strangers by sharing their concerns as well as excitement for the visit. Warfield explains that the second stage is specifically crucial for young adult pilgrims' identity formation because "identity fusion begins to emerge as the personal pilgrim identity merges with the social group of other pilgrims."[20]

In the third stage, in mid-June, all participants meet in Korea and begin their two-week journey of visiting about 15 cities in South Korea. Even though they have chances to visit places that show both historical and contemporary aspects of Korea, more emphasis is on visiting

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[14] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 48.
[15] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 48-49.
[16] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 49.
[17] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 49.
[18] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 50.
[19] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 51.
[20] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 51.

historical sites including palaces, temples, museums, historic churches, and traditional villages that contain about 4,000 years of Korean history. Under the guidance of leaders from both Korea and the U.S., participants begin each day with a prayer meeting and concludes each day with group discussion and reflection. While participants get captivated by Korea's rich cultural heritage and long-lasting traditions, they are also reminded of the country's ongoing legacy of pain and loss, such as the Japanese Colonial Period (1910-1945) and the Korean War (1950-1953). One of the highlights from the journey is for participants is to visit the Korean Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), which is the buffer zone that has separated North and South Korea for over 60 years. Visiting DMZ is frequently an eye-opening experience for participants from America to see, experience, and witness a glimpse of the painful division of Korea and its ongoing political tension. Finally, they enter the sacred spaces in the fourth stage, which is the main point of the pilgrimage or the "pilgrimage within a pilgrimage."[21] In entering the sacred space, pilgrims often "form organized processions, chant mantras, or engage in a specific ritual that highlights the separation of this activity from everyday life."[22] Of course, South Korea is known for the world's some of the largest Protestant congregations.[23] But two of the most heart-rending and powerful sacred places in this trip are neither mega churches or cathedrals with high steeples. One is Jeoldusan Martyrs' Shrine, known as "the beheading mountain," where a large number of both French Catholic missionaries and native Korean Roman Catholic converts were brutally punished, punished, and murdered in the late nineteenth century.[24] Another site is called Yanghwajin Foreign Missionary Cemetery, which is the final resting place for over 500 Korea's foreign missionaries and their family members from all over the world who came to the "Hermit Kingdom." Although many Korean Christians continue to grapple with the complicated legacy of foreign missionaries in Korea, many Korean Christians tend to have genuine appreciation for their mission work due to many missionaries' effort to support Korea's independence from the Japanese colonial rule.[25] After recognizing the sacredness and historical significance of these sites, in the fifth stage, pilgrims have the actual experience by engaging behaviors such as, "placing offerings, performing the appropriate type of worship (with sound or without), ringing bells, touching a part of the sacred space, weeping, kissing the sacred object, praying in front of the image, or placing an object at a shrine."[26] In this process, the pre-pilgrimage meanings and expectations are ultimately met with "the reality of the here and now" sensory and more embodied experience.[27] As participants walk around these sites and reflect on the unknown lives of many early Korean Christians and foreign missionaries, they encounter various emotions,

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[21] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 52.
[22] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 52.
[23] Yoido Full Gospel Church is known as the world's largest congregation with about 480,000 members. This is a Pentecostal church affiliated with the Assemblies of God in Seoul, South Korea. Furthermore, Myunggsung Presbyterian Church, one of the long-time sponsors of the pilgrimage program is known the largest Presbyterian church in the world.
[24] On May 3, 1984, Pope John Paul II visited this site to pay respect to the martyrs. He visited during the 200th anniversary of Catholicism in Korea. Mother Teresa visited the shrine a year later in 1985. On November 7, 1997, the shrine was designated as a site of national historical significance. To read more about the history of Catholic Church in Korea, Don Baker, "The Korean Catholic Church's First Hundred Years," *Acta Koreana* 15, no. 1 (2012): 1-14.
[25] Donald N. Clark, ed. *The Seoul Foreigners' Cemetery at Yanghwajin: An Informal History with Notes on Other Cemeteries in Korea and Individuals and Families in the History of the Foreign Community in Korea* (Seoul, Korea: Seoul Union Church, 1998).
[26] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 52-53.
[27] See Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 53.

including awestruck, elated, euphoric, honored, and encouraged. In particular, participants show and experience more visible emotional reactions when they see the specific section in the Yanghwajin cemetery, where a large number of infants and children of missionary families are buried. However, ar the same time, there are several religious and historical sites, pilgrims felt underwhelmed or disappointed because the experience does not match their preconceived expectations.[28]

The sixth step of the pilgrimage focuses on the completion of the journey and pilgrims begin to return home in the United States. In the final phase of the pilgrimage, they engage in more tourist activities and participate in various local customs events, where Korean American young pilgrims build friendship with local Korean hosts by visiting their homes and lodging in their homes for several days. On the final day of the pilgrimage, they all go to a retreat center to spend the whole day to reflect on their journey, share their experiences with one another, and have a time for closing worship. In this time of conversation and reflection, participants occasionally share how they have decided to reevaluate their directions in life, possibly changing their careers, pursuing new vocations, making new commitments to God, or ending a preexisting relationship.[29] At the stage, participants may be relieved, fulfilled, and gratified. Most importantly, they feel sad to say goodbye to fellow pilgrims, encourage one another to stay in touch and share their commitment to remember what this pilgrimage means to them as a community. While some leave for airport as soon as possible to return to America, some of them extend their travels for a few extra days to remain in Korea and explore their motherland more on their own.

The seventh and final stages of the pilgrimage signify the post-pilgrimage process. The seventh stage is reintegrating with one's own original environment as pilgrims return home. While returning home is a meaningful closure to the whole pilgrimage, Warfield explains that "pilgrims returning to their pre-pilgrimage construct often report feeling discomfort because an internal transformation has occurred for them, but the people at home have remained the same."[30] In the post-pilgrimage stage, that's why many pilgrims experience a deep sense of grief, loss, and confusion, yet they must find ways to readjust to their original home environment as soon as possible. The final stage is about the ongoing and developmental process for pilgrims to integrate their pilgrimage experience with their own narratives.[31] This process may last from the months following the pilgrimage up to the rest of each pilgrim's life. During the final phase, pilgrims actively think about how the pilgrimage has changed their lives, create new meanings about their lives' directions and purpose, and possibly plan another pilgrimage for future growth. Unfortunately, for the Korean American young people who went on the pilgrimage, the last two stages of the pilgrimage are not officially included in the pilgrimage experience. After the sixth stage, "the completion of pilgrimage," participants are literally on their own to think about their integration and reintegration process as they return home. There's no official post-pilgrimage gathering online or in-person to creatively and collectively think about how to integrate their stories of encountering the motherland into their own stories. Because the reintegration process

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[28] But, at the same time, there are religious sites that participants encounter possible disappointment with a sense of being underwhelmed. As a result, pilgrims might experience cognitive dissonance, which is the mental discomfort people encounter when encountering conflicting experiences. See Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 53.

[29] See Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 54. See also, Linda Davidson and David M. Gitlitz, *Pilgrimage from the Ganges to Graceland: An Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2002).

[30] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 54.

[31] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 54-55.

can be quite disorienting for pilgrims, Warfield argues that pilgrimage scholars, practitioners, and leaders must consider the importance of providing a therapeutic and generative community, where pilgrims share about their post-pilgrimage experiences and imagine mutually about the significance of the pilgrimage for their past, present, and future. However, currently, the Trip to the Motherland as a program does not provide the post-pilgrimage activities for young Korean American pilgrims to readjust to their respective home environments in America and strengthen their newly founded identities as Korean American pilgrims with transnational Christian heritage.

Pilgrimage as a Developmental Process of Embodied Learning

"I really saw where I came from," many participants shared it with conviction at the end of the pilgrimage.[32] Many young people of Korean descent go through an intense identity crisis, struggling to understand what it means to be Korean and American at the same time.[33] However, as they embody and occupy many historical, religious, and cultural spaces located in the motherland, these young people witness and understand where their parents, grandparents, and ancestors came from and furthermore, where their religious tradition of Korean Christianity, especially the heritage of their Reformed faith. One student mentioned, "Now I think I know what it means to be a Korean Presbyterian. Now I am very proud of my heritage of ethnicity and faith tradition."[34] For these Korean American pilgrims, this trip to South Korea is a holistic, transactional, and embodied learning endeavor as well as personal journey of finding more about their Korean American identities with the transnational Christian heritage and legacy. Because the pilgrimage is such a "momentous experience" for many, particularly young people who are actively searching for their identity, the developmental framework enables us to examine more systematically about how pilgrims both individually and collectively make sense of each stage of their journey and their pilgrimage as a whole from the beginning to the end. Warfield's developmental model is helpful to acknowledge and consider how the pilgrimage truly "begins long before the travel and ends long after the return home," which informs pilgrimage guides and religious educators to consider the significance of "the pilgrim before and after the journey" to make the pilgrimage more robust and enriching experience for young pilgrims.[35]

Despite the significance and value of this program as a pilgrimage experience for many Korean American young people's identity and faith formation, many Korean American young people in the Presbyterian Church (USA) have not taken advantage of this program for various reasons. While there are many crucial reasons why people resist, doubt, or question what this trip to the motherland as a pilgrimage can offer to young people, one of the most persistent reasons is that pilgrimage has not been understood as a valuable practice of religious education in the Korean immigrant churches in North America.[36]

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[32] Quoted in Cho, "The Trip to the Motherland," 25.

[33] To learn more about the identity crisis of Korean American Christian youths and young adults, see Christine J. Hong, "Cultivating Woori: The Experience and Formation of Children and Youth in Korean Immigrant Communities" *Practical Matters Journal* 11 (2018), 1-11.

[34] Quoted in Cho, "The Trip to the Motherland," 25.

[35] Warfield, "The Pilgrim in a Developmental Context," 55.

[36] Other important reasons why Korean American young people do not take advantage of this program is that even though they are interested in going, they are not able to afford a ticket to South Korea, which is normally around $1,500-2,000 in summer. Moreover, young people who are not documented won't be able to have international travels.

The Limitation of Text-Based Learning in Korean Immigrant Churches

Based on their in-depth ethnographic research, Christine J. Hong and Mark Chung Hearn conducted separate studies on how Korean American adolescent girls and men (aged between 25 and 45) receive and experience Christian education in Korean American immigrant churches.[37] Both studies reveal that these Korean American immigrant churches prioritize text-based learning, such as Bible study, sermon discussion, and heritage language education explicitly in their educational programs. However, both Hong and Hearn highlight that Korean American youths and young people in the immigrant church setting desire more experiential opportunities for building *intimate interactions* with members of their church communities, such as through retreats, field trips, community services, or sports activities that foster building interpersonal and communal relationships rather than just receiving information through text-based learning within the church building.

While text-based education itself may not be a problem, the text-based education in the Korean immigrant church setting fails to consider the interconnectedness of a person's racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. Boyung Lee argues that education must engage a person's whole being and go beyond the traditional classroom approach of simply imparting information,[38] which strongly implies Korean American immigrant churches' model of religious education is primarily framed without considering the learner's context. While Hong still acknowledges the importance of text- and teacher-based learning, she argues that specifically how the Korean American adolescent girls want to have "educational events, tools, and topics that are specifically trailed to their personal struggles," rather than the "curriculum out of the lectionary."[39]

For Hong, in Korean American churches, the explicit text-based curricula such as bible study and sermons have limited influence on the adolescent girls' personal and spiritual formation.[40] As they still feel quite disconnected from the larger church community, young girls desire "the process of sharing and re-reading their narratives as well as listening to the narratives of their peers, they came to desire a space to explore their bi-culturality while developing whole picture of self and others."[41] Furthermore, the limited influence is not only for adolescent girls, but also for young men. Hearn claims that Korean American church education tends to focus on explicit and "an evangelical model based upon bible-centeredness and passing down of religious tradition through transmissive pedagogy," which emphasizes the urgent need to explore different pedagogical approaches of Christian education in the Korean immigrant church setting.[42] In order for the Korean immigrant church to become a spiritual place that fully embraces the whole being of youth and young adults in their community, Hong and Hearn indicate that it is important to listen to the younger generation's perspectives and reflect critically on the limitation of text-based education.

In fact, Korean immigrant churches have a unique responsibility to help Korean American young people not only to learn about their Christian traditions, but also accompany

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[37] See Christine Hong, *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church* (New York, NY: Palgrave 2015). See Also Mark Chung Hearn, *Religious Experience Among Second Generation Korean Americans* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2016).

[38] Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church.* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 56.

[39] Hong, *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church*, 101.

[40] Hong, *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church.*

[41] Hong, *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church,* 180.

[42] Hearn, *Religious Experience Among Second Generation Korean Americans*, 111.

8

them to embrace their ethnic, racial, and gender identity. The Korean American immigrant church is not only the place for the Christian practice, but it serves as a sociocultural center where members should be able to share their stories, culture, language, and food, providing a sense of connection to their homeland.[43] The culture of the immigrant church setting is often predominantly Korean in terms of leadership, language, style of worship, and even Christian education pedagogy. This explains why their Christian educational programs, Bible study curriculum, and resources often fail to address the particular challenges that second- and third-generation Korean American young people experience in their day-to-day lives, such systemic racism, bicultural identity crisis, intergenerational conflicts, transnational legacy, immigration experience, and mental health crisis. In other words, Korean American young people find themselves in confusion without knowing how to make sense of their intersectional identities, especially as they struggle to integrate their racial and ethnic identity and their Christian identity coherently. While in public schools, they feel intensely as if they are not "American enough," in Korean immigrant churches, they feel as if they are not "Korean enough." Korean American young people are pressured constantly to "try and reconcile the two disparate worlds, perspectives, and multiple theologies, often on their own. Their parents, who often do not acculturate as quickly as their children, are unable to help them navigate across cultural differences."[44]

Consequently, within the Korean American immigrant church community, youths and young adults as second-generation have been primarily placed in the position of receiving instruction on how they should believe God and recognize their Korean American Christian identities by obeying the religious and cultural instructions of their parents and elders in the church setting. This great absence of intergenerational conversation and mutual learning may be attributed to the Korean cultural value of practicing obedience to elders influenced by in neo-Confucian ways of living in harmony.[45] In this prevailing model of teaching and formation, Korean American youths and young adults develop their sense of identities not based on their own lived experience, but on what they have heard about "who they should become" from their parents and grandparents.

Pilgrimage as Embodied and Experiential Learning

How can religious educators in the Korean American immigrant church address these challenges of youth and young adults? First of all, it is vital to provide a brave space for young people explore and wrestle with their intersectional identity. In addition, church education should move beyond traditional text-based pedagogy and teaching to include more embodied and experiential learning opportunities that support their journey of self-discovery. The Trip to the Motherland program as a pilgrimage can be a valuable opportunity for experiential learning for Korean Americans to think about how their racial, ethnic, and religious identities intricately

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[43] For sociocultural functions of Korean immigrant churches, see Eunil David Cho, "Coping with a Double Pandemic of Health Crisis and Anti-Asian Racism in America: The Role of Immigrant Churches" in *Between Pandemonium and Pandemethics: Responses to Covid-19 in Theology and Religions*, edited by Dorothea Erbele-Küster and Volker Küster, 57-68 (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2022). For more sociological overview of immigrant congregations in America, see Pyong Gap Min, "The Structure and Social Functions of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States," *The International Migration Review* 26, no. 4 (1992): 1370–94.

[44] Hong, "Cultivating Woori," 4.

[45] See Min, for more on the influence of Confucianism in Korean Protestant churches, see Chae, Byung Kwan. "Korean Protestant Churches Inculcated in Confucian Habitus and Hereditary Pastoral Succession" *Studies in Humanities and Social Sciences* 64, no.2 (2021): 67-82.

9

intersect with one another by visiting and occupying the sites of "where they came from." Hong proposes the idea of creating a such space, where Korean American young people share their personal stories and build intimate relationships with their peer groups and their first generation elders "for their personal, mental, and spiritual formation and development."[46] For instance, Hearn explains how he facilitated a men's group where he used sports as a means of fostering spiritual formation through physical activity, communal meals, and meaningful conversation about life and spirituality. He suggests that such activities can serve as a foundation for creating a space where individuals can share their personal experiences and narratives, which indicates the importance of creating a welcoming and inclusive environment as the first step in establishing such a space.[47]

Similarly, participating in the Trip to the Motherland program offers unique occasions for Korean American young people to experience intimate, transnational, embodied, and experiential learning through visiting transnational spaces, sharing personal and communal stories, and creating new memories. On the importance of embodied and experiential dimensions of learning, David Nguyen and Jay Larson claim that embodied pedagogy encourages learners to bring their whole being to make a space of transnational learning through one another and the world beyond the constructed knowledge of the subject matter.[48] Along the same lines, Lee underscores the significance of "dialogical pedagogy," which encourages students to bring their "living texts" such as wisdom, insights, life experiences, cultural backgrounds, and critical analysis, rather than relying solely on "written texts" that have been inherited their parents and grandparents.[49] By sharing authority with elders in learning, young people can experience and enjoy benefits of embodied pedagogy[50], which aptly "provides a perspective based in holistic knowledge construction and social contextualization" with the awareness of body, space, and social context.[51]

In the pilgrimage, the Korean American young people bring themselves as "living texts" to their motherland, interacting and conversing with the "written texts" of Korea that their parents have told them back in the United States, which indicates a process of transformation. According to Alexandria M. Egler, the embodied pilgrimage leads to a transformative experience, where learning goes beyond observation and acceptance but instead becomes "a process of transformation."[52] Pilgrimage as "a journey to become holy through a memorial of holiness," the youth and young adults transform themselves by being in the holy environment.[53] Through the program, as they become pilgrims in the motherland, a familiar yet unfamiliar place, these young pilgrims gain courage and receive affirmation to work on their stories and think

[46] Hong, *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church*, 180.

[47] Hearn, *Identity, Youth, and Gender in the Korean American Church*, 112.

[48] Nguyen, David J., and Jay B. Larson. "Don't Forget About the Body: Exploring the Curricular Possibilities of Embodied Pedagogy." *Innovative Higher Education* 40, no. 4 (2015), 342.

[49] Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community,* 58.

[50] We use David J. Nguyen and Jay B. Larson's definition of embodied pedagogy. "Embodied pedagogy as learning that joins body and mind in a physical and mental act of knowledge construction. This union entails thoughtful awareness of body, space, and social context." (332., Nguyen, David J., and Jay B. Larson. "Don't Forget About the Body: Exploring the Curricular Possibilities of Embodied Pedagogy." Innovative Higher Education 40, no. 4 (2015): 331–44. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-015-9319-6.)

[51] Nguyen and Larson, "Don't Forget About the Body: Exploring the Curricular Possibilities of Embodied Pedagogy," 332.

[52] Alexandria M. Egler, "Pilgrimage as Religiously Educative" in *Pilgrimage as Transformative Process*, ed A. Warfield, Heather, and Kate Hetherington (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 26 Nov. 2018), 34.

[53] Egler, "Pilgrimage as Religiously Educative," 33.

critically about their intersectional identities as Korean American Christians. This work of transformation is possible because a pilgrimage as an experiential and embodied learning allows and empowers these young people to engage and interact with fellow young pilgrims, the cultural, religious, and political history of Korea, the local people they meet, and the spirits of their ancestors and the Spirit the land of the motherland.

Because this pilgrimage is an embodied experience, the participants (Americans of Korean descent) gain and experience a new sense of *connection* to their motherland (Korea). This kind of embodied transnational connection can be framed as "*woori*-ness" according to Hong. For Korean American young people, Hong emphasizes the significance of cultivating "*woori*-ness," which empowers them to connect with their transnational Korean heritage across generations through stories, culture, tradition, spirituality, and history.[54] "*Woori*-ness" encourages individuals to use their imagination to rediscover and reconnect with their ethnic identity as they develop into a whole being. Hong writes,

> Growing up and listening to the story of my grandparent's escape and the many other painful stories in our shared family narrative, I learned about my identity and the power of *woori*. I was not alone. I learned to define myself in relationship to the joy, grief, and pain that emerged from these narratives and within the contextual power of *woori* or the "us" of what it meant to be a Korean person in diaspora. Stories and the tenor of the voices that told these stories grounded me. I began to see myself by extension in the places and people I had never seen or met. I knew who I was and who I wanted to become because of how I was directly connected to the stories shared with me by my family as well as others in my Korean American community. As a second-generation Korean American, born in Los Angeles, these stories connected me directly to the motherland, to the Korean Peninsula and the Korean people. Sitting at the feet of my elders, I felt claimed by a tradition and story larger than my own, a narrative more expansive than what I had been allowed as a nonwhite person in the United States. As a liminal and bicultural person who often experiences life in North America as betwixt and between, these connections, facilitated through story, anchored me in a transnational sense of home, particularly in seasons of my life where I felt invisible or essentialized in an American cultural context that constantly measured me as deficient against the yardstick of whiteness.[55]

Hong's personal reflection shows that the stories passed down from her grandparents and parents provide a strong connection to her motherland. In the same way, participants on the pilgrimage gain a sense of *woori* as they visit Korea for the first time, occupying the birthplace of their parents and grandparents, understanding the heritage of their Christian faith, eating varieties of Korean food across the country, and even wrestling with the ongoing traumatic legacy of the Japanese colonial rule and the Korea War. Consequently, pilgrimage as an embodied learning becomes a developmental process that empowers these young people to cultivate *woori*-ness, deepening their identities as "pilgrims" as well as enriching their intersectional identities as "Korean Americans" with the transnational Christian heritage and legacy.

Conclusion: Pilgrimage as a Decolonial Practice

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[54] Christine Hong, *Decolonial Futures: Intercultural and Interreligious Intelligence for Theological Education* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Press) Chapter 5, Kindle.
[55] Hong, *Decolonial Futures,* Chapter 5, Kindle.

In conclusion, the Trip to the Motherland program offers participants the opportunity to engage in decolonial learning exercises. By shifting their physical bodies away from intentional and unintentional sources of the dominant power in the United States, participants can become more aware of how their intersectional and transnational identity affects them differently in different environments. This program challenges individuals to recognize the colonial power that exists not only within the United States but also within their own racial, ethnic, Christian, and gendered identities. Educational scholars Lisa Delacruz Combs and Marc P. Johnston-Guerrero understand pilgrimage as a way to practice decolonial education in order to explore one's transcultural, trans-religious, and transethnic heritage and identity. They argue that pilgrimage to the motherland enables immigrant youths and young adults to "recover memories" and their ancestors and families' memories.[56] Combs and Johnston-Guerrero recount their experience of pilgrimage to their motherland, Philippines, and discover how memories and the act of remembering are essential parts of pilgrimage. In their pilgrimage, they are not only recovering and remembering their own memories of living in Philippines, but also recovering their ancestor's memories, which subsequently initiates the reconciliation of their relationship with themselves, their parents, their community, and the divine.[57] They explain that recovering and remembering our personal experiences through pilgrimage enable ourselves to retell and connect our stories with the stories of our families, future generations, and religious communities.

Hong also claims that recovering and retelling our stories in conversation with our ancestor's stories are powerful ways to resist the colonial power and claim our "genealogy of resilience and faith."[58] For Korean American youths and young adults, because they are primarily educated through the U.S.-centered education in schools and churches, they are often limited to learn about and connect with the history of both Korea *and* Korean America and hear about the personal and collective stories of their parents, grandparents, and ancestors. Many second-generation Korean Americans are pressured to define their "Korean" aspect of their identities without knowing much about their Korean heritage. To address this challenge, the pilgrimage program allows them to embody, experience, and engage the history and stories of the motherland, which would allow these Korean American young pilgrims to recover the memories of themselves and their ancestors, in order to reclaim their transnational Korean American identities.[59]

According to Combs and Johnston-Guerrero, pilgrimage to the motherland is a "soul searching" work in the process of decolonization.[60] This work of "soul searching" allows and enables us to get intimate with the motherland in an embodied way. The land that once nurtured and nourished the grandparents and parents of youth and young adults is now doing the same for these young people living in diaspora. They also deepen their connections with their ethnic, national, and religious heritage by visiting and occupying about the places and histories associated with it, which strengthens their spirituality and connection with their ancestors. These kinds of experiential and embodied religious education are necessary for Korean American

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[56] L.D. Combs and Johnston-Guerrero, M. P, "At Home or On Tour? Mixed Race Filipina/o American Reflections on Identity and Visiting the Motherland," *The Qualitative Report* 27, no. 10:(2022), 2361.

[57] Combs and Johnston-Guerrero, , "At Home or On Tour? Mixed Race Filipina/o American Reflections on Identity and Visiting the Motherland," 2361.

[58] Hong, *Decolonial Futures,* Chapter 5, Kindle.

[59] Combs and Johnston-Guerrero, , "At Home or On Tour? Mixed Race Filipina/o American Reflections on Identity and Visiting the Motherland," 2361.

[60] Combs and Johnston-Guerrero, "At Home or On Tour? Mixed Race Filipina/o American Reflections on Identity and Visiting the Motherland," 2359.

young people because Korean immigrant churches' explicit emphasis on text-based religious education is quite insufficient for second- and subsequent generation Korean American children, youths, and young adults to understand and embrace their intersectional Korean American identities with profound transnational heritage and history. In this presentation, we focus on sharing and reflecting on our candid experiences of leading and participating in the pilgrimage program and also examining the transnational pilgrimage as an experiential and embodied way of practicing religious education. We sincerely hope that this opening conversation would invite fellow religious educators to imagine how faith communities, especially immigrant congregations, can implement domestic and international pilgrimages as a new way for young people to simply know more about "where their faith came from," "who they are becoming," and "whose children they are."

13

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Children's Moral Agency

In the Context of Vietnamese American Catholic Families

Since the twentieth century, the reality of migration has caused perennial acculturation problems within Vietnamese American families. Bearing the history of immigrations during and after the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese American families are struggling to live between two worlds: their old culture and nation and their new life in America. Specifically, the parents face a dilemma in raising their children either to maintain the Vietnamese tradition or to adapt to the new American culture, which can result in an intergenerational gap. Therefore, I propose that acknowledging and nurturing children's moral agency can help to bridge this gap and bring transformation to both parents and children in their faith journey. Rather than seeing children as static objects of moral formation, moral agency seeks to empower children to build their own sense of identity. This means that the relationship between parents and children is not a one-way relationship, but a reciprocal one in which children can also bring impact to their parents. In the context of Vietnamese American Catholic families, this can be done by implementing what I propose as "Just Love" in the family faith formation. By seeing children as an image of God, parents acknowledge and respect children's dignity and treat them as subjects of spiritual insight who can inspire and transform the whole family as well.

Key words: children, moral agency, migration, Vietnamese American Catholic families, family faith formation

1

In 2022 the World Migration Report reported 281 million migrants in the world. About 50 percent were children. This paper asks how forced uprootedness impacts children and young people, especially in developing their agency, which concerns the human capacity to act and make choices. Cristina L.H. Traina (2009, p. 29) argues that "[agency] is an ontological quality that deepens and develops in response to, and within the limits of, a social world." Are children capable of having their agency and being responsible for their choices? What should adults (especially teachers, parents, and caregivers) think about children and young people regarding their moral formation and agency? In this paper, I propose to look at moral formation with fresher eyes to foster a deep and just understanding of children in the context of Vietnamese-American families. I argue that, by embracing theological reconstructions of moral agency and acknowledging children and young people as full moral agents in faith formation, we can transform both parents and children in their faith journey, especially in immigrant families suffering from dislocation, cultural differences, and intergenerational gaps. First, I will provide background information on Vietnamese immigrant families in the United States and then dig deeper into children's rights and agency. Second, I offer an analysis of Christian ethics' sources of children's moral agency embedded in feminist theology. Third, I provide a series of practical implications for children/young people's moral formation in the context of Vietnamese American Catholic families (VACF) using feminist theology to help rewrite family narratives to accompany their children in faith formation.

1. Rereading the History of Vietnamese Immigrant Families

After the fall of Saigon in 1975, Vietnamese history was marked by a mass exodus (emigration). About two million Vietnamese became refugees between 1975 and 1995. According to a report issued by the Comptroller General of the United States (1975, p. i), "The President's Interagency Task Force quickly organized and put into motion machinery needed to receive and process many of these refugees." When refugees arrived in the U.S., some who were fluent in English managed to secure their financial resources and had a resettlement plan, while those without such benefits had to wait (Comptroller General of the United States, 1975, p. ii).

Vietnamese immigrants arrived in the U.S. in several waves. There were 839,310 Vietnamese refugees that came to the United States between 1975 and 1992; among them, 796,310 escaped by sea and 42,918 over land to the shelter of camps in other countries before resettling in the United States (Vo, 2005, p. 2). Another wave of 693,022 came to the U.S between 1990 and 2008. This was largely a group of re-education prisoners who had been imprisoned for three years and beyond with their families (Office of Refugee Settlement, 2010). Since 1999 a smaller wave of Vietnamese people came to the U.S as legal immigrants based on their family sponsorship policy or for studies abroad. Those who escaped Vietnam during the first four waves identified as refugees while the last two waves of Vietnamese identified themselves as immigrants. Since this paper focuses on immigrant families as a whole, I use the term *immigrants* to include all Vietnamese refugees and immigrants.

2

1.1 Children and Immigration

In the first wave in 1975, 50% of Vietnamese refugees were aged 12-18, while 30 % were aged 19-35 (Comptroller General of the United States, 1975, p. 34). These young people were uprooted from their homeland and lived in refugee camps by themselves. They needed *a just* and *healthy* environment for character formation and psychological development but suffered from a lack of communication with their families and sponsors, creating anxiety and trauma. A later study in 1990 lists that "As of 1990, 52% of all Vietnamese American children under 18 years of age were U.S. born, 27% arrived in the United States prior to the age of five, 17% arrived between the ages of five and 12, and only 4% arrived as adolescents" (Zhou, 2001, p. 1).

Once these children were in U.S. schools, they experienced additional trauma. A study in 2021, using the data from the Children of Immigrants Longitudinal Study, concludes that "children were about 30 times as likely to report being discriminated against as compared to their parents, about five times as likely to report expecting to be discriminated against no matter what, and three times as likely to report a feeling of being discriminated against" (Cao, 2021, p. 8).

An autobiography written by a Vietnamese American college student in 1989 (published by her professor, Chan Sucheng in 2006) highlights how immigrant children experienced discrimination. Let us call this student Linh. Linh left Vietnam with her family one day before the war ended on April 29, 1975. She was four years old at that time. Linh wrote of her experience in a story entitled, *How It Feels to Be an Asian American* (Chan, 2006, p. 139):

> I went to a school that had very few Asians. I was the only Asian girl in the first grade and felt very alienated and different from everyone else because of my looks, language, and lack of familiarity with everything. I did not know English, so some of the children teased me. They ridiculed me not only because of my accent but because of my culture as well. They made fun of how my family lived, ate, and socialized. In third grade, some of the teachers were not sympathetic toward me either. One thought I was deaf or mute because I could not understand what she said in English. I thought the teachers must be right, so I considered myself inferior to my classmates. I became quiet and reserved. I found it difficult to talk and open up to people, even to my parents. I constantly feared that if I talked, people were going to mock me. So I remained silent, shy, and embarrassed. Every day I asked God why he had not made me White. As I grew up, I realized it was terrible to think of myself that way, but children are very self-conscious about what others think of and say about them. During my elementary school years, I developed a deep hatred toward society. Why must people be so prejudiced and cruel?

These touching words reveal how immigration can severely impact children and their identity formation. Factors such as appearance, language, color of skin, and capacity to express their feelings can deeply scar their minds and hearts.

1.2 Straddling Different Worlds

3

A substantial intergenerational gap as well as complex conflicts often exist between parents and children regarding their pace in acculturation, expectations, and communication or lifestyles. People get through the acculturation process only when they adapt and adjust to a new culture, or when a new culture is implemented in their community. For the individual, acculturation may mean "a process of giving up one's traditional cultural values and behaviors while taking on the values and behaviors of the dominant social structure" (Atkinson et al., 1995, p. 131). Assimilation is a form of acculturation in which minority cultures change and adapt to dominant cultures. Assimilation has different degrees of voluntary and forced processes. Marginalized, separated, and assimilated individuals experience more stress during acculturation than those whose choices and values lead to integration (Redfield et al., 1936, pp. 149–152). An identity shift due to acculturation impacts individual and group behaviors, cognition, and personality. Some might feel ambivalent while others may feel alienated.

Immigrant Vietnamese children are caught between two cultures and two worlds: East and West, their homeland and the United States. Peter C. Phan calls it the betwixt and between status. "To be 'betwixt and between' is to be neither here nor there, to be neither this thing nor that" (Lee & Phan, 1999, p. 113). Phan explains this in-between status from two angles—power and social status: The power dynamic occurs when marginalized people are pushed away from the centers of power where "the two dominant groups meet and clash and are denied the opportunity to wield power in matters of public interest" (1999, p. 113). Phan defines the in-between status socially as being part of a minority, not fully integrated or accepted by either cultural system. Moreover, seeing this in-between status through the lenses of psychology and spirituality, people are straddling a different world that shakes their self-identity, sense of agency, and belonging.

Carlos E. Sluzki (1979) addresses the acculturation process faced by immigrant families who are caught between the two cultures and may move through a period of overcompensation. He believes that some family members either choose to retain their old culture and fail to engage with the new culture, or they abandon their traditional ways to adopt a new identity (Sluzki, 1979, pp. 379–390). A more significant generation gap appears when one person is faster than the other in acculturating. Most Vietnamese parents have come to the United States with a well-formed identity based on their culture, while their children arrived here at an early age or were U.S. born and are shaping their identity in the new land. Thus, this process of resentment and responses to acculturation impacts each family member differently.

Because of low socio-economic status, immigrant children share many obstacles in resettlement with their parents. Lacking resources to send their children to after-school daycare, many young children go to their parents' workplaces, such as nail salons or restaurants. Some children suffer from their memory of sudden exile; others might mourn the loss of their parents, siblings, and relatives during migration. Caught between two diverse living styles, children may be affected more deeply than their parents. Receiving conflicting guidance and signals between school and home can also polarize both children and parents.

Children of immigrants often struggle with self-identity. Along with the challenge of finding their place in a new country, younger generations of immigrants also contend with the cognitive

injustice of either colonizing or being colonized in education, which presents itself in the form of a disciplined-selective moment in which they may lose their agency and cling to what they are taught. A study in 2021 claims that "compared with majority ethnic youths, minority youths tend to be more concerned with ethnic identity since they are exposed to the discrepancy between their minority ethnic group's culture and the dominant culture of the majority ethnic group" (T. T. Tran & Bifuh-Ambe, 2021, pp. 168–169). Vietnamese American adolescents face the same problem in forming their identity as other Asian Americans, based on how white supremacy defines, restrains, and disciplines their being in the United States. The path becomes risky when they must let go of their cultural heritage to shape their self-understanding, agency, and relations embedded in the western culture.

Meanwhile, migrant youth are often caught having to negotiate between two cultures. Children engage in a role reversal when they become spokespersons for non-English speaking parents. In such cases parents may feel they are losing their control and authority, which impacts the child-parent relationship. However, these role reversals may also have a positive effect when children empower themselves to be the cultural bridge between their families and society. Young immigrants who understand the Vietnamese language, values, and norms, perform a unique bridging function, given their ability to understand both their elders and their American-born peers (Chan, 2006, p. xiv). This opportunity can be enhanced by developing children's agency within their families and communities through their contribution as cultural brokers, between home and school, between the older Vietnamese generation and the American-born children. The following section will explore children's moral agency using feminist theology and transnational families' frameworks.

2. Children's and Young People's Agency

2.1 An Overview of Children's Agency

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore argues that we hold a distorted view of children and their right to be an agent. The contested dominant cultural views of children can be counteracted by asserting a healthier, rich moral and religious vision about children and re-imagining the agency of children. She emphasizes that "a Christian ethic of children asserts that one's own good is inextricably linked to the common good, the good of others, and the good of the whole. A Christian spirituality reminds adults that… Children come from God and to God they return." (Miller-McLemore, 2019, p. 169) Moreover, she re-imagines a change by shifting to the view of children's care and rearing as a religious practice and community discipline (2019, p. 157). Miller-McLemore explores and develops children's agency based on feminist theology. She views children's rights as human rights based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, developed over ten years, and adopted in 1989. Feminist theologians promote children's well-being as a shared responsibility among educators, families, and the community to protect them from exploitation and abuse (Miller-McLemore, 2019, p. 140). People do not need to be the voice of their children, because they have their own voice and agency. We need to

5

create spaces to let children's voices be heard! Children become a social resource for changing humanity or human social capital to sustain democracy. However, Miller-McLemore emphasizes a crucial need to see "children as ends in themselves" (2019, p. 137). Feminist theology promotes social justice, the common good, and children as moral agents, concepts which scholars from other disciplines might overlook. The shift to seeing children as agents is based on two theological views: (1) children as persons created in God's image deserving of fundamental human rights accorded to all people of any age, color, or creed, and (2) children as a source of spiritual insight (Traina, 2009, p. 21). Children deserve full dignity, agency, and personhood before God. Even at a young age children have a sense of right and wrong and can be responsible for their actions. The source of children's agency is "based on religious convictions about human creation, and divine desire" (Miller-McLemore, 2019, p. 138).

According to Matthew A. Shadle, the theological view of moral agency is identical with sociocultural interaction. Moral agency includes interaction among people, their relations with others in both the surrounding environment and larger society (Shadle, 2020, p. 47). From my own experience teaching kindergarten for ten years, I share an example of how this interaction works: Three-year-old children learned how to give priority to elderly persons or pregnant women, as well as people with disabilities on public transportation. They learned that lesson in school by role-playing driver, customer, and prioritized group. One week after teaching that lesson, a parent approached me and said, "My daughter corrected me when I did not share my seat with an elderly woman standing on the bus. She insisted that I invite that woman to sit in my place." This three-year-old child understood what they should or should not do. This example supports Kate Ott's argument that "the new understanding of moral agency values children as complete moral agents—as they are now—rather than waiting for what they will become" (Ott, 2019, p. 525). This new approach does not diminish parents' agency, role, and responsibility for their children. However, the main goal is to reclaim children's rights and enhance their voices for both parents' and children's flourishing.

2.2 Children's Agency and Transnational Families
Children can make moral decisions in accord with their age and understanding. Migration theology has been shifting toward family as a center; however, it will fail if children and young people continue to be seen as those who follow their parents and act based on their parent's instruction alone. Traina points out how church teaching and doctrine can obscure children's rights and agency when they are identified as merely their parents' offspring. The Western nuclear family norm cannot address the needs of immigrant families who come from different countries and cultures (Traina, 2018, p. 142).

"Claiming agency is a way of maintaining identity, preserving continuity, and affirming self-assertion against high odds," Traina asserts (2009, p. 25). It is crucial to explore children's agency within their family context to understand why children are often overlooked. Traina further claims that children and young people have a short history but a long future, so the status of "incomplete autonomy does not remove their agency" (2018, p. 144). They have a right to be

6

active in their own welfare. Although children and young people still depend on their parents in many aspects and can be vulnerable in their role as active agents for themselves, they deserve to claim their own agency and live a dignified life. On the other hand, children are developing their agency, which Traina names as a relational agency. Children are both open and vulnerable to their social and physical environment. Therefore, empowering immigrant children's agency is a crucial responsibility for those who accompany children and youth in their educational training, faith practice, or psychological development.

Research done in 2021 examined the positive effects of youth programs on the development of ethnic identity and youth's agency in second-generation Vietnamese American adolescents based on the Buddhist youth program (T. T. Tran & Bifuh-Ambe, 2021, p. 168). Vietnamese Catholic communities perform a similar function with youth development programs that facilitate ethnic identity development for immigrant children and youth. These programs support children in language learning, faith and identity formation, and gain "a sense of self that is defined as much by one's place in a familial history as a personal past" (Fivush et al., 2008, pp. 131–143). While engaged in ministry for various immigrant Catholic communities in the New England areas, I learned that Sunday schools and faith-based communities can create opportunities for parents and children to discuss multiple aspects of their social and cultural identities. Parents can share about their lives in their homeland, and their children share about their U.S. experiences. Such practices enhance children's identity, self-identification, and self-esteem and enable parents to understand their children's new cultural experiences. Family members also understand one another's mindset and expectations and converse with an open mind as they listen to others' experiences and stories to foster interconnectedness in immigrant families. This sense of belonging is essential to cultivating the youth's self-confidence and self-identity. Schools can invite parents to the class to share their family stories or give students a chance to interview older parents/grandparents to learn about intergenerational family patterns. The next part will propose a model to uplift children's agency in FFF.

3. The Just Love in Family Faith Formation

This section proposes a model to uplift children's agency in family faith formation (FFF) and calls for a centering shift toward children as subjects and active agents. Margaret A. Farley (2008) suggests that this shift should start with a definition of just marital love for families. She argues that "just as human relationships are or ought to be governed by certain norms or ethical principles — in particular, norms of justice; so also, institutional frameworks for commitment in human relationships ought to be subject to norms of justice" (Farley, 2008, p. 260). Farley defines justice as a norm or standard to guide, protect, nourish, and form love (2008, p. 311). Justice enables humans to grow in love and actions to become a better person in relation to oneself and others. While Farley's model focuses on sexual ethics, her framework is helpful to construct a family faith formation that is rooted in children's agency.

I envision a model called "*A Just Love in Family Faith Formation (FFF)*" based on children's moral agency to accompany immigrant families in their faith journey. *Just Love* refers

7

to both mutual and equal relationships between parents and children through rewriting a new Christian family narrative to empower children's agency.

3.1 Rewriting a Christian Narrative to Empower Children's Agency

Immigration impacts VACF relative to how they practice faith and transmit their Vietnamese tradition. Scholars in migrant studies emphasize that "various family patterns of immigrants are not passively handed down from generation to generation. Instead, immigrants selectively choose and actively use varied cultural resources. Within particular social contexts and constraints, they create new family traditions" (Gjokaj et al., 2012, p. 287). In the context of FFF, how does VACF maintain their family values and resist unequal relationships between parents and children?

Parents will set a boundary to avoid falling into a path of overpowering or harmful permissiveness. Christine Gudorf reminds parents to maintain a balance—to allow their children to have freedom and practice their agency, but also to explain to them how and why they can make good choices instead of simply telling them what to do. In the context of VACF, children play a more active role when they become a source of life and motivation for their parents. "Parents draw upon ethnic community resources to reinforce cultural strategies of their parenting and discipline in ways that shape positive educational and economic trajectories of the immigrant offspring growing up in the United States" (Gjokaj et al., 2012, p. 289; Zhou & Bankston, 1999). Traditional Vietnamese parents often identify as a 'generational sacrifice' and do everything for their children. This attitude may harm both children and parents because it reflects one way of love from parents to children and perpetuates a model that sees children as passive recipients. Another harmful narrative is seeing children as an economic burden for families. Having a child often impacts a mother negatively: she might lose her job or miss opportunities for a promotion. Some mothers choose to stay home to offer care for the child as a motherly sacrifice. Again, these narratives might reflect mutual love but unequal relationships. How can we rewrite family narratives in a better way?

Miller-McLemore asserts that the care for children is a religious discipline and a community practice. She suggests keeping a balance by seeing that *educating children is a task and gift*. This view enables parents to stay in the middle ground of "good-enough parenting" (Miller-McLemore, 2019, p. 145). I would broaden this view to see both *parents and children as a task and gift* to empower one another on their lifelong journey. When children play an active role in FFF, both parents and children walk in a path that fosters growth in children and a change in parents. "Living with children transforms parents," even within negative situations (Miller-McLemore, 2019, p. 55).

The story of the novelist Ocean Vuong shows how important children's agency is. Vuong suffers ontological vulnerability within his immigrant family, not just by their resettlement in a country but also by their family's traumatic personal issues. Living in a refugee camp at the age of two, his childhood memories are augmented by his grandmother's life and stories. Moreover, regardless of what happened between his parents, either his father abandoned the family, or his

mother forced him to leave because of domestic violence, the situation is that Vuong is raised by all women, a single mother, aunts, and a grandmother. Living with children can transform parents is precisely correct in this case. Vuong becomes a source of life for his single mother and vice versa. Vinh Quoc Vuong was his original name, but after divorcing his father, his mother renamed him Ocean Vuong. Vuong explains, "[his mother] chose Ocean because, like the Pacific Ocean, we do not truly reside in the United States or Vietnam; like that expansive stretch of water, I touch both nations but belong solely to neither" (Rasheed, 2013). Vuong's experience is an example of his retained agency within a broken family. Vuong (2017) was physically abused by his own mother. At the age of 14, he stood up for himself to free both himself and his traumatized and abusive mother:

> The time, at fourteen, when I finally said stop. Your hand in the air, my face stinging from the first blow. "Stop, Ma. Quit it. Please." I looked at you hard, the way I had learned, by then, to look into the eyes of my bullies. You turned away and, without a word, put on your wool coat and walked to the store. "I'm getting eggs", you said over your shoulder, as if nothing had happened. But we both knew it was over. You'd never hit me again.

Vuong's painful experience did not stop him from seeking changes for himself and his mother as a sign of "conscientization" following Paulo Freire. Conscientization is a process of thinking critically about people's social-political surroundings and taking action to resist unjust systems to support his argument on why true liberation must come from the oppressed: Conscientization is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergences" (Freire, 2018, p. 109). In this case, Vuong empowers himself and claims his agency by seeing an alternative way of living and being a young immigrant. Vuong is critical of his family situation, understands it, and becomes an agent of change. Thus, he helped transform his mother's behavior. Recognizing all family members, especially children and young people, the capacity to transform families is a way of rewriting family narratives and creating new stories for a better future.

3.2 Applying the Just Love Model in Family Faith Practice

When revisiting the household code through the lens of Vietnamese culture, family values regarding filial piety are the most important cultural values. Research of Vietnamese families in the United States shows that while migration increases women's status, power, and authority, patriarchal family structures and gender relations of inequality are reconstituted through the influence and internalization of Confucian-based ideologies (Gjokaj et al., 2012, p. 288). Positively speaking, Vietnamese culture helps young people build an identity of respect for grandparents and parents and follow their instruction and teaching. The culture forms respect through the way younger people communicate with their parents, siblings, and relatives, by the beauty of caring for each other, protecting each other when having difficulties or troubles in life, and encouraging each other to overcome difficult stages in life. Filial piety is the most

9

fundamental virtue Vietnamese people exercise by taking care of their parents when they grow old and even after their death by practicing the veneration of their ancestors. Most Vietnamese agree that the essential role of filial piety in Vietnamese culture is to nurture communal cross-generational relationships. Thus, obeying and honoring parents as young children and caring for their parents in their old age are both tasks and gifts all children should keep in mind.

Parents need to show their love and respect for their children. Feminist theologians remind parents that children are created in God's image, and as a source of spiritual insight, they should allow their children to have agency in faith practice. Parents who act with authority but are not controlling in faith formation, invite children to have their voice heard, creating a space for them to speak up. For a child, primary nurturing relationships influence their spiritual development. They see God through their parents. For adolescents, personal devotion enables them to build a personal relationship with the Divine and enhances their well-being. Parents need to be aware that children have the right to be agents instead of objects/merely passive recipients of adult formation. Again, parents must try to avoid extremes: neither being overpowering nor overly permissive. Overpowering parents will diminish children's agency while permissive parents may inhibit their children from developing a strong and solid mind to make moral choices.

Parents should avoid idealized family norms, such as generational sacrifice, which can reinforce oppression or diminish healthy family relationships (Heyer, 2012, p. 85). Instead of the strict idealized norms, parents will recognize the significant role children play in their faith journey and daily activities. Farley strongly believes that "the goals of marriage are to some extent the goals of love: embodied and inspirited union, companionship, communion, fruitfulness, caring and being cared for, opening to the world of others, and lives made sacred in faithfulness to one another and to God" (Farley, 2008, p. 268). Vietnamese immigrant children must be grateful for their parents and grandparents who may have risked their lives for a better future in the United States, but these children are not merely recipients of that sacrifice. They motivated their families to take that risky journey. The motto driving Vietnamese families is "I want my children to have a better life and better children." Children and young people need support to claim and use their agency through correct moral agency formation.

Parents are called to recognize the significant role of their children in their faith journey and daily activities. Thomas Groome emphasizes how adaptation to a new culture requires parents to negotiate and reform their identity continually, which will bring both benefits to parents themselves and greater chances for their children to achieve a sense of dignity, worthiness, and acceptance (Groome, 2008, p. 33). Some Vietnamese parents control their children by over-protection or by imposing their dreams of whom their children should become. Others unwisely adapt to American culture in terms of individualism and seem to lack care, support, and concern for their teenage children. But there is another way. Traina's three strategic points can enhance children's/young people's agency. She first recommends parents (not) to avoid subsuming children's agency by over-initiating. Second, parents must promote children's agency and flourishing directly. Lastly, children's agency is enhanced by respecting them as moral persons

10

and helping them to uplift their self-reliance and self-assertion while mending their wounds (Traina, 2009, p. 20).

3.3 Applying the Just Love Model in Faith-based Communities

For Vietnamese immigrant parents to be successful in their children's education and faith formation, parents need training/formation themselves to grow in understanding and develop skills to know the boundaries of assimilation and retention between the two cultures and to keep a balance in their agency with their children. Daniel Groody (2016) recommends three levels of foundational considerations including pastoral, spiritual, and theological levels.

At a pastoral level, faith-based communities contribute by welcoming and supporting immigrant families and knowing "what's happening on the ground and how needs can be met" (Groody, 2016, p. 228). Church pastors and leaders need to be made aware of the needs and challenges of this population. The parish is not just a place to worship, but also the second home for many immigrant children, where they find a sense of belonging when they join the language program with their peers or to build friendships with those who share the same experiences as immigrant children.

A spiritual level calls us to listen: to come to know the inner lives of migrants and how their journeys enrich and inform the Church and society and how God is working in their lives (Groody, 2016). To help immigrant children meet their spiritual needs, this paper recommends using a narrative approach in doing ministry with families, with the hope that "it can be a prism that helps families claim the rainbows of their identity, the stories, and experiences, the tragedies and struggles and victories that might be hidden" (Garland, 2012, p. 282). Parishes can offer families opportunities through weekend retreats, workshops, and group sharing. These activities encourage family members to share and rewrite their stories and experiences that define their family. Immigration experiences become part of their family story. Both parents and children indeed recreate faith practice as they migrate. They do not simply adopt the religious ways of their new home but bring traditions and worship styles with them. Immigrant children need more space to learn about their original cultures and to share their own experience of what life is like as an immigrant child.

A theological level motivates Christians to embrace their lives as a migration journey towards God. A deeper level embraces a theology of migration as a theology of justice which is a shared theme in many theological writings today. It is in a faith-based community that they wait for God's answer even among hopeless situations, like a common hope for the coming of God's reign (Groody, 2016, p. 233). Many immigrants say that "God is the only one left after everything has been stripped away" (Groody, 2016, p. 226). Each immigrant has precious stories to transform those who know how to listen and desire to take action for change.

I have recommended that both parents, faith-based communities, and those who care and accompany children are called to embrace children as made in God's image, to recognize their human dignity, and offer them agency to tell their stories of their lived experience. Those who are not migrants must encounter immigrants face-to-face, listen to their stories, and advocate on

11

behalf of their needs as some of the most vulnerable in society. This goal can be met only if we are willing to be what Susanna Snyder (2019) calls "a channel of life". She recommends that service, helping, supporting, and offering kindness need to lie at the heart of who we are as we seek to be channels of life (Snyder, 2019, p. 9). By placing immigrants at the center of ethical deliberation, pastoral services and sacrificial love (*agape*) transform both a person who witnesses and listens attentively to immigrants' stories and immigrants themselves.

4. Conclusion

The model *The Just Love in FFF* first calls for radical change in moving children and childhood to the center of biblical interpretation of the household code tradition. In the context of immigration and a patriarchal society such as Vietnamese culture, this model gives hope for an alternative way of life embedded in both faith and culture. When parents and children see each other as both a gift and a task, they transform their family into a school of mercy where parents grant children dignity, freedom, and autonomy, while simultaneously helping them cultivate healthy, caring habits before they are old enough to know why.

The limitation of this paper is its scope. Focusing on the Vietnamese immigrant population and the family faith formation setting might exclude other Vietnamese groups. The proposed model may be applicable, mainly for "churchgoers" who still want to practice their faith and transmit it to the next generation. Researchers can explore how non-practicing Catholic families and people from different religious backgrounds approach children's agency. Children can be more than the language they speak, and surprise us by their capacity to express what they know. Including children as a subject calls the researcher to move beyond a strategy focusing merely on language programs to a more active listening to immigrant children/young people's stories, experiences such as ethnographic research or participatory action research.

Church and faith-based communities are called to design a program of faith formation which is not *for* children but *with* children. A just love model inspires both parents and children to love, accompany, and empower each other. Since no family is perfect, it is inevitable that family members will make mistakes and possibly hurt each other. Phan reminds Vietnamese immigrant families, both the elderly and younger generation, to remember. Remembering aims to know the truth, to forgive, and to be healed (Phan, 2016, p. 131). "Always remember where you came from" is an emerging ethic of migrant memory. Immigrant families must remember the rootedness embedded in their cultural and religious heritage. "Migrants need to understand why they must remember their past, what of this past they must remember, and how they should remember it." Phan warns "they will fail to meet the challenges and forfeit the unique opportunities the Deus migrator has given them" (Phan, 2016, p. 141). It is time to stop imposing values and virtues or using children as objects. It is time to educate children and young people to increase their awareness and deepen their conviction. It is time to let children's voices be heard and let them make the family and community a better place.

12

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13

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14

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Preaching from the Kitchen: The Proclamation of Black Women from Seemingly
Ordinary Spaces and How It Transforms the Faith of Black Youth

Abstract: Though Black women may, in many cases, not have access to a pulpit due to their marginalization within society and within the Black cultural context, they have and still do find places to make their voices known. Through the act of preaching, Black women transform seemingly ordinary spaces into places for sacred witness. These carved-out spaces of authority provide an innovative new understanding of preaching and allow for new ways to transmit biblical understanding to young adults by entwining it with their lived experiences. By witnessing through proclamation, Black women pass on knowledge of the Christian faith and model what it means to live a life braided together with faith in word and action. Though preaching may be seen as the primary function of the ordained, marginalized communities can create spaces within their daily reality to make God known and pass on the ability to preach to young adults looking to find their voice in the church and world.

1

It happens in a passive revelatory moment. A woman with a hot comb begins speaking of how she met her spouse to an enraptured audience of women who affirm with "uh huh," "that's right," and "Amen." She quotes Corinthians 13:4 as she attests to the love she felt that was both patient and kind – a love that whispers to her heart of God active in her life through the witness of her husband. The God she knows is not distant but intimately entwined in her love life, family, job, friendships, and more. This God breaks the bounds of her weekly liturgical service and breaks into the salon with the ease of a straightening comb; between the blow dries and the beauty tips, the Word is opened with seamless grace and confident assurance that this God is ours present in every moment for those who want to listen.

I am reminded of times spent with my great aunt, an active member of the African Methodist Episcopal church and a devoted woman of God. When my parents' work schedule left me playing with dolls on her living room floor, this sacred in-breaking would arise. In fact, some of the best sermons of my life were never heard from the pews. They were heard outside the Church's walls in the kitchens, living room, sidewalks, and salons from women in my family and community. These sermons lingered in the soul of listeners, a testimonial witness of the truth and transformation of God present in one's life. The most powerful preaching moments in my life came from the lips of aunts, grandmothers, sisters, hairdressers, first ladies, and friends. Women who chose to share with me their individual stories weaved with the fabric of biblical understandings. These unforgettable testaments to a life of faith were anything but ordinary, but they took place in ordinary spaces where in my youth, I could not help but listen with awe to the deeply held faith of the women around me.

In a study from the Journal of Youth and Adolescence done in 2020, a study on the faith of low-income youth showed that Black women were named as "culture bearers" in low socio-economic black communities.[1] Within these spaces, they transmit important cultural traits and values to the children within the household.[2] In doing so, these spaces often become the primary space for transformative Christian education work for young adults being introduced to a life of faith through moments of unplanned proclamation. In *Preaching as an Outsider,* author Lisa Thompson speaks about the powerful impact of the proclamatory moment, noting that when it truly happens, "Our body, mind, and heart react to that which bear witness to our deepest places of knowing, and we remember this bodily knowing when we encounter such a witness once again... When proclamation happens, the entirety of our being recognizes its presence as it engages that multitude of our intelligence, including our physical, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual ways of knowing."[3] As a child, I knew this moment. I've witnessed this proclamatory moment that is felt in the entirety of our being and the deepest places of our knowing. This powerful moment is the result of preaching that cannot be denied - a moment that brings biblical words to a revelatory experience that engages the senses, awakens your heart, and reverberates in the essence of your being. Though I may have witnessed it from time to time from the pulpit, my most frequent memory of this type of proclamation has been found in the kitchen during preparations for family gatherings, in the salon during a hair braiding session, and in the church basement as women gather to share their lives. Preaching of this kind is often the powerful

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[1] Wendy Kliewer et al., "Maternal and Family Correlates of Intrinsic Religiosity Profiles Among Low-Income Urban African American Adolescents," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 49, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-019-01095-y.

[2] Kliewer et al.

[3] Lisa L Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 27.

2

testimony of Black women who transformed seemingly ordinary spaces into pivotal spaces of God's divine Word.

The History of Black Women's Preaching

This proclamatory teaching has a history in women's fight for voice and authority. Both inside and outside the Black community, Black women have had to find ways to use their voices despite opposition. Black women, often on the discriminatory end of both sexist and racist ideologies, have found themselves doubly marginalized within society. Theresa Fry Brown describes the history of Black women's call to preach partnered with the silencing of their prophetic voices in *Renovating Sorrow's Kitchen*. She starts by explaining the origin of the Black Church - a church born from the "culture imperative that all must be free."[4] This church began in hidden spaces - woods, swamps, caves, and other undisclosed places during the times of institutional slavery in American history.[5] Slaves needed "a space to worship a God who affirmed their personhood"- a personhood not recognized on the plantations they were bound to.[6] The Black church was known by the Black community as the 'cradle of freedom,' 'the womb of education,' and/or 'the social center of the community.'"[7] In these secret spaces, they could reveal a God greater than the one who preached on the plantation, a professed God who saw them all equally - almost. This free space was not truly free for all; it was still an oppressed place for its female members. This cultural institution suppressed the voices of black women as those who voiced their call to preach were denied.[8]

Instead, women were given other roles: singing in choirs, teaching children, serving the pastor, providing financial support, and building cleaning.[9] These roles also included supporting the institution by "cooking dinners, sponsoring programming, teaching Sunday school, training sons and daughters in Christian homes, and encouraging black males to be leaders in the church that society denied outside of it."[10] Though segregation of tasks gave pulpit access and perceived power to black men to the exclusion of black women, Fry-Brown considers this lack of authority a result of "cultural amnesia" that refuses to note the historical-cultural significance of Black women in North America.[11] These subdivided roles barred women from once-held natural places of communal and spiritual authority. The documentation of slave narratives spoke of Black women as priests, prophetesses, queen mothers, as well as female griots, or west African storytellers, who held the genealogical records of African Americans in their memory.[12] Black women also took roles in the spiritual realm. In fact, Leontyne T.C. Kelly names that "unordained black women have long been preacher-spiritual leaders."[13] These women were

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[4] Christine Marie Smith, *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, Reissue edition (Wipf and Stock, 2008), 44. (Chapter 3, Theresa Fry Brown, An African American Women's Perspective: Renovating Sorrow Kitchen).

[5] Smith, 44.

[6] Smith, 44.

[7] Smith, 44.

[8] Smith, 44.

[9] Smith, 45.

[10] Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (Continuum, 1997), 169. Quoting Leontyne T.C. Kelly.

[11] Smith, *Preaching Justice*, 49.

[12] Smith, 49.

[13] Hilkert, *Naming Grace*, 154.

designated prayer warriors who participated in worship that connected to the ceremonial and ritualistic foundations of the culture.[14]

Despite this spiritual leadership of the past, these women, even in the church today, are restricted to non-preaching roles that deny their baptismal call. Yet, I believe that sermonizing may have moved within the allotted roles of teacher, dinner preparer, and preparing youth for the world. Sermons, seen through the African American theology of proclamation, are one way an active God speaks through the individual to the people. The voice of God can not be stopped even when she lacks ecclesial power.[15] The voice is simply brought to spaces where Black women hold authority.

"Clearing" a Space to Preach

These designated spaces of authority became what Toni Morrison's *Beloved* called "the Clearing." In *Beloved*, Morrison creates a pulpit where one does not exist.[16] In this space, a huge, flat rock becomes a place of sharing where there is openness and authenticity for all who gather. This wide open space cut deep within the wood was a place "the women cry, the men dance, the children laugh."[17] Baby Suggs, a character who prays silently and speaks openly, becomes an itinerant preacher who preaches openly within this space, moved by the spirit for whomever's heart is open. This iconic moment is a testament that this spirit-moving moment can happen anywhere, "be it at a kitchen table, a prayer meeting, or wide-open meadow."[18] These moments carved out space away from the gender-prohibited pulpit so that women could become "pulpit-less proclaimers" ready to share with a self-made authority.[19] Though Baby Sugg would never be allowed to preach at their weekly service, her second-class citizenship disintegrated when they reached their sacred space in the clearing. In this space, society's restrictions and pressures were lifted for the freedom of authentic sharing. It created a space where everyone could bring their honest selves, free to laugh, cry, and dance at will. In this sacred and set apart space, Baby Suggs' voice traveled not only across sound waves but also across spirits as their spiritual truths and genuine selves could be shared within this carved-out community in a seemingly ordinary space. Like Jesus' sermon on the mount, her preaching was found in an open space outside of the confines of a liturgy.[20] It was a clearing where Jesus knew the movement of the Spirit was still at work.

This "clearing" is what I have seen enacted in salons, kitchens, and other black female-centric spaces across my lifetime. In these female-dominated spaces, the authority of women is an unspoken and uncontested reality. It is where those from the majority community, as well as any man, knows that they are not in control of the operations within this carved-out space in society. Instead, in these spaces, Black women share their stories, their deeply discovered truths, and their lives with each other and with the young people who inhabit them. Women bring their children and their truths to these spaces out of practicality and the importance of passing down shared wisdom. In these places, all children, male or female, are welcomed into a place where they can dance, cry, and share in open honesty about their trials and joys as they discover God at

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[14] Smith, *Preaching Justice*, 49.

[15] Smith, 47.

[16] Lisa L Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 31.

[17] Lisa L Thompson, 31.

[18] Lisa L Thompson, 31.

[19] Lisa L Thompson, 31.

[20] Hilkert, *Naming Grace*, 158.

4

work in our day to day and seek the wisdom of their elders. Within these clearings, an operational space becomes one of shared recipes, shared wisdom, and shared faith.

The spaces are unique because, unlike the marginalized places they hold within their culture within the wider society, these spaces have been culturally conditioned for women's leadership. They are places where Black women not only speak but are listened to because the unspoken ethos of these spaces acknowledges who's in charge. It's seen in who holds the styling brush, who is in charge of the parish program, and who knows the secret family recipes. This powerful turn of one's ear is important because "listening is a cultural act. We learn to listen based on how we have been conditioned to listen by our communities."[21] Though in many liturgical spaces, the voices of Black women may lack representation. Their voices are prevalent in these female-dominated havens. In this, the sermon takes unique forms; often in the testimonial or narrative styles, it involves as a natural conversation where the bible is interwoven not as a separate account but as an intertwined part of Black life. In this reality-embedded biblical narrative, black women share stories of love and loss, family joy and concerns, and cultural commentary, all while executing ordinary tasks. These new carved-out reception places have allowed new sermonic opportunities.[22]

How They Preach

As these operational spaces transform into sacred ground, we see preaching take on a new form through testimony and storytelling that not only tells the story of one's faith but mingles it with life in transformative ways. In *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence names the ancient Christian practice of testimony within the human experience as two parts: confession (of what one believes) and narration (of what one has seen), all linked to belief in Christ.[23] Florence notes that this powerful testimony practice is often practiced by marginalized communities who interpret it as preaching.[24] She also names the gift of this unique preaching perspective, stating that because women exist on the margins, they read scripture through a marginalized perspective.[25] This marginalization allows them to utilize scripture to name freedom not given through society.[26] The hermeneutics of marginality shows that they "interpret the text by bringing their ways of knowing in the Word, their experience on the margins and their practices of speaking."[27] All of these elements become an open dialogue of freedom rather than a strict exegetical examination of the text.[28] In the Black community, this freedom has been identified through Black women's personal experiences, and their interpretations become a "testimony to what they have seen and believed in the Word and in their lives."[29] The confession and narration of life events allow others to see who they are and what they have seen; it also allows a better understanding for the others to see themselves anew.[30] Black women who have spent their lives navigating their marginalization within society and within their cultural

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[21] Lisa L Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 125.
[22] Lisa L Thompson, 39.
[23] Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, Annotated edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), xx.
[24] Florence, xx.
[25] Florence, 96.
[26] Florence, 96.
[27] Florence, 97.
[28] Florence, 97.
[29] Florence, 96.
[30] Florence, 96.

framework bring their life experiences in a testimony filled with what they have seen and lived enfleshed with their experience of the living God.

This freedom is what they testify to black young adults in the throws of finding ways to cope with the marginalization they, too, face within society. According to Florence, feminist writer, Rebecca Chopp, calls this kind of preaching a "proclamation of Jubilee."[31] This type of proclamation "happens whenever and wherever preachers testify to those who need it."[32] This means that sacred spaces can come at any time in place, even at the kitchen table. All the space needs to offer is a place of encounters where God can be met.[33] Those who hunger for freedom are offered a Word of hope.[34] This typically happens when one's body is planted in a marginalized space because "the word has a distinct preference for whispering liberation."[35] This distinct preference is present in the place off the beaten path where black women gather. Within these spaces, this type of preaching breaks into ordinary moments with a divine disruption.[36] Jubilee implies a regularly occurring moment in our lives that mirrors Isreal's practice of Jubilee, a removal of debt that happens every seven years. This regular occurrence of jubilee is what I've heard on family holidays in the kitchen, during monthly detangling or braiding sessions at the salon, or even during weekend chats in the living room. These recurring moments of jubilee allow the breaking of God's Word in a moment of liberating freedom because speaking freedom to the deep needs of one's heart brings about liberation.

Though this is often not recognized as preaching, Florence notes that "there is a whole lot of preaching going on that no one classifies as preaching, and that will continue to happen whenever people need to hear the Words of freedom."[37] For Florence, "Proclamation… is a testimony of freedom," and the proclamatory experience of Black women speaks from one marginalized reality to another as they interpersonally preach to black youth.[38] This proclamation is ongoing. It is a lifelong continuation that does not end when the dinner is cooked, the hair is curled, or the church program ends. There will always be another opportunity to preach freedom whenever we gather again. Just like life is never completed and is always in progress, so is the preaching in these operationally sacred spaces.[39] This process will continue to arise as Black women live an embodied life of continued transformation and new understandings.[40]

Passing on Wisdom and Faith: Intergenerational Catechesis

This living testimony opens new ways of preaching that combine our confession of God's revelation in our lives mingled with a narration of the stories of our life's events. Black women, unable to preach from the pulpit, convert their role of Sunday school teachers and raisers of children as part of their spiritual leadership. In this, their would-be sermons take on a new formulation of jubilation. Grounded in the hermeneutics of marginalization, "it is the preacher's responsibility to take the intimate knowledge gained through experience and share it in the

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[31] Florence, 100.
[32] Florence, 100.
[33] Florence, 100.
[34] Florence, 100.
[35] Florence, 100.
[36] Florence, 100.
[37] Florence, 101.
[38] Florence, 97.
[39] Florence, 97.
[40] Florence, 97.

6

sermon so that others may come to know God working in and through their living experience."[41]
For Timone Davis, preacher and writer on youth-centered catechesis, this moment of preaching
brings in facts that the preacher has experienced to appeal to the imagination of the listener.[42] In
this way, Black women continue their role as Female griots as they continue to be story-tellers,
only this time; their stories are biblically linked.[43] Culture, both created and passed on, during the
time of enslavement, happened through word of mouth and has not stopped now.[44]The private
collective oral culture was not just for the record but to comfort and teach.[45] The sermon is now
used as a connective and educational gift for young adults within the communal setting to learn
about God in tangible ways.

In this sense, the sermon "is a story of people connecting their lives to God." This
connection of their experience is often intermingled with actual life, leading to effective
catechesis. Though the preacher can be seen as a role of instruction meant to define, interpret,
and solve contemporary issues of life that affect the people, this catechetical approach innovates
the previous instructive model.[46] In fact, many in the catechetical field "resist the reduction of
catechesis to "instruction," instead acknowledging that true religious instruction "share in the
formational and transformational role of all forms of proclamation."[47] Moving this religious
instruction from the classroom to the living room changes the listener's receptivity and allows for
the building of relationships - a key aspect of any successful ministry. By nature, storytelling
helps to build relationships.[48] This built relationship allows Jesus to enter in and allows grace to
flow.[49] In this method, one must be aware of tone, language, and when a heart is open to hearing
it because evangelizing and storytelling are intertwined at the moment.[50] Unlike a sermon from
the pulpit spoken to the audience, this sermonic style allows a conversation with the listener.
This shows that these women never stopped sermonizing despite their inability to preach from
the pulpit. In fact, these new ways of sermonizing preserve oral tradition, find optimal moments
of instruction when hearts are truly open and remind people of the cultural values that knit the
community together.[51]

As the testimonial narrative unfolds, the Black woman as a preacher is " in conversation
with a community's general understanding of sermon form, pacing, intonation, and shape even as
they determine the form, pacing content, and shape of any given sermon."[52] The pacing and form
move with the flow of the moment, inviting in a sermonic flow that moves with the conversation
between adults and young adults. As the words flow unprepared from the mouth of the
proclaimer, they take on their own form and become a true witness in word and action of their
lived experience of faith - an experience that can not be denied; it can only be shared within the
communal sacred story.

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[41] timone a davis, *Intergenerational Catechesis: Revitalizing Faith through African-American Storytelling* (Lanham:
Lexington Books, 2021), 33.
[42] davis, 33.
[43] davis, 31.
[44] davis, 31.
[45] davis, 31.
[46] Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 48.
[47] Hilkert, *Naming Grace*, 130.
[48] davis, *Intergenerational Catechesis*, 39.
[49] davis, 39.
[50] davis, 39.
[51] Smith, *Preaching Justice*, 48.
[52] Lisa L Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 125.

7

A Love of Scripture Forms A Love of God

   This entwining of scripture with the individual's life is a unique cultural offering of biblical interpretation. Black preaching traditions allow play and interplay with the scripture in singular ways.[53] Black women make use of the "interpretive possibilities" in aid of the good news that calls for "the necessity of (re)imagining the sources and possibilities of the good news."[54] In this perspective, scripture is seen as "a living document in our midst."[55] In some black preaching traditions, this relational engagement with the text is described as "the bible as my story."[56] This names the bible as part of the Black story and gives the community the ability "to engage the Bible as an entity to which they have the capacity to connect and understand through a give-take relational exchange."[57] Black women interpret this scripture intimately with their ways of living and moving in the world.[58] As a woman preaches, the "bible moves from my story to our story."[59] The preacher allows listeners to encounter scripture through life experiences but also invites others in as well.[60] Voice and speech are one-way communal values are transmitted.[61] Stories about their lived experiences from the past or in the present utilize this scriptural interplay to allow for a captivating transmission of biblical values and, with this, a better understanding of the Christian faith.

   Unlocking love for and knowledge of the bible is no small task because within the biblical text lies the core teaching of the church. In fact, Mary Catherine Hilkert notes, "to preach the biblical heritage is therefore to preach the most basic doctrine, the normative teaching, of the Christian church."[62] There is a relationship between doctrine and scripture.[63] The precepts we follow and the doctrine we believe come from our understanding of the biblical text. If we teach about Jesus, we teach an interpretation of biblical tradition, witness to the gospel in the contemporary world, and bring into consideration ethical actions.[64] This is why there was no ministerial distinction between teaching and preaching in the early church.[65] Both focused on handing down the mystery of salvation from God in Jesus entrusted to the church.[66] African Americans utilize the biblical text to speak constructively and critically in each new situation, whatever it may hold, while also passing on the knowledge of the past.[67] The Bible is a primary component of the Christian Black experience; therefore, it becomes a key part of life, holding weight for the ordained and the unordained alike.[68]

Aiding Young Adults Through the Passing of Wisdom

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[53] Lisa L Thompson, 65.
[54] Lisa L Thompson, 66.
[55] Lisa L Thompson, 66.
[56] Lisa L Thompson, 67.
[57] Lisa L Thompson, 67.
[58] Lisa L Thompson, 67.
[59] Lisa L Thompson, 67.
[60] Lisa L Thompson, 67.
[61] Lisa L Thompson, 57.
[62] Hilkert, *Naming Grace*, 135.
[63] Hilkert, 134.
[64] Hilkert, 135.
[65] Hilkert, 134.
[66] Hilkert, 134.
[67] Smith, *Preaching Justice*, 47.
[68] Smith, 47.

This personalized preaching method of Black women has concrete effects on the lives of black youth in not only seeing God's Word with new eyes but also inviting them to see themselves anew. Reginald Blount discusses the power of voice in *Toward Whole-Making: The Power of Voice in the Formation of Black Youth*. Blount pulls on W.E.B. Du Bois idea of "twoness" addressing that the oppressed suffer from a split reality. They must access who they are in the eyes of society as well as within the larger African American community.[69] This "double conscious" is the reality of young adults in oppressed communities.[70] The dominant society poses one image of self while the other image of self is seen from their racial perspective. This often divided identity of Black youth between white and black spaces within church and society causes daily strain. The division is something Black women exponentially understand because they are doubly oppressed, receiving prejudice in both White majority spaces and within the Black community due to their gender. In both places, they navigate a division of self that operates as a "quadruple conscious" within overlapping societal realms. In this way, their marginalized expertise can give insight and authentic witness to Black youth by helping them to navigate times of both joy and struggle.

Due to this inner division, Black youth find their inner voice competes with outer voices. The outer "voices" in this sense are 'the socializing forces of family, friends, school, and popular culture that serve as conversation partners in the lives of young people."[71] Because the culture provides a variety of voices competing for their attention, these voices become active in the young person's discovery of who they are.[72] According to soviet scholar Bakhtin, their own voice contains their "perspective, conceptual horizon, intention, and worldview."[73] They embody in this voice their way of seeing the world and ourselves. Because voices never exist in isolation, they must learn to operate within a social context.[74] Inner voices are in conversation with the other social milieu. When the voice of the listener responds to the speaker's voice, this conversational communication is known as "addressivity."[75] The addressivity can be done internally or externally. Addressivtiy can shape inner speech and form the way we see ourselves. Because the voices of society have a key influence on the listener, it is important to keep in mind who these conversation partners are in the lives of youth. Black women, in these ordinary spaces, provide a conversational addressivity that adds to the dialectic happening in their outer world and allows faith conversation to engage the inner world. In the many voices shaping the lives of young people, these "kitchen moments" provide a restorative voice in the sea of commentary.

In the social milieu, the voices of the Black community can be a necessary sounding board for Black youth. In this way, the prophetic voices in culture reposition the social narrative. Lisa Thompson names the "cultural prophets" in African culture as wisdom bearers that can take the form of famous singers (Marvin Gaye), activists (Martin Luther King Jr.), and old folks and saints. In this paradigm, mothers and grandmothers are added to this cultural recognition of prophetic wisdom bringing in the key role of Black women.[76] Thus, cultural prophets bridge the

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[69] Reginald Blount, "Toward Whole-Making: The Power of Voice in the Faith Formation of Black Youth," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 10, no. 1–2 (2011): 37, https://doi.org/10.1163/24055093-90000038.
[70] Blount, 37.
[71] Blount, 40.
[72] Blount, 40.
[73] Blount, 40.
[74] Blount, 40.
[75] Blount, 40.
[76] Lisa L Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 48.

9

gap between the sacred and the secular.[77] These cultural prophets offer words also entwined in "the clearing." For the preacher, "there is something to be claimed as sacred within the ordinary speech, songs, and writings that are a part of the community."[78] Voices of ordinary people become communal sages who dispense their knowledge and share the many voices of wisdom found within the culture, which includes Black women.[79]

Blount builds on the work of Howard Thurman's *Disciplines of the Heart*, noting the need for both *Interpersonal community*, humanities connectedness and relationships with one another, and *Intrapersonal community*, circumstances and environments that allow persons to fully understand their true self-worth and purpose in life.[80] For Thurman, liberation is synonymous with freedom.[81] Intrapersonal relationship building can reconcile our parted selves and make us whole; it allows us to focus on the inner elements that prevent us from believing we are truly free.[82] For Thurman, internal and external freedom is tied, as liberation can only be achieved when the external powers no longer have control. Though external liberties can and have been denied to those on the margins, "freedom is internal and cannot be denied unless it is forfeited: for freedom is an individual's birthright."[83] This freedom is what is preached in moments of sermonic jubilation. These moments speak to all the marginalized, particularly youth, of society who have come through difficult moments still finding reasons to praise God. Freedom not found in society can be found within an understanding community that listens and affirms struggles and helps direct toward divine hope.

This intrapersonal process is in need of the community in the faith formation of Black youth centered on God. Blount argues that one's other voice amplifies the voice within, which means critical inner voices can be internalized dismissal from the dominant society that Black youth encounter in their daily setting.[84] The goal, particularly in faith, is that these young adults are connected to faith-filled and encouraging voices away from society's deafening demands. Adult conversation partners foster help that allows them to navigate community conversation and bring their divided selves together.[85] The clearing is a space where their authentic selves are welcome - openly exposed and inherently loved by the women who gather there. Florence reminds us that relationships are at the core of our preaching.[86] "We can't preach to people we don't love."[87] Fortunately, Black female spaces possess an abundance of love. This love guides their preaching, navigating not only what they say but how they say it.

Love is the key to true openness because most of these youths spend their days at the receiving end of society's expectations. Walter Brueggemann, old testament scholar and theologian, states that behind the wall lies "different sets of assumptions, a different perception of the world, a different epistemology are at work."[88] Bruggeman poses the idea of discourse that happens at the wall and behind the wall. Blount notes that Black youth need conversation

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[77] Lisa L Thompson, 51.
[78] Lisa L Thompson, 51.
[79] Lisa L Thompson, 49.
[80] Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit*, Reprint edition (Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 1963), 105.
[81] Blount, "Toward Whole-Making," 44.
[82] Blount, 44.
[83] Blount, 44.
[84] Blount, 46.
[85] Blount, 46.
[86] Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 153.
[87] Florence, 153.
[88] Blount, "Toward Whole-Making," 46.

partners that can see what is hidden or what is "behind the wall" of their daily guise.[89] These conversation partners are mentor figures that provide a safe space to process the effect of the outside world. As a result, this interpersonal discourse provides an essential need for youth development. Having this adult aid in discourse helps Black youth transform and address the purposes God has placed on their heart. Blount notes that youth are looking for adults who show their care by a willingness to hear them as well as guide them.[90] At the wall, the primary discourse of society takes place over the discourse of the marginalized, but behind the wall, transformation and empowerment can happen.[91] The conversations behind that wall have their own language, own experiences, and proper references that are not only legitimized but essential to public discourse.[92] This nurtures an alternative reading of reality that counters the dominant societal understanding.[93] The secret Black church experience that happens in the kitchen becomes a space of transformation and safety for young adults fighting internally and externally at the wall. These spaces allow for assumptions, perceptions, and truths not recognized by the White majority. In doing so, they open up a space of unfettered truth and honest discussion of the hardships and joys of the black experience. Those committed to being in this candid conversation invite young adults into a space of nurturing and guidance that brings about a spiritual transformation that happens over time.[94] Each conversation behind the wall presents a preaching opportunity that invites an encounter with God's truth over that of society.

In this way, the Black church has historically spent its time finding places "behind the wall" to be themselves, be it in swamps, in caves, or in kitchens. Black women foster a space where young people can not only hear a sermon but they find the words to preach their own. In kitchens, salons, and women's meetings, the world outside of the walls does not impose on this space of communal freedom. As Black women invite youth into that space, they show them that this is a space of freedom they, too, can create wherever they need it most. For young adults looking for hope in the world, the sermonizing of Black women allows them to see the challenges, as well as the gifts, of a life of faith. The preacher challenges themselves and the community to engage fully with the biblical text, not calling for perfection but inspiring change.[95] In this way, the preacher presents realities while unlocking future possibilities.[96] The preacher leads the community noting what God has done, will do, and is already doing in their lived reality.[97]

The Kitchen We Are All Invited To
In a recent presentation on the prophetic voices of young adults, a talk attendee, who was a Latin X woman, had a moment of epiphany as I spoke about the sacred spaces we create as we preach outside of the liturgical context. She noted, "now, I know that though I've never preached at a pulpit, my living room is my pulpit, my kitchen is my pulpit." This moment was a "sacred inbreaking" of God that became a moment of catechetical instruction for me and other young

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[89] Blount, 46.
[90] Blount, 36.
[91] Blount, 47.
[92] Blount, 47.
[93] Blount, 47.
[94] Blount, 47.
[95] Smith, *Preaching Justice*, 49.
[96] Smith, 49.
[97] Smith, 49.

adults learning the biblical truths.[98] Throughout my youth, God was present in an unforgettable way, intermingled with the daily operations of Black life as they preached from the kitchen. Some of life's biggest lessons were gained, not from a classroom or a pulpit, but instead in front of the oven or leaning over a stove, propped up in a salon chair, or sitting at the feet of a women's meeting as the dispensing of spiritual knowledge was married with the dispensing of recipes and family stories.

This "clearing" is known by many of the marginalized, not simply the Black community. There is a church preaching for those who are open to hearing it, breaking open the word in new and innovative ways from "behind the wall." If we listen, the words of the marginalized can unlock a freedom that drowns out the world and invites us to a relationship with the one who made it. Preaching the gospel does not stop at the threshold of the church; it goes into the spaces of our lives where we confess to the truth of a God who has been active in every part of our life's reality. For young adults listening, they learn about a God equally active in their lived experience, and they go out into the world creating their own "clearings" of authentic witness and loving embrace. Preaching from the kitchen reminds us that we can testify whenever and wherever we need to, and it's heard by all those who hunger for hope. Thankfully, the God of hope is with us, waiting to be known by all who bring themselves to "the clearing."

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[98] Lisa L Thompson, *Ingenuity*, 28.

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13

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**Towards a Pedagogy of 'Just' Hospitality:
A Theo-Ethical Proposal for Ministry with Children of Different Cultures[1]**

Abstract
This research challenges the understanding of hospitality in the Christian faith community as it pertains to children who have marginalized experiences in a multicultural society. Although hospitality has been a traditional practice of the faith community, it needs to be reconsidered in today's context of power differentials among culturally different people. This study explores the concept of hospitality with a critical awareness of unjust power issues among children of different cultures. By imagining a way of 'just' hospitality, the study envisions a pedagogy that the faith community can practice in its ministry with children from different cultural backgrounds.

Introduction: Welcoming Which Children?

"Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (Mark 10:14b)

The Gospels portray a celebrated narrative in which Jesus receives children amidst a gathering of adults and welcomes children as equal members of the kin-dom of God (Mt 19:13-15; Mk 10:13-16; Lk 18:15-17).[2] How can this radical message be interpreted in today's context of a multicultural society? In our present reality, many children experience marginalization or exclusion due to their racial or ethnic backgrounds. White children and children of color often perceive themselves as holding different levels of power. Disturbing incidents reported by Debra van Ausdale and Joe R. Feagin in a daycare in the US reveal instances where white children as young as 3-5 years old asserted their superiority over children of color (Black, Asian, and Latinx) during play.[3] The children claiming superiority justified their perception based on their whiteness, linking it to their concept of (US) Americanness.[4] This demonstrates how racial injustice permeates interactions among culturally different children. If left unaddressed, this antagonistic situation can lead to distorted self-perceptions and distorted views of other cultural groups among children of different backgrounds. Hermeneutic injustice against minority groups can be perpetuated within society, manifesting itself in verbal and behavioral oppression against

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[1] This presentation paper includes content and summaries derived from my PhD thesis.

[2] I intentionally use the term "kin-dom" instead of the term "kingdom," recognizing and appreciating the wisdom of the Mujerista perspective that highlights the kinship in God's world-order that counteract the existing world-order. See, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, "Kin-Dom of God: A Mujerista Proposal," in *In Our Own Voices: Latino/a Renditions of Theology*, ed. Benjamín Valentín (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 171–89.

[3] Joe R. Feagin and Debra van Ausdale, *The First R: How Children Learn Race and Racism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000).

[4] Ibid., 36-37, 108-9, 111, 182-83.

them, as we have already seen, directly or indirectly. Consequently, children of color are often framed as vulnerable and marginalized strangers within their own communities. In the face of this disheartening reality, it becomes crucial to reflect on the message conveyed through Jesus' welcoming of children. What does it truly mean to welcome children within the faith community? How can children's ministry embody the welcoming of children?

Several Christian educators, including Joyce A. Mercer and David W. Anderson,[5] have advocated for pedagogies that reflect the ethos of hospitality in children's ministry. These scholars provide valuable perspectives on biblical hospitality, and argue for the importance of fully welcoming children into the church. However, their pedagogies often overlook the power dynamics that exist among culturally different children, an issue that can arise within the concept of hospitality. When constructing a pedagogy in relation to children of different cultures who experience varying levels of power, it is crucial to examine more carefully how the concept of hospitality can deal with these power dynamics. One promising avenue for exploration is the theo-ethical understanding of hospitality. Scholars such as Letty M. Russell, Hee An Choi, and Namsoon Kang underscore the link between power differentials among culturally different people and the notion of hospitality. They advocate for a more just understanding of hospitality that acknowledges and addresses these power dynamics. I believe that their arguments for a more 'just' hospitality offer invaluable insights and implications for children's ministry.

It is important to clarify that the intention of this research is not to criticize existing pedagogies that feature the spirit of hospitality. Rather, my goal is to enhance the understanding of hospitality through a critical examination of the concept and to explore its possible application in ministry with children from different cultural backgrounds. By incorporating a more nuanced and critical perspective, this research aims to propose a theo-ethical approach to ministry that empowers all culturally different children to thrive in a multicultural society. To fulfill this task, I begin with an analysis of Christian hospitality, examining biblical teachings on the concept and exploring how early Christians historically practiced it. I then point out a problematic aspect in the historical understanding of hospitality and proceed to introduce a more critical understanding of the concept. Building upon this critical examination, I envision a pedagogy of 'just' hospitality that can be reflected in children's ministry in a multicultural society.

(Re)Considering Christian Hospitality

Hospitality entails the generous treatment, reception, and welcome of strangers as guests.[6] Hospitality is central to the faith community throughout the history. Special attention needs to be given to early Christians. Their practice of hospitality not only garnered praise within their wider society but has also served an exemplary model of Christian hospitality for today's

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[5] Joyce A. Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2005); David W. Anderson, "Hospitable Classrooms: Biblical Hospitality and Inclusive Education," *International Journal of Christianity and Education* 15, no. 1 (March 2011): 13–27.

[6] Merriam-Webster, s.v. "hospitality," accessed May 31, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hospitality; Merriam-Webster, s.v. "hospitable," accessed May 31, 2023, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hospitable.

church.[7] To grasp the concept of Christian hospitality among early Christians, it is helpful to examine its practice in their social contexts: the ancient Greek and Roman societies.

For the ancient Greeks, hospitality was considered a virtue that distinguished them as more civilized than who they viewed as more primitive counterparts. Among these supposedly more primitive people, xenophobia was pervasive as they viewed strangers as potential threats possessing magico-religious powers that could endanger their safety.[8] The ancient Greeks recognized that such feelings of xenophobia were rooted in misguided beliefs and reflected a lack of civilization.[9] By practicing hospitality, they sought to demonstrate their civilization and goodness toward strangers.[10] As strangers ventured into unfamiliar societies, whether willingly or involuntarily, they found themselves without a place to stay and vulnerable to physical attacks. Their precarious and unsettled status necessitated a safe haven.[11] The ancient Greeks aimed to fulfill the needs of strangers by offering food and shelter. In this way, the hospitality of the ancient Greeks was seen to exhibit altruism and became a social virtue that indicated their civilization.[12]

However, despite the seemingly altruistic mindset associated with ancient Greek hospitality, it was fundamentally grounded in the principle of reciprocity. This principle was accompanied by the understanding that anyone could find themselves in the position of being a stranger in particular situations.[13] In a nomadic context, people had the potential to leave their homes for any number of reasons, rendering them vulnerable strangers in need of assistance.[14] Recognizing this possibility, people welcomed and treated strangers with kindness, envisioning a future where the hosts themselves would receive such hospitality in a different setting. Thomas E. Reynolds refers to this as an "ethic of exchange," highlighting the notion that "human beings share a base-line vulnerability that is worthy of protection and covering when exposed to peril."[15] Accordingly, the common vulnerability and desire to be well-treated in times of emergency became driving forces for the practice of hospitality.

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[7] Amy G. Oden, *And You Welcomed Me: A Sourcebook on Hospitality in Early Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2001), 38.

[8] Ladislaus J. Bolchazy, *Hospitality in Early Rome: Livy's Concept of Its Humanizing Force* (Chicago, IL: Ares Publishers, 1977), 1; Arthur Sutherland, *I Was a Stranger: A Christian Theology of Hospitality* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006), 23.

[9] Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 18.

[10] Bolchazy, *Hospitality in Early Rome*, 1.

[11] Thomas E. Reynolds, "Welcoming without Reserve?: A Case in Christian Hospitality," *Theology Today* 63 (July 2006): 196.

[12] Bolchazy, *Hospitality in Early Rome*, 1.

[13] Reynolds, "Welcoming without Reserve?," 196.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Thomas E. Reynolds, "Beyond Hospitality?: Unsettling Theology and Migration in Canada," in *Religion and Migration: Negotiating Hospitality, Agency and Vulnerability*, ed. Andrea Bieler et al. (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Veriagsanstalt, 2019), 114.

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The reciprocal nature of hospitality persisted in early Roman society, influenced by the ancient Greeks. Despite prevalent xenophobia, trade and interactions with foreign societies increased, leading to the need for positive relationships with strangers. The law of hospitality (*ius hospitii*) was thus established, highlighting the welcoming of strangers as guests rather than potential adversaries. The law served a practical purpose, fostering a friendly bond between hosts and guests. If a foreign guest proved to be a business partner or a representative of the host's political interests, they could become a friend of the host. As guest-friends, they were expected to contribute to the host's community and provide educational opportunities for the host's children, and even assist the host as a spy if necessary. This exemplified the host's aspiration to treat guests in the same manner in which they would like to be treated in return.[16]

Compared to this reciprocal hallmark of hospitality in ancient Greek and Roman societies, early Christians' hospitality lacked a desire or requirement for reciprocity. This distinctive characteristic was deeply rooted in biblical teachings. Here, I will elaborate two important examples of such teachings and relate the biblical passages to the practice of hospitality in early Christianity. Firstly, in the First Testament, God demanded ancient Israelites to remember that they had once been sojourners and strangers in Egypt and that God had saved them from the Egyptians' oppression. Based on their past experience, Israelites were required to practice hospitality to strangers and sojourners amid themselves (Lev 19:33-34; cf. Dt 12:17-19; Dt 24:19-22).[17] The same requirement was applied to early Christians, who found it to be imperative for them as well. Similar to ancient Israelites, early Christians were marginalized in society due to the political and social oppression of the Roman empire. Like ancient Israelites had done, early Christians identified themselves with exiles and refugees. This context inspired them to practice hospitality by sheltering strangers and harboring other Christian asylum seekers.[18]

Next, in the Second Testament, Jesus taught people to be hospitable to the vulnerable. The Gospel of Matthew reports that Jesus told a story that a king separated two groups: righteous sheep and unrighteous goats. Their separation is dependent on how they treated the least, such as those who were hungry, thirsty, strangers, naked, sick, or in prison (Mt 25:34-36). The king identifies himself with these people, and calls those "the righteous" (v. 40) who treated well those who were the least. As Christine D. Pohl puts it, "This has been the most important passage for the entire tradition on Christian hospitality."[19] Jesus' saying that "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (v. 35) became a recurring theme throughout the early Christian texts on hospitality.[20] As early Christians repeatedly heard the Jesus' teaching on this message, they learned that Christ is among the least; they identified welcoming one of the least with welcoming

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[16] Bolchazy, *Hospitality in Early Rome*, 28-29.

[17] Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 7; Luke Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness Amid Moral Diversity* (Abingdon, UK; New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 129.

[18] Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 38-39.

[19] Pohl, *Making Room*, 22.

[20] Pohl, *Making Room*, 22; Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 19.

Christ.[21] Therefore, early Christian communities extended their practice of hospitality to the most vulnerable individuals who were least able to offer anything in return.[22]

While the hospitality practices of early Christians compared to those of ancient Greeks and Romans have distinct motivating factors, both share the "paradigm of gift," as called by Ilsup Ahn.[23] In this paradigm, hosts believe they have abundant resources and can provide for the needs of strangers or guests. Hospitality, therefore, becomes unidirectional, with hosts focusing solely on meeting the 'physical needs' of their guests. This approach remained consistent in ancient Greek and Roman contexts, as well as in early Christianity, where the emphasis was on providing for guests in a one-sided manner, regardless of whether reciprocity was expected.

This gift paradigm poses challenges in today's intercultural relationships with power imbalances. Pohl astutely points out that in our present-day societies that emphasize justice and equality, the traditional model of hospitality may seem outdated and even paternalistic.[24] This observation highlights the fact that the paradigm of gift does not guarantee equality between hosts and guests. Instead, in intercultural settings with power differentials, it can engender an unjust relationship where dominant groups (such as whites and hosting citizens) assume the role of givers, while marginalized groups (such as people of color and migrants) become receivers.[25] This dynamic further reinforces inferior perceptions of the latter, creating a power quotient. Accordingly, a more 'just' understanding of hospitality is necessary for our intercultural context.

Imagining a More 'Just' Hospitality

An important task at hand is to move beyond the paradigm of gift. To achieve this task, the first step is politicizing the concept of hospitality itself. As Namsoon Kang aptly points out, if hospitality is romanticized or depoliticized, it becomes a form of blind charity.[26] In order to avoid this undesirable possibility, we need to consider how hospitality can be practiced with a critical recognition of power differentials in the relationships between the majority (those who are believed to be hosts) and the marginalized (those who are framed as guests).

Letty M. Russell presents a possibility for such a critical consideration on hospitality. She contends that hospitality is not merely about giving material resources to strangers but about the building of "a *relationship* that is rooted in our God-given human nature; it is not a commodity

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[21] Oden, *And You Welcomed Me*, 19.

[22] Pohl, *Making Room*, 17; Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 107.

[23] Ilsup Ahn, "Economy of 'Invisible Debt' and Ethics of 'Radical Hospitality': Toward a Paradigm Change of Hospitality from 'Gift' to 'Forgiveness,'" *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 38, no. 2 (June 2010): 247.

[24] Pohl, *Making Room*, 78.

[25] Ibid., 78-82.

[26] Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013), 151.

to be rationed."[27] Thus, she shifts the focus of Christian hospitality from gift-giving in a traditional sense to a *relational* understanding. Russell's argument regarding the relational aspects of hospitality emerges from the postcolonial context of the United States, where the legacies of colonialism continue in economic, political, and cultural forms. In this context, Russell argues that all individuals are "postcolonial subjects," whether they occupy the position of colonizer or colonized.[28] Despite their differing positions, they need to share a common goal of challenging the knowledge, values, and practices that privilege certain groups, or colonizers. This shared goal also entails the creation of "liberating spaces" where people can collaborate to resist various forms of oppression such as racism and unjust social structures that perpetuate such oppression.[29]

Seeking to create a relationship of hospitality among postcolonial subjects who have different levels of power, Russell advocates for "just hospitality" by intertwining Christian hospitality and justice. She defines just hospitality as "the practice of God's welcome by reaching out across difference to participate in God's actions bringing justice and healing in our world of crisis and fear of the ones we call 'other.'"[30]

Her definition highlights two crucial issues in just hospitality: (1) the fear of those who are labeled as "other," and (2) the importance of reaching out across difference. These issues are interconnected and revolve around a "hermeneutic of the other," as described by Russell. According to her, the colonized are perceived as the "other" by colonizers, who consider themselves as the norm or standard. The colonized are viewed as divergent from this norm and permanently different from the colonizers.[31] The perceived persistent difference creates fear among those who identify with the norm (the colonizers), of the colonized who are not like themselves. This fear leads to oppression against the colonized.

Recognizing this harmful consequence of difference that goes together with fear, Russell argues that difference should be named by the marginalized with their own voices and agencies. If all postcolonial subjects, including both colonizers and the colonized, acknowledge the emancipatory potential of difference, they can see difference not as a threat but as a gift. Russell finds the biblical account of the Pentecost (Acts 2:12) as an example of this understanding, where God enabled people to understand and communicate with one another across linguistic and cultural differences.[32] Just hospitality, for Russell, embodies this principle by encouraging

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[27] Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference*, ed. J. Shannon Clarkson and Kate M. Ott (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 117; Russell's italics.

[28] Ibid., 25-26.

[29] Ibid., 27, 112; Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 152.

[30] Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 101.

[31] Ibid., 21, 23-24, 31, 71.

[32] Ibid., 71-72.

all participants in a hospitality relationship to communicate and partner with one another across any (or many) differences in the pursuit of justice within an unjust reality.[33]

However, while Russell proposes a more 'just' understanding of Christian hospitality that goes beyond the classic paradigm of gift, her definition of just hospitality still reflects the perspective of the majority. This is evident in her use of the phrase "the ones we call 'other.'"[34] This expression exposes Russell's position of privilege as a white individual in the postcolonial context. Whether intentional or not, she employs the binary of 'us' and 'them' when discussing her claim to just hospitality. This binary division reveals a hermeneutical violence that may further contribute to producing strangers/guests in need of hospitality.[35] By fabricating some as strangers/guests, it means that such a hermeneutical violence always defines people of color as perpetual strangers/guests in terms of hospitality.[36] This understanding may depict people of color as waiting for an invitation from whites to build a hospitality relationship. Therefore, we need to strive for epistemic justice in the context of hospitality to overcome this hermeneutical violence against people of color.

Additionally, Russell provokes the marginalized to raise their own voices to name the differences between themselves and the powerful. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that people of color often desire to be viewed as not significantly different from those in positions of more power. If people of color, who are frequently framed as guests, are expected to contribute to the hospitality relationship by addressing their distinctive values that differ from those of the powerful, it can be another form of oppression against them. In other words, anticipating that people of color should contribute to the hospitality relationship can perpetuate hermeneutical violence against them.

One possibility for achieving epistemic justice is related to a more accurate understanding of people of color. As Thomas E. Reynolds aptly points out, people of color are often presumed to be immigrants, regardless of how long they have lived in North America for generations.[37] This contrasts with the perception of whites, who are always seen as native in this context, even if some of them have only recently arrived in the land.[38] Criticizing this unjust belief about people of color, Hee An Choi highlights the significant efforts that people of color have made to successfully settle in the North American context. They learn new languages as well as understand, adopt, resist, or integrates norms and rules upheld in North America. These

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[33] Letty M. Russell, "Encountering the 'Other' in a World of Difference and Danger," *The Harvard Theological Review* 99, no. 4 (October 2006): 465; Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 16.

[34] Russell, *Just Hospitality*, 101.

[35] Reynolds, "Beyond Hospitality?," 115-16.

[36] Nell Becker Sweeden, *Church on the Way: Hospitality and Migration* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 27; Eleazar S. Fernandez, *Burning Center, Porous Borders: The Church in a Globalized World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2011), 228.

[37] Thomas E. Reynolds, "Migration and Christianity in a Canadian Context," in *Christianities in Migration: The Global Perspective*, ed. Elaine Padilla and Peter C. Phan (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 194.

[38] Ibid.

endeavors are never easy and often are rather painful. Nevertheless, people of color have endured these challenging practices to support their well-being as residents in society.[39]

Building upon the complex experiences of people of color, Hee An Choi challenges the binary of host and guest in a hospitality relationship that inherently engenders and perpetuates their guest status. She refers to this binary as "the paradigm of the host-guest," which fails to understand the intricate life experiences of people of color in North America. This paradigm even fails to acknowledge their status transition from strangers/foreigners to residents.[40] Instead, it is essential to recognize that people of color do not remain as guests but as those who would live in the same land alongside whites, who are generally regarded as exclusive hosts. As Choi boldly states, people of color "want to be cohosts in this land, by all means. They are cohosts after all."[41] In this way, she tackles and breaks the binary of host-guest and further advocates for a paradigm shift in hospitality toward the idea of sharing "co-hostship."

The notion of co-hostship does not signify that all people maintain their exclusive hostship. Rather, it implies that all people involved are both cohosts and coguests and they belong to one another.[42] Russell's understanding of just hospitality can align with the idea of co-hostship at this point. When people of color and whites recognize themselves as cohosts and coguests to each other, their partnering efforts to resist systemic injustice become more meaningful. It becomes evident that the ultimate goal of the co-work is to flourish together with equal dignity in a multicultural society. Toward this goal, engaging in "a radically political act of risk-taking and boundary-crossing" becomes possible.[43] All boundaries among culturally different people can become more flexible when everyone is acknowledged as cohosts and coguests who belong to one another.

In imagining a more 'just' hospitality, the above discussions of Russell and Choi have shed light on several important points. First, a more 'just' hospitality involves crossing the boundaries that distinguish between culturally different people who hold varying levels of power. Second, it requires acknowledging and embracing the shared co-hostship among all participants in a hospitality relationship, recognizing their interconnectedness and belongingness to one another. Third, it entails partnering with one another to actively resist social injustice.

I find that Jesus' act of washing his disciples' feet, as described in the biblical account of John 13:3-15, exemplifies this notion of 'just' hospitality. In this episode, Jesus, who is the host of the supper, takes on the role of a servant by washing his disciples' feet. This action challenges the societal norm where it is expected for a servant to wash the feet of the host. By washing his disciples' feet, Jesus crosses the boundary between himself as the teacher and his disciples. It also signifies his honoring of the disciples by placing them in the position of the host.

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[39] Hee An Choi, *A Postcolonial Self: Korean Immigrant Theology and Church* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), 65-70.

[40] Ibid., 140.

[41] Ibid., 141.

[42] Ibid., 141-43.

[43] Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology*, 174.

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Furthermore, Jesus does not command his disciples to wash his feet in return. Instead, he instructs them to wash one another's feet, just as he has done for them (v. 14). This mutual act of washing symbolizes a humble offering of love to one another, the realization of co-hostship and co-guestship, the recognition of their belongingness to one another, and the affirmation of their partnership in embodying Jesus' humble and radical love among themselves.[44] In this biblical example, we can see elements of crossing boundaries, embracing co-hostship, acknowledging mutual belongingness, and engaging in mutual acts of service and empowerment. These principles align with the concept of 'just' hospitality, emphasizing the importance of mutual respect, solidarity, and the co-pursuit of justice within hospitality relationships.

Envisioning a Pedagogy of 'Just' Hospitality

To reflect the ethos of 'just' hospitality in children's ministry within the faith community, it is crucial to cultivate a pedagogy that embraces and promotes the values of 'just' hospitality. A 'just' hospitality requires that repeated and intentional learning be embodied in the daily lives of children from different cultural backgrounds where they may have encountered power differentials in their intercultural relationships with others.[45] The Christian faith community can become places of 'just' hospitality where "all children, in the dynamic fullness of their entire lives, with all the diversity . . ., can participate together in meaningful ways."[46] To make this possible, I envision a pedagogy of 'just' hospitality. In what follows, I suggest several principles that can guide the pedagogy.

1. **Sharing the Co-Hostship Between Adults and Children in the Faith Community**

The first principle involves re-framing the relationship between adults and children as one of cohosts and coguests. In many contexts of children's ministry, adults are often seen as exclusive hosts who possess abundant resources such as biblical knowledge, faith experiences, and other capabilities, which they impart to children. Consequently, children are often cast as receiving guests in this dynamic. However, to go beyond this gift paradigm, it is essential to create an environment where adults and children can share in the co-hostship and recognize that they belong to one another.

This re-framing necessitates a hermeneutic shift in the understanding of children from being seen as "human becomings" who are in the process of becoming adults, to recognizing them as "full human beings."[47] This recognition of children's full dignity and humanity stems from their status as children of God, bearing the image of God.[48] By acknowledging and

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[44] Ibid., 173.

[45] Hee An Choi, *A Postcolonial Relationship: Challenges of Asian Immigrants as the Third Other* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2022), 149.

[46] David M. Csinos and Ivy Beckwith, *Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 138.

[47] Wesley W. Ellis, "Human Beings and Human Becomings: Departing from the Developmental Model of Youth Ministry," *Journal of Youth and Theology* 14, no. 2 (October 2015): 119–37.

[48] Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 110.

affirming the inherent worth and value of children as full participants in the faith community, we can create a foundation for 'just' hospitality. This includes recognizing their unique perspectives, insights, and spiritual journeys. It involves listening to their voices, valuing their contributions, and providing opportunities for them to actively engage and participate in the life of the community. [49] A part of this engagement should be "a gradual transfer of power" to children, enabling them to take on moral responsibilities and actively contribute to making the faith community more just, according to their age and situation.[50] This means acknowledging children's agency and involving them in decision-making processes that affect them. By doing so, children are empowered to shape the community, and their presence becomes more integral to the communal life of the faith community.

2. Educating All Culturally Different Children as Agents of 'Just' Hospitality

The principle of sharing co-hostship between adults and children, should go hand in hand with the next principle: educating all culturally different children as agents of 'just' hospitality in their intercultural relationships. This can be achieved when these children form genuine friendships where all individuals have equal power in their relationships. As mentioned earlier, in a multicultural society, those with more power are often seen as exclusive hosts, while those with less power are easily labeled as guests. In this reality, it is often overlooked that people of color are also cohosts who share the same land and live together with those considered exclusive hosts. The same dynamics of power and ignorance can be observed in the relationships among culturally different children who possess varying levels of power. Therefore, in the faith community, it is essential to consistently reinforce the idea that children of color are not guests but cohosts. Anderson also expresses a similar perspective, highlighting that an educational environment rooted in hospitality encourages the development of friendship among culturally different children, transcending the boundaries that divide them based on race or ethnicity.[51] Fostering friendship with 'just' hospitality is crucial among children from different cultural backgrounds.[52]

How can this friendship with 'just' hospitality be established among culturally different children? To achieve this, the ethos of 'just' hospitality needs to be woven into all aspects of children's ministry, including but not limited to worship services, Bible study, small group gatherings, and play. For example, in worship services, intentional efforts can be made to represent cultural diversity and differences. This can be done by using imagery that shows children of different skin colors and cultural backgrounds, and images of historical Jesus portrayed as a person of color.[53] By doing so, children can develop a sense of radical inclusivity and recognize the value of cultural diversity. Another method is the employment of Bibliodrama

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[49] Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 3.

[50] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2003), 143.

[51] Anderson, "Hospitable Classrooms," 21, 24.

[52] Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 33-34.

[53] Heejin Choi, "Enhancing Anti-Racism of Asian American Children in Ministry," *Journal of Asian American Theological Forum* 9, no. 1 (July 2022): 31.

10

to engage with biblical narratives. In Bibliodrama, children can play biblical characters, interpret biblical narratives from their own perspectives, and collaboratively complete the drama.[54] This process not only helps children engage with the biblical text by interpreting it with their life experiences in society but also enables them to engage with other peers, listen to them, and learn to honor their perspectives.

While the above examples illustrate how children can indirectly learn the ethos of 'just' hospitality, the following activities offer more direct instruction. For instance, in small group gatherings, social issues can be addressed openly through dialogue with and among children. When power imbalances in intercultural relationships are specified in such a dialogue, children have the opportunity to understand power dynamics, develop skills to navigate and challenge injustice at both individual and societal levels, and promote justice in our unjust reality.[55] Additionally, play can serve as a space where children actively participate as moral agents and challenge the notion that whiteness represents the exclusive character of (US) Americanness.[56] Such biases and stereotypes may arise during play, presenting valuable "teachable moments" that faithful educators, responsible for educating children with a 'just' hospitality, should not overlook.[57] When children are encouraged immediately to resist such biases and stereotypes, they can cultivate a deeper understanding of justice and share the ethos of 'just' hospitality with one another. Through these various activities in the faith community, children can learn the ethos of 'just' hospitality either directly or indirectly, enabling them to embody it in their daily lives, particularly when forming intercultural relationships with peers from different cultural backgrounds.

Conclusion: Welcoming All Children of Different Cultures

Let us revisit the passage mentioned in the Introduction. When we contemplate Jesus' words, "The kin-dom of God belongs to such as these children," in today's context of unjust power imbalances among culturally different children, it prompts us to reflect on its significance. It indicates that the kin-dom of God is where all culturally different children are welcomed without any conditions and enjoy their co-hostship with one another. It also reveals that the faith community, answering Jesus' call to embrace God's alternative and radical world-order, can and should become a place where 'just' hospitality is actively practiced in the company of culturally different children.[58] In doing so, the faith community ought to embody and exemplify the values of friendship (or love), justice, and hospitality, enabling culturally different children to transcend

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[54] Cheryl T. Magrini, "Children's Interpretations of Biblical Meal Stories: Ethnographic Intertextual Voicing as the Practice of Hospitable Pedagogy," *Religious Education* 101, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 60-61; Peter A. Pitzele, *Scripture Windows: Toward a Practice of Bibliodrama* (Los Angeles, CA: Torah Aura Productions, 1998).

[55] Choi, "Enhancing Anti-Racism," 30.

[56] Feagin and van Ausdale, *The First R*.

[57] Choi, "Enhancing Anti-Racism," 31; see also, Eunsook Hyun and J. Dan Marshall, "Teachable-Moment-Oriented Curriculum Practice in Early Childhood Education," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 35, no. 1 (January 2003): 111–27.

[58] Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 168.

11

existing power dynamics and work together towards realizing the vision of God's kin-dom on earth.

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13

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14

Hospitable Education
Ina ter Avest
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Summary
In the past, the Netherlands took on the form of a pillarized society, with three 'pillars'
(Catholic, Protestant and liberal) 'living apart together'. Each pillar came with its own
education system, health care, and newspapers. In the 1980s, a fourth 'pillar' was added: the
Islamic pillar. Nowadays, however, pillarization is fiercely debated. During the same period at
the end of the 20th century, a model was developed at a Dutch primary school for the
inclusive education of all pupils, irrespective of the (religious or secular) life orientation of
their parents. This innovative educational process became the object of research. Literature
reviews on (inter)religious education were complemented by *qualitative interviews* with the
school's principal, and supplemented with *historical research* of the school's filing cabinet
kept in the city archives. The findings of my own research focus both on supportive aspects
that were in place (like the well-founded goal orientation of the principal and his team) and
pitfalls (like a lack of shared responsibility).
The recommendations linked to this process serve as a basis for all people committed to
education in a plural society, as an encouragement to learn *from* and *with* each other in future
processes developing in – what is nowadays called – 'inclusive education'. Drawing on my
research, I end my presentation by proposing that what is called 'interreligious',
'intercultural' and 'inclusive' education nowadays, might be given a new name: 'hospitable
education'.

1. Introduction
In the past, the Netherlands took on the form of a pillarized society, with three 'pillars'
(Catholic, Protestant and liberal) 'living apart together'. Each pillar came with its own
education system, health care, and newspapers. In the 1980s, a fourth 'pillar' was added: the
Islamic pillar.
The innovative process of what has been coined 'interreligious education' began at the
request of Muslim parents in the 1980s – in the latter days of the Dutch pillarized society.
Muslim children of so-called 'guest workers' were enrolled in public and Christian primary
schools. Muslim parents who were familiar with the constitutional freedom of religion and
education in the Netherlands, inquired about the possibility of Islamic religious education
during school hours, similar to Christian religious education already provided during those
school hours.
In a small town in the Dutch 'Bible Belt', in a district populated by orthodox Protestant
Christians, this request from Muslim parents touched upon the life orientation of a primary
school principal and his conviction that religious education was an important aspect of pupils'
identity development – regardless of whether they were Christian or Muslim.

2. Biography of the Principal
In his childhood, Principal Bart ten Broek lived in the countryside, in a village characterized
by a conservative Christian climate. This was also true of Bart's own family. He remembers
the grade six teacher telling stories during the church services about missionaries in New
Guinea[1]. This triggered in Bart a wish to become a missionary himself. He still recalls a text
from the Bible that was read at his confirmation: 'You shall be my witness' – with a focus on

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[1] A former Dutch colony, nowadays part of the Republic of Indonesia.

the person. Years later, Bart regards this text as an inspiration for his innovative concretization of interreligious education at the Juliana van Stolberg primary school – 'although in a different way than the priest had in mind at that moment, I think' Bart says, reflecting on this moment.

Socialized by his upbringing in a relatively poor orthodox Christian family, his education at Christian schools (primary and secondary school, and teacher training), and by being confirmed in an orthodox Protestant church, Principal Bart developed a strong conviction that the context in which children live is important. In his view, every child enters school with their parents' (religious or secular) value orientation in their backpack. For Bart, this resulted in a decision to dedicate his life to giving full attention to each child-in-context. The slogan of his school became: 'Every child matters'. A well-founded goal orientation!

3. Principal and Leader
Principal Bart became the inspirator, initiator and leader of an innovative education project. The concept of 'good leadership' can be described from the theoretical perspectives of Dialogical Self Theory (DST) (Wijsbek, 2009; van Loon & Buster, 2019) and organizational psychology (Heres, 2014). In their publication on DST, van Loon and Buster focus on the questions leaders should be asking themselves ('Why are *you* the leader at this specific time and place?' 'Why are *you* the leader capable of understanding the professional world?'). These questions place leaders – who get involved in reflecting about them –*outside* the group. The context in which this approach to 'good leadership' is situated, is that of a crisis caused by diagnosed 'tame' or 'wicked' problems, and this triggers a certain leadership style. In this case, the 'crisis' was the arrival of Muslim children at Bart's Christian school. Here, the 'wicked problem' was the complexity of providing religious education for Muslim pupils in a Christian school. Principal Bart responded to the question 'Why are *you* the leader?' with the Bible text read at his own confirmation: 'You shall be my witness', at the same time recognizing that he was a 'witness' in a different way than the priest had in mind during the confirmation ceremony. Even in that 'different way', however, Bart's focus was on the person of the leader.

4. Leadership
In leadership research these days, the focus has shifted from the person of the leader to the surrounding context, following the work of organizational psychology (Heres, 2014). Heres' focus is on employees' perceptions of leadership. How do employees approach their leader, and how do they anticipate on their leader's perceived characteristics? Nevertheless, the leader still has a central place and is viewed as not included in the group of employees for whom s/he has to be the leader. This brings us to a different approach to 'good leadership' – an outlook according to which the leader is interconnected with the employees s/he directs. This was an approach not available in the days when Principal Bart's innovative education project was running.

Leadership in this approach is not viewed as the isolated quality of a single person – very often accompanied by (mis)use of power – but leadership includes being led – in a flexible balance – on both a personal and a group level. Leadership is therefore a quality of the group as a whole (see Ardon, 2015). A leadership style is needed that evokes the whole team's moral and spiritual positionality with regard to the situation to be confronted. In such a process, in which a plurality of internal and external moral voices can be heard – including so-called dissonant voices – a safe space is preconditional. To cross the boundaries of comfort

zones ("This is how we've always done it") and to establish flexible, temporary new spaces ("This is how we could do it this time"), Narrative Moral Consultations (NMC) should take place on a structural basis, constituting 'moresprudence'. In relation to our topic, 'moresprudence' refers to every time new wicked issues are at stake in the as-yet-unknown interreligious education context.

5. Dialogue

The innovative process launched in the then unknown context of a Christian school with Muslim pupils, began as an elaboration of intercultural education, with a focus on encounter and dialogue.

The aim was to create moments of encounter to enable pupils to become familiar with the other, and the latter's cultural and religious background. A mixture of teaching and learning *about*, and teaching and learning *from* and *with* others. A reciprocal process. 'Teaching and learning *about*' refers to knowledge of religious rituals, and their meaning for classmates. For example, pupils got to know about family rituals of fasting during the month of Ramadan, and what this fasting meant for classmates and their family. 'Teaching and learning *from* & *with*' refers to the reflection that begins in the moments when pupils become acquainted with something new – moments of wonder and amazement. Pupils begin – and are stimulated – to reflect upon the meaning of such 'new' information, which they try to connect with what they already know or – wish – to create as new knowledge in mutual dialogue.

From the latest research (Jetten, 2018), we know that for a successful encounter to take place knowledge of and experience with different styles of communication is preconditional. A hermeneutic-communicative style facilitates the understanding of the meaning of religious phenomena for the persons involved, as informed by knowledge about the religion in question. In this school's case, cognitive and experiential knowledge came together in an understanding of the meaning of religion for faithful Christians and Muslims.

In addition to *styles* of communication, Jetten distinguishes between *dimensions* of communication. In relation to the cognitive and emotional age of the children, we recommend paying attention in RE classes attention to:
1. A semiotic dimension, relating to signs and their meanings. For example, the sign of fasting and its meaning for Muslims.
2. The institutional dimension, concerning general, official statements by institutions on the one hand (for example, the Sunni tradition) and individual statements on the other (of a person about what s/he individually thinks).
3. A linguistic dimension, regarding literal and metaphorical understandings of religious texts.

6. Right to Education

Teachers and parents bear joint responsibility for the education of the child. In the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, article 28, paragraph 1), the child's right to receive education is linked to the government's moral obligation to provide good education (Becker et al., 2023). Good education aims at the fullest possible development of the child's talents and moral and physical abilities. Education must prepare pupils for an active life in a free society, and should be inspired by – and directed towards – the development of respect for their parents, the culture in which they were born and continue to live, as

well as respect for the cultural background of others (CRC article 29, paragraph 1). In short, respect for human rights.

The CRC deals with the responsibility of parents, as being primarily responsible for the upbringing and development of their children, in line with their own (secular or religious) life orientation. In addition, according to the CRC, parents also have a duty to create spaces for their children where they can come into contact with different ways of living, different life orientations; the latter task parents share with the school. For parents, this constitutes a double task of holding on (to their own tradition) and letting go (in a plural society). Article 17 of the CRC explicitly mentions the preparation for living in a diverse society, and consequently talks about providing children/pupils access to information and materials from a variety of national and international sources (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1989). According to the CRS, every child has the right to be guided into, and to informed about a diverse society. Respect for the other's otherness is a key concept in this, and is at the heart of democracy.

7. Pedagogic Civil Society
The school's pedagogical task and the parents' double responsibility come together in the Pedagogic Civil Society. Different activities can be implemented to establish a fruitful school-home contact. Teachers and parents can stay in touch about school affairs; parents can help their children do their homework; they can be invited to assist with school activities on a voluntary basis; they can become members of a parent's council or a representative advisory board; parents and teachers can participate together in activities organized in the school's neighbourhood. In each of these activities, teachers and parents act on an equal footing as partners in education, respecting each other's expertise as professional and loving educators, respectively.

Most of the time, teachers take the initiative for parent participation in school activities.[2] Parents must, of course, be able (or enabled) to meet the questions of teachers. For constructive teacher-parent contacts, teachers must be(come) familiar with the parents' cultural and religious backgrounds. Teachers should know about the characteristics of the school's neighbourhood, and know about their pupils' lives after school hours. An open mind about the role of parents, and a positive attitude toward parental participation are preconditional for a successful pedagogic civil society. A certain modesty on the part of teachers regarding their own professional contribution will positively influence the relation with parents. Teachers should never forget that parents are the first responsible persons for the education of their children – an important aspect that was emphasized by the teachers of the Juliana van Stolberg primary school.

Teachers must be aware of their expectations; expectation management and communicative competencies are required! Parental contribution flourishes the moment teachers show their genuine interest in parents' views on education, and when they invite parents to bring their ideas about education to the table. Teachers must also be ready to adjust their expectations about collaboration to the concrete situation – a factor that shaped the pioneering context of the Juliana van Stolberg primary school.

8. Hospitable Education
Hospitality is a core concept in both the Christian and Islamic traditions. The story of Abraham/Ibrahim brings out the core of this concept: being unbiased, putting aside prejudices

that might arise at first sight, encountering 'the other' with an open mind, rooted in faith in the trustworthiness of that other and their implicit and invisible richness. Encountering others with an open mind, even though they are different in a unique and radical way, and their presence is disturbing. Opening the doors of your house, opening your mind for the other, without requiring something to be done in return (Poorthuis 2007, p. 38 ff).

Extending hospitality to, and receiving 'the other' in my house, presupposes that I feel at home in my house. That is why Muslim parents asked about the possibility for their children to receive Islamic religious education, to make their children feel at home in the Islamic tradition, in the way Christian children feel at home in their Christian tradition.

The teachers of the Juliana van Stolberg school – experts in education – hosted the children's parents/caretakers in the world of education, as they hosted the children in their roles of 'pupils' and 'classmates'. Parents were welcomed as guests in the 'house' of the Juliana van Stolberg school, and consequently felt at home there. The other way around, parents – experts in the loving caretaking of their children – also hosted teachers; literally by inviting them for a visit at their homes, and metaphorically by telling them stories about their children in their family roles of 'sons/daughters of', and 'brothers/sisters of'. In this way, teachers came to feel at home in their pupils' families.

Hospitality practiced in this way can be described as the unbiased welcoming of the stranger/strangeness into your own unique home, without seeking to assimilate the other to your own values and regulations; on the contrary, it is the act of making space for the other's uniqueness (cf. ibid. p. 42). Knowing how to live in your own house, knowing yourself, and at the same time recognizing the radical difference with the other, are two sides of the coin of hospitality.

Freedom of religion and education, as central to the Dutch Constitution, cannot but open the space for this kind of reciprocal hospitality. Modelling hospitable education – for teachers and parents alike – creates a space in which all pupils – whatever their cultural, family or religious background – become familiar with being hosts and being guests. In a dialogical and safe school context, pupils learn about – and experience the ups-and-downs of – the dynamics of being a host to their classmates with a different (cultural and religious) background, those 'familiar strangers', just as they learn about being a guest in a hitherto unfamiliar/relatively unknown context.

9. Concluding Remarks

Keeping in mind a future for pluralised societies, it is of utmost importance that every child is enabled to learn to live ìn difference, without becoming indifferent.

Each and every child should be given the opportunity to meet 'the other', to name differences, to explore in a dialogical space in what way and to what extent 'the strange' can become 'familiar', and to feel at ease in their religious home as part of their own identity-in-progress. This is what hospitable education is about.

However, like building a house requires bricks and technical instruments; in a similar way hospitable education requires its building blocks: learning *with* and *from* the other, feeling at home in the religious house of one self and the other. In addition, the technical instrument of dialogicality must not be neglected, scaffolding the required safe place.

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Religious rights and religious freedom: How do we set the agenda for Christian Education?

Abstract

This paper centres around the question of the extent to which parents should be entitled to bring their children up in their Christian beliefs through practices of education that promulgate these beliefs and, where this is enacted, whether children are simultaneously accorded sufficient autonomy to make their own religious choices. We use the so far unresearched example of Christian parents home educating in England and, specifically, the implications of the proposed English Schools Bill (2022). Although now dropped in its current form, the Schools Bill held particular implications for control of education, begging the question of who should make such decisions or 'whose children are they'? We use the work of Will Kymlicka (1995) in this first academic consideration of this minority religious group, appraising both the need for external protection and the charges of internal restriction potentially imposed through largely unregulated home education. Quantitative and qualitative survey data from 462 respondents is analysed to elucidate the minority positioning of the group. We then consider, according to Kymlicka's argument, the opportunities within the proffered education to proselytise, question and reject the faith if desired. We conclude that Christian home educators in the UK do constitute a minority group in need of political recognition and external protection to continue in the educational aspects of their faith. We also conclude that whilst, in this data set, internal restrictions are not evident, that Christian home education is not homogenous and that continued research on the nature and implications of heresy and apostasy are needed.

Keywords: Christian education, home education, Schools Bill 2022, Kymlicka

Introduction

This paper centres around issues raised by proposed legislation concerning the home education of children in England. The Schools Bill (House of Lords, 2022) recommended state rights, through Local Authorities, to oversee home education in unprecedented ways. Home educators widely perceived this as a 'power grab' over parental rights (UNICEF,UK, 1989) and responsibilities (Education Act, 1996). Christian home educators raised particular concerns about the possibility of state ideas on education clashing with their own educational convictions as Christian parents. The Bill had multiple objectives of which home education was only part and objections were raised to various parts of its content, including action by home educators (Weale, 2022). However, opposition by home educators does not appear to have constituted a reason for its demise and many are convinced that the proposed restrictions on home education will return before long. Many of the objections raised by home educators centred around the boundaries of parental and state decision making as regards the content and style of education. For Christian home educators, this issue has particular relevance concerning the Christian content, tone and world view presented through a particularly faith

1

based education. This paper considers the position of Christian home educators as a minority group through the lens of Will Kymlicka's thinking on multicultural citizenship, the rights of minority groups in terms of the education of their children and practice of their faith and the rights of children to an open world view in which they are free to find and follow their own faith pathways (Kymlicka, 1995).

What's the problem?

Home education in the UK is a legal educational choice on par with school education (which is largely state provided). It is an option growing in popularity (Charles-Warner, 2020), offering as it does, the chance for parents to tailor an education according to both child interests and talents (Thomas, 1998) as well as a way of promulgating parental values and beliefs (Kunzman, 2010). However, home education has caused public and political disquiet alongside its growing numbers with accusations of educational inadequacy (Morton, 2010), safeguarding risk (Morgan cited in Rothermel, 2015, p. 194) and radicalisation (Simpson, 2017). Since at least 2009, there have been intermittent calls from across the political spectrum to regulate its practice and to bring it more closely into line with school standards (Pattison, 2020). The latest iteration of this action has been The Schools Bill 2022, drawn up by the current Conservative government, which proposed the compulsory registration of home educators along with far reaching data gathering powers. The Bill was widely seen by home educators as a prelude to the restriction of home education practice and the curtailing of the freedoms outlined above.

Religious home education in the UK remains under researched; the exception being a small amount of research on Muslim home educating families, particularly in connection with the Prevent anti-radicalisation programme (Pattison, 2020,: Myers and Bhopal, 2018). Pattison (2020) uses the framework of Stan Cohen's moral panic (Cohen, 2002) to show how, under pressure from media and political suspicion, Muslim home educators felt marginalised and misunderstood. Participants in the research described retreating into their own communities for protection and understanding, whilst viewed as a threat in many quarters of mainstream society.

In the US and other home educating countries, religious home education has received much more attention, including criticism that it denies children exposure to the core democratic values of mainstream society (Ross, 2010), it reduces children's tolerance to other religions and points of view (Ross, 2010), it indoctrinates rather than educates (Kuusisto, 2003), it restricts curricula (Bartholet, 2020) and undermines children's rights to a particular kind of childhood. The latter argument, presented by Tillson (2023) considers life in a religious sect which includes state schooling. Nevertheless, he draws the conclusion that an entitlement to a normative childhood should trump any parental rights to impose a faith on their offspring. The argument can be logically extended to home education where such an environment might be considered even more restricted and less 'normal'.

The growing secularisation of public education in the UK has promoted a view of education as being, at best, areligious, leaving faith to be a personal, rather than public matter.   Such a view is summed up in the words of Helen Penn "that education should be entirely secular; people are at liberty to hold whatever religious views they wish, but they should so privately" (Penn, 2018, p 47). Home education therefore has, perhaps, a particular appeal to parents of faith to whom it offers the opportunity to provide a faith based education for their children and a fulfilment of their own duties as parents in accordance with their faith.

2

In light of this, whilst home educators across the country saw the Schools Bill as an unwarranted state overreach and power grab and even an existential threat, Christian home educators harboured a further deep seated concern that such restrictions would mean that their capacity to bring up and educate children within their faith could be seriously compromised. This paper explores the perspectives of Christian home educators as a minority group within a secularly schooled wider population and considers how their freedoms to practise their faith (specifically the education of their children within that faith) can be made compatible with the commonly expressed doubts about religious home education, that it undermines children's exposure to and opportunity to join mainstream society. We use the work of Will Kymlicka (1995) and his perspective on the rights of both individuals and minority groups to examine survey data collected from Christian home educating groups in the UK.

Kymlicka on minority rights

Will Kymlicka (1995) outlines the basic issue of maintaining minority rights within pluralistic societies as being a balance between protecting the rights of minority groups and the rights of members of minority groups. Minority groups within liberal democracies are entitled to practise their traditions and beliefs but, in order to do so, may require protection from being overrun, undermined, compromised and marginalised by their minority position. Kymlicka calls for external protection for such groups. Minority group members, on the other hand, should be free to embrace or leave their heritage groups and should not be either constrained by, or forced into, practices inherent to the minority group nor should they forgo the freedoms and protections of the mainstream society of which they are also part. Such constraints, Kymlicka finds to be unacceptable internal restrictions. We shall now go on to consider the position of Christian home educators with regard to Kymlicka's concerns of internal restriction and external protection.

Internal Restriction

This part of Kymlicka's argument concentrates on the protection of the individual within the minority group. Internal restriction refers to the power of the collective to impose particular restrictive behaviours, practices and traditions upon individual members without their consent. Examples given by Kymlicka include gender roles that include sanctioned violence and arranged marriage. Internal restrictions cited by authors such as Tillson (2023) and Ross (2010) focus on the restriction of contact with wider society which enables the inculcation of particular world views (such as strict gender roles, creationism) rejected by wider society, the encouragement of intolerances towards practices such as homosexuality which are accepted by wider society, and the loss of normative childhood experiences enjoyed by children brought up in mainstream society (such as certain kinds of play, school attendance). Ross (2010) is concerned with the damage that may be caused to society through separate educations leading to a splintered society. Tillson (2023) focuses more on the effect on the individual, arguing that the philosopher Paul Hirst's childhood within a strict Christian sect left lasting emotional damage. Even though Hirst left the sect at the age of majority, the internal restrictions imposed on his childhood were severely detrimental to him and thus Tillson says should not be permissible.

Eamonn Callon (2000) suggests that religious schools are specifically designed to pass on religion to children rather than to offer them the opportunity to take up that faith, should they

3

so wish. Home education can be seen in a similar light where parents opt out of school in the belief that it is school that poses the threat to religious integrity. For example, the Amish in the US have used internal restriction rights to limit children's mainstream schooling for fear that once exposed to wider society, children may choose to leave their home faith (Kymlicka, 1995). Kymlicka argues that internal restriction should not be allowed to limit the rights of minority group members, including their right to exit from the group if they so wish. This aligns with the notion of Spiecker (1991) emphasising the need for children to have active choice during religious education, rather than diminished rationality (Snook, 1972) or having habits and dispositions imposed without questioning or exploring (Martin, 1970). Such approaches ensure that Christian nurture is wholesome and resourceful for the child (Holmes, 2017).

External Protection

The external protections to which Kimlicka refers, centre around the preservation of a distinctive existence for minority groups, "by limiting the impact of the decisions of the larger society" (P36). Arguing from a liberal perspective, Kimlicka maintains that external protection should be provided where this promotes fairness between pluralistic groups and that this does not imply, and need not imply, the justification for internal restrictions. Thus the minority group may be protected from marginalisation by wider society, whilst the individual members of that group are protected from an unquestionable traditional authority within the group - the kinds of issues highlighted by Tillson (2023), Ross (2010) and others.

Imposing a certain (secular) form of education on an entire citizenry (as Penn (2018) and quoted above suggests) is religious discrimination if parents (and children) feel that this practice and its consequences denies or undermines the faith they wish to uphold.   It is an infringement of liberal democracy and morality given that denying religious parents the right to express their faith through the raising of their children within the edicts of that faith is to deny them a fundamental meaning within their own lives (Callan, 2000 p52). Where state arbitration based on the perceived best interests of the child restricts the practice of established religion (and Christianity is the founding faith of the UK) by restricting the religious education of children born into families of faith, a religious discrimination has been enacted and the parameters of liberal democracy transgressed (Callan, 2000).

To avoid this, Kimlicka proposes three types of external protection for minority groups. These are special group representation rights within political institutions, rights of self governance on particular issues of central importance and rights that protect specific religious practices which might not be supported through existing markets or structures.   The existence of such rights delineates the relationship between the group in question and the wider society in which it is located, rather than concerning itself with individual within-group rights. Upholding the rights of Christian (and other) parents to home educate in order that they may fulfil their religious duties and avoid exposing their children to an education which is inimical to their beliefs, according to the arguments of Kymlicka, would constitute an external protection as it would limit the impact of the wider society decision to remove the Christian content and values base from public education.

Synthesising external protection and internal restrictions

4

Kymlicka (1995) argues that individuals must be able to consider different versions of the good life and then choose which version they endorse. For this he considers education to be essential. This education must include access to information and the freedom to reject or embrace different choices; both states which rely on internal openness, rather than restriction. It also requires the capacity for reflection in order to assess and consider the meaning of different choices. For this Kymlicka argues, it is necessary to have access to the culture which supplies the meaning that will inform rejection or acceptance. In other words, a faith and life choice, such as Christianity, can only be accepted or rejected from an informed position on Christianity that includes a profound understanding of the cultural and religious narratives which give it meaning. This implies that genuine religious teaching cannot be the mere transmission of a kind of objectified and 'neutral' information, as this would fail to capture the religious meaning of Christianity. Kymlicka's argument disputes the premise of replacing 'learning about' religion as opposed to instruction in a particular faith (Jackson, 2013) with the intention that children can then choose what to believe. According to Kymlicka's argument, religious faith cannot be imparted via neutral facts, an argument echoed by the participants in Vigilante et al's research (2013) where one Christian father argued, "You cannot rely on somebody else to teach them something they don't believe". In other words, being taught from within the faith is essential to imparting its meaning.

This leads to two further questions - what is the relationships between teaching from within the faith and the internal restriction of indoctrination, and how is Kymlicka's criterion of access to information and opportunity for reflection incorporated within a Christian 'in faith' education?

It is often difficult, Kymlicka points out, for outsiders to ascertain if self government of a group will lead to individual oppressions (Kimlicka p 40). It may be hard, as well, to ascertain what should count as an internal restriction in presenting a world view to children. Numerous protective practices surround the education of children in terms of when, how and whether they should come in contact with information and ideas that may in some way threaten their 'innocence' (Garlen, 2019). Vigilante et al (2013) describe the Christian fathers in their study creating a "protective cocoon" (a concept borrowed from Gidden, 1991) by eliminating unwanted secular influences (including school) from their children's lives in order to raise them within a controlled Christian environment. Whilst the actions of the Christian parents may appear to be particular, given their reflection of religious belief, they can also be seen as the same kind of value transmitting social practice that justifies any protective restrictions intended to preserve the social conditions of an approved childhood (Garlen, 2019). An example discussed by Vigilante et al (2013) is that of Christian parents' control of peer interaction which might expose their children to disapproved of ideas and behaviours. However, restricting children's access to information that may violate innocence can also include shielding from violence, commercialisation, sexualisation and consumerism and be as applicable to a secular perspective as to a religious one (Garlen, 2019).

Demarcating what should count as an internal restriction is further obfuscated by the heterogeneity of Christian practice and beliefs and educational approaches by parents towards such beliefs. For parents such as the fathers in Vigilante et al's research, teaching Christianity makes no sense without faith, however this does not necessarily mean that theology is never questioned or interrogated. Pazimo (1992) calls Christian education a 'preparadigmatic' discipline that lacks a dominant framework and instead cites the creativity and freedom needed in addressing the challenges of Christian learning and teaching. However, Holmes (2017) asserted the need for healthy questioning and personalisation of beliefs as part of holistic Christian education, aligning with the emphasises on exegesis,

5

hermeneutics and contextualisation in the responsible sharing, rather than mechanical transmission of Christian knowledge (Pazmino, 1992). Indeed the latter may be more akin to the 'knowledge about', rather than 'education in' model (Jackson, 2013) which characterises secular religious education and in which the teacher is characterised as a conduit of information rather than a purveyor of values and life views. Jackson (2021) viewed this more broadly, stating that belief, faith and hope all play a part in rationalizing action. Such a critical approach within Christian home education is certainly not guaranteed, as it may not be in any other form of education, but it is possible and where it is practised, could contribute to the reflective space Kymlicka (1995) points to.

We now take the data from Christian home educating parents to explore their needs in terms of external protections in an increasingly secular educational environment and the extent to which their faith based home education imposes an internal restriction on their children's upbringing.

Methodology

Data was collected using an online survey distributed through Christian UK home education networks and advisory groups in summer 2022. To reassure prospective participants and gain their trust, the survey was completed anonymously and the preamble assured respondents that no identifiable information would be used in the writing up to ensure confidentiality. Participant's right to withdraw was also confirmed. The survey contained 22 questions, which were a blend of multiple choice and open-ended. An excellent response rate was achieved (n=462), with many writing copious accounts and reflections in the open-ended segments. This paper analyses responses to three of the multiple choice questions and two of the narrative responses. Other papers have analysed the other survey questions.

Discourse analysis was employed to analyse the narrative responses to the questions: How do you think Christian home educators are viewed by wider society?, and To what extent do you think the Schools Bill upholds Christian values? These questions elicited extensive discourses of participant experiences and perceptions. In a similar way to Mulya & Aditomo's (2019) use of discourse analysis to identify a set of interconnected ideas which led to understanding and perceptions of religious tolerance, this paper used discourse analysis to identify the framework of beliefs and perceptions of participant Christian home educators. This enabled exploration of how the participants expressed and gave meaning to their realities (Mulya & Aditomo, 2019) and identification of any taken-for-granted assumptions in the data (Machin and Mayr, 2012). The narrative responses were examined at three levels: (1) word level; (2) discursive level, the way that the responses were written; and (3) social level, how their views related to the context of wider culture (Fairclough, 2001). It was critical that meaning was not imposed on the participant's expression (Mulya & Aditomo, 2019), but rather that the responses were held as the starting point of analysis to understand their meaning and context, alongside their underlying beliefs (Van Dirk, 2001). Kymlicka's work (1995) on citizenship in diverse society and the concepts of external protection and internal restriction are used as the main lens for analysis.

Findings

Perceptions of their place in wider Society

- *Christian Home Educators as a minority group*

6

To ascertain the participant's identity as Christian home educators, they were asked about the role which faith had played in their choice to home educate. Figure 1 shows that faith is a major driver for Christian home educators and therefore an indication of specific group membership (as opposed to those who might be home educating for other reasons and happen to be Christian). When asked how they felt Christian home educators were perceived by wider society (figure 2), over half (52%) felt this to be negatively. These two responses indicate a minority group which may be in danger of the kind of marginalisation discussed by Kymlicka. Discourse analysis of qualitative comments accompanying the quantitative data shows Christian home educators feelings of marginalisation, politicisation, being discriminated against and being misunderstood.

Major consideration **341** (74.9%)
Minor Consideration **74** (16.3%)
No influence **30** (6.6%)
Not sure **10** (2.2%)
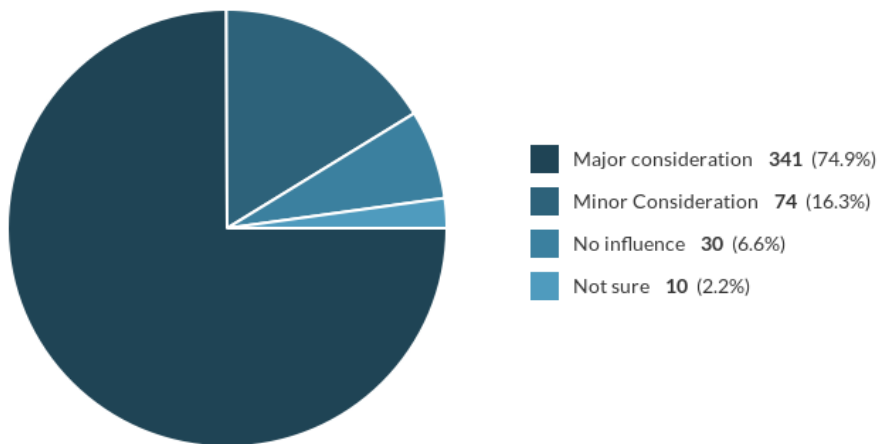
Figure 1: Responses to the question How much part did faith play in choosing to home educate?

Negatively **237** (52%)
Neutral **121** (26.5%)
Not sure **75** (16.4%)
Positively **23** (5%)
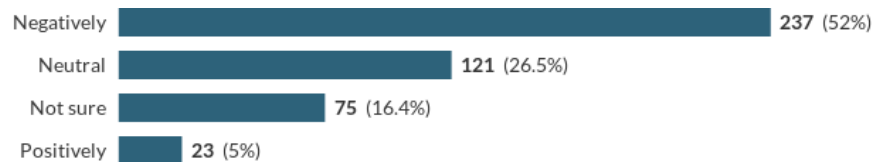
Figure 2: Responses to question: How do you think Christian home educators are viewed by wider society?

- *Marginalisation*

Many respondents conveyed feelings of being excluded or ostracised from wider society, and being made to feel like outsiders. The language used to express this discourse was emphatic, with many of the participants including sad or disappointed emotions in their narratives,

7

depicting that this is not the way they wish to be perceived, yet documented that their experiences had led them to feel this way. This echoes the work of Pattison (2020) who found Muslim home educators felt marginalised and unsafe in wider society, rather than the arguments of Tillson (2023) and Ross (2010) that such groups deliberately eschew contact.

Further to this, some spoke of not feeling welcomed or accepted by society, which implies the desire and attempt by these home educators to be active participants in wider society, yet to be excluded from it. Some wrote of the disapproval of wider society, reporting their experiences of being 'frowned upon,' or labelled as 'weirdos,' 'odd,' or 'strange.' One even said that they had been mocked. These respondents did not elucidate on any specific events which had led to this sense, but it was strongly felt across many in the participant sample.

Whilst respondents felt the effects of marginalisation as individuals, many felt their experiences to be a consequence of their group membership. Many showed an acceptance of this marginalisation and although disappointed at the reaction, not surprised by it. As one respondent explains:

"Wider society deems home education to be second rate and Christianity to be irrelevant."

- *Politicisation*

Another discourse was about the political situations of Christian home educators. Many respondents stated that wider society viewed them as 'bigoted fundamentalists,' 'radical' 'extreme right wing.' As with the above, these pejoratives seem to be applied to the collective sector of Christian home educators, rather than specific individuals.

This portrays a sense of Christian home educators feeling a strong sense of ill-will towards them from wider society. Slightly less intense phrases were also used such as 'irrelevant,' 'intolerant' and 'narrow minded,' although there were also stronger expressions such as 'inciting hatred' and 'dangerous.' The former very much convey the notion of this sector being different to the norm and deliberately opting to think in a particular way which is not in keeping with wider society. The stronger phrases imply that the sector is unsafe and poses a risk to others. It was not detailed *who* was deemed to be in danger and neither was it explained the reasons for such a discourse. The participant narratives often conveyed bafflement about the reason for such views, although equally the matter-of-fact way in which they reported this suggested that they had accepted that this was the underlying situation and prevalent view of them now as a Christian home educator, and they had come to accept it, such as the respondent comment:

'The press likes to accuse Christians of hating people if they disagree with their lifestyle choices. On the contrary, we care very deeply for those around us but that does not mean we have to agree with everything they do and say.'

- *Misunderstanding*

A slight nuance of the above discourse was that of being incorrectly represented, misunderstood or 'portrayed badly.' Participants reporting this discourse expressed frustration and disappointment at awareness of this. There was a strong sense of participants trying hard to explain their reasoning and justification for home educating their child yet feeling that they were prejudicially misunderstood. This discourse tended to be more personal than collective in the way it was expressed, resonating with other accounts of

8

minority groups feeling misunderstood (Pattison, 2020). Respondents tended to link these comments with their reasons for home educating rather than with the outcomes of home education, and expressed the prevailing misunderstand, such as:

'Some of the wording around this debate is derogatory. When politicians refer to children as ghost children. Invisible children. Illegal faith schools. It all conjours up an image of isolated, brainwashed children.'

However, some implied that they felt these negative portrayals and misunderstandings were seeking to deny them their right to raise their child according to their religious beliefs, an act of religious discrimination (Kymlica, 1995). Ultimately, these parents expressed frustration at the fact that they were simply seeking what they believed was the best environment for their child to thrive, yet were being negatively represented.

The feelings of Christian home educators that they are being marginalised and discriminated against as well as misunderstood and stereotyped, places them in the kind of position outlined by Kymlicka as in need of external protection in order to be able to continue a way of life and exercise their religious beliefs without being either deliberately or non deliberately assimilated into the mainstream.

The Schools Bill

Figure 3 provides a glimpse into how participants perceived the capacity of new policy to include and enable their religious beliefs. Yet, this aspect was more strongly expressed in our data, as 86% of respondents felt that the Schools Bill was poor in upholding their beliefs (figure 3). This suggests that from the perspective of our respondents, there is a perceived ongoing negative view of this sector, and it appears that this potential policy has exacerbated this even more strongly.

Figure 3: Responses to question: To what extent do you think the Schools Bill upholds Christian values?
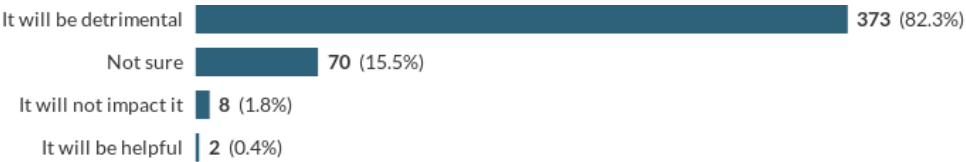
Figure 4: Responses to question: How do you think the Schools Bill will effect Christian Home education?

9

Responses to this question showed that, overwhelmingly, it was perceived that the Schools Bill would exacerbate an already difficult situation. It further revealed the Christian home educators' feelings about the relationship between themselves and the State and shed some light on the issue of internal restrictions which their religious education might place on their children.

The Schools Bill was not seen as upholding Christian values, with many participants simply stating this without further elaboration.   Some, however elaborated that the Schools Bill does 'not even recognise Biblical Christian values,' revealing a feeling of Christian values in no way being accommodated or included within the Schools Bill. A few participants took this further, arguing that it did not permit Christian values, or that it was detrimental to, or undermining of them, intimating that it was blocking or preventing Christian values from being active. Others asserted that it 'goes against' or opposes Christian values. This strong discourse of the Schools Bill being in opposition to Christian values indicates firstly that this group feel that Christian values are distinct but also points towards a potential case for external protection of Christian education as a justified minority case within a liberal democracy.

- *Parental and State Responsibility*

A strong thread in the narrative responses relates to parental authority and responsibility, as respondents expressed a sense of the Schools Bill curtailing their parental rights. Many participant narratives asserted that parents, rather than the State, should be responsible for their children. Many expressed that they felt threatened or undermined by the Schools Bill in their parental role. These arguments tended to be presented as matters of fact, rather than opinion, and many parents supported this by reference to Biblical teaching. Indeed, many participant narratives referred to Biblical references, with a Biblical mandate in this way to explain their perceptions reveals the strength of feeling and deeply held respect of these respondents to uphold instructions contained in the Bible, such as 'parents should be the ones to train our children up in the ways of the Lord (Proverbs 22:6).' Whilst some use the Bible to justify their views on parental responsibility, others spoke of the 'Christian worldview' as placing the responsibility for children within the family. Some asserted that the Biblical teaching prepares them for this situation, commenting that 'the Bible says not to expect the world to uphold christian things.' These comments demonstrate a strong underlying sense of biblical teaching being fundamental to how these Christian home educators organise their home and family life, including their child's education.

These Christian home educators perceived the Schools Bill as a State instrument which would sideline or overrun their Christian education. Some used language of active removal such as pushing, eroding, removing and enforcing. Others spoke of 'state control' or restrictions on parent's teaching. Some noted that the Schools Bill does not include comments about religious freedom, intimating that this was intentionally not part of the agenda. More strongly, others wrote that it 'doesn't allow faith,' and some said that it prioritises secular values, indicating a perceived re-ordering of society to be intolerant or discriminatory against religious faith. Others spoke of removal of religious freedom, indicating a perception that such freedom is currently present but that the passing of the Schools Bill would destroy it. Arguments about the impact of the Schools Bill were expressed as a collective perspective, although in many cases they were viewed as being an affront against parents specifically, rather than religion alone. Many expressed that the

10

Schools Bill portrayed distrust in parents and a new reality of 'co-parenting with the government'.

Another strong discourse in the narrative responses was concerning whether mainstream curricula was in alignment with participant's religious beliefs and interpretations of the Bible. Many felt that the Schools Bill would prevent them from teaching Biblical perspectives to their child, and there was a strong call for parents to 'have a say' in what their child is learning. Particular issues which were perceived to be counter to their understanding of Biblical teaching were those surrounding LGBTQ and more broadly family, identity, and marriage. As outlined above, Ross (2010) has expressed fear that intolerance and prejudice may be passed on within religious home education. Here however, respondents expressed the other face of that understanding in that they felt threatened, as Christians, in their freedom to teach their worldview to their children. Many perceived the Schools Bill to be in opposition to their Christian values and beliefs and an emerging conflict between 'what government thinks should be taught with what Christians think.'

- *Internal Restrictions*

The issues described above are an example of the internal restrictions which may be associated with minority groups. In this case, Christian parents might raise children within narrow views or orthodox doctrines which restrict children's world experience and views and may alienate them from mainstream society. Kymlicka describes internal restrictions as being those placed on "basic civil and political liberties" (p36) through the imposition of cultural tradition or religious orthodoxy. We have seen that a strong narrative through public opinion on Christian home education is that it imposes non-mainstream views on children and may indoctrinate them with intolerances or other objectionable beliefs. Whilst Ross (2010) is concerned with the effects this may have on wider society, Kymlicka focuses on the right of the individual to question and change their beliefs in the light of new information or changes in value. His argument, unlike Ross', is that liberal autonomy means that life should be lived ' from the inside', in accordance with an individual's beliefs and values rather than according to criteria imposed from the outside. It is the capacity of individuals to reflect on, question and make decisions about their lives that counteracts the potential internal restrictions imposed by the group. Specifically with reference to religion, Kymlicka argues that liberal society must uphold rights to proselytise, to question (heresy) and to reject faith if this is what an individual decides (apostasy) (p81). These three are taken here as categories of analysis of the Christian home educators' descriptions of the education offered to their children.

- *Questioning*

Kymlicka stresses the liberal principle of individual capacity to question church doctrine and whilst bringing children up in faith is clearly extremely important, parents also talked about their own desire to include views other than their own:

"We make sure there is a width of worldview represented and that at least part of it reflects our Christian beliefs."

"I don't think a curriculum with lots of Bible texts is the answer, as I have found that the children need to be challenged with what other children are being taught, so they can critically appraise other viewpoints."

11

Many parents acknowledged implicitly or explicitly that following a faith is not necessarily easy or straightforward and that many theological or lifestyle implications need to be worked through, echoing the views of Pazimo (1992) that there are questions of interpretation (exegesis) and the need to establish principles of interpretation(hermeneutics) rather than a simplistic handing over of articles of faith.

"We loved being able to have deep conversations about our faith"

"Through the years, we've been able to use our time together … and many conversations around faith."

These parents expressed the thought that children need to question and learn about other perspectives:

"I think it's [Christianity] part of our family culture and part of who we are,so I don't think it could not be a part of our education. But I do want them to learn from others in the home education community ,of all faiths and none ,to treat each person they encounter with respect."

"I aim to choose resources that reflect our faith, whilst balancing that with making sure our children are aware of other faiths"

"We encourage our children to ask questions as well: don't just follow a road because someone told you. You need to know why you believe it is the right way."

- *Rejecting*

Liberal society, argues Kimlicka, must allow for the freedom of apostasy, the revision of values and the rejection of faith. Some parents also highlighted the importance of personal conviction:

"you cannot inherit being a Christian as it is a personal choice"

More exceptionally, some parents explicitly described the religious freedom they sought for their children apart from, and even away, from their own faith:

"I am Christian. I wish for my daughter to be whoever she wants to be. She has not been christened. Occasionally we discuss all religions, including atheist beliefs."

"We want to share a Christian worldview with our children when they are young. (as well as explaining other worldviews so later they can choose)"

For some it was not about forcing a decision but making the space to allow for the enactment of that free choice:

"Christianity is part of our life and we wanted our children to be free to be Christians if they chose without ridicule or being taught about the faith by those with no faith."

Other parents describe the wherewithal to consider and reflect as an integral part of their educational aims. Like the Muslim parents in Pattison (2020) this parent describes a rich and

12

varied world within home education that stretches religious education well beyond the confines of school aims:

"Sometimes I think the idea of a faith-based education is seen as one-sided whereas it can in reality give children the chance to learn from a more varied breadth of perspectives. I'm keen for the children to understand the classics and see how western philosophy today is shaped by the past, and to learn how to weigh arguments for themselves. These aren't necessarily taught in state schools. Grappling with the big ideas, learning about the power of rhetoric, and the need to thoughtfully consider opposing views is a central part of what we do. I want to raise children able to think for themselves and not be afraid of difference, to respect other people and be confident in standing on their own beliefs."

Conclusion

This paper has considered the minority practice of Christian home education in England in the first piece of research of its kind. We have used the arguments of Will Kymlicka to consider the position of Christian home educators as a minority group in need of external protection as well as a group often accused of imposing internal restrictions on children via a dogmatic religious education.

Our survey data of 462 English home educators showed that many feel marginalised and misunderstood. An overwhelming majority feel threatened by the Schools Bill and particularly state capacity to overrule their autonomy to raise their children in the convictions of their faith. We therefore conclude that external protections of the kind outlined by Kimlicka (1995) should be considered in future policy which might affect religious home education and certainly that this group should be more widely recognised and considered in policy on both national and local levels.

Turning to Kimlicka's concerns with internal restriction; this data shows that a wide range of positions were taken up by the Christian home educators. Parents who saw home education as an opportunity to bring up children in the faith might indeed restrict their access to, and knowledge of, certain aspects of wider society. For some this seems to be no different to the shielding actions that parents might take about any undesirable influences in their children's lives and many parents seemed to be taking this type of action on a short term basis, until the child was considered able to cope with more. However, other parents saw the restrictions they imposed as liberating rather than oppressive and this begs the question as to how an internal restriction can actually be defined and recognised. More specific reflection and investigation is needed on this subject.

In the matters of questioning and making their own faith decisions however, a number of parents demonstrated that not only was this possible within their brand of Christian education but that they also considered this to be an integral part of faith education. The possibility of these benchmark criteria proposed by Kimlicka therefore seems assured. However, this is a long way from guaranteeing that they will be part of all examples of Christian home education. It equally does not address that even where education is open to apostasy, this may come at immense personal cost, as described by Tillson (2023). Apostatic freedom itself cannot be considered to be 'free' but is also enmeshed in a wide human and spiritual network of values, relationships and beliefs that make up faith and family communities and individual lives.

There is much philosophical and practical work to be done in this area and a pressing political need for hard questions to be addressed so that policy may be democratically informed and considerate of those in this minority. This paper makes a small start on a much bigger project of understanding and reflection which we hope will be taken up by others in the near future.

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15

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Educating Young People in Their Language; a Synodal Process

Today, even more than in the past decades, students are constantly reminded of the need to 'excel' in every respect. Since the goals of academic education are marketized, students themselves also tend to describe the goals of their education in economic measurable terms of success instead of emphasizing the intrinsic value of education in terms of personal growth and intellectual development (Schuurmans, 2020). Studies show that many students experience student life as a stressful and difficult time, and that performance pressure is one of the predictors of burnout symptoms among students (Dopmeijer 2021). A prevailing meritocracy has broadly installed the idea that success and failure in professional and personal life, and responding to the dilemmas involved, is one's full individual responsibility. It is therefore necessary to learn how to cope with the strains this individualist paradigm produces, and, more importantly, to develop personal and professional resilience that allows for different perspectives and helps creating a resilient attitude towards future challenges or ethical dilemmas.

In the pluralistic, fragmented and polarized world in Western Europe often we let the young people find a direction towards resilience in "their own authentic way". But still, religious educators and pastors can be of much help and support when they participate this pilgrimage the young people make when growing to become young adults. Using the language *they* use everyday might help a lot to describe determining factors in their development. When we understand what inspires young people, gives them strength and makes them worried, we can adjust formation and education towards and with the young people instead of try bending them into our old-fashioned ways and structures.

Young people in the roman catholic church in Western Europe are hard to find though the church takes its task of religious formation of a new generation seriously. Where there are children in primary school age who participate in initiation rites, after confirmation, at the age of twelve, they seem to disappear. In the Netherlands, this is the age they also leave primary school and enter the broader world of secondary schools. Parents become more distant in the education and formation of their children and the young are growing into young adulthood mostly influenced by their peers.

A connection with the church is often not found any more. They become 'Legatos' (van Dijk 2017 p.25) and only return to church when it is Christmas, when their grandma dies or when they want to get married.

Focusing on the question who has the authority and responsibility for the religious development of a new generation, I prefer to start with the young people themselves. How can we really listen to them, to determine which religious path might suit the young person? In my longitudinal research since 1997 amongst Dutch pupils at the age of 16-18, I search their inspiring people, their belonging to church and their way of believing, their worries and their

hopes. By analysing these data, the language of young people can be heard. We can focus on the learning in the presence of the other (Roebben 2009). With the synodal dialogue in catholic parishes (Moons 2022) starting with these data, a new way of approaching young people may be created.

Research
A quantitative digital survey was conducted in 2022, wherein 1250 pupils at mainly catholic and protestant schools participated. Many variables were measured with five-point scales, basic descriptive analyses were conducted and compared with earlier, five yearly, surveys from 1997 onwards (Van Dijk 2013, 2017, 2019). Moreover, in many of the questions also the opportunity was offered to elaborate on the answer in their own words. Additionally, two questions were completely open, so a qualitative analysis of this part of the data is also conducted and analysed with close reading method.

Background data
A total of 1246 students participated in the questionnaire across 11 schools. Half of all secondary schools in the Netherlands are confessional, despite the high range of secularity in the country. This enlightens the challenges religious educators have when teaching these very pluriform and diverse groups of pupils. In this research, 10 of the 11 schools were protestant or catholic (five each), with respectively 388 and 414 respondents.
The students were asked why they chose this (denominational) school and they were allowed to tick several answers. 41 percent chose the school because of the distance, 34 percent because of the atmosphere at school, 26 percent because the school is well known, 22 percent because of friends and 18 percent indicated that there is no other secondary school in the neighborhood. Eight percent indicated that parents chose this school and only five percent chose the school because of its (religious) identity. Twenty percent cite other reasons in addition to these stated possibilities. These include, for example, that they chose the school because of the possibility of bilingual education, because of learning paths such as sports, atheneum+, gymnasium or musical, because they work with iPads and because brothers or sisters already attended the school.
The majority of respondents were 15-17 years old. The exact ages are distributed as follows: 16 percent are 17, 39 percent are 16, 30 percent are 15, seven percent are 14. Five percent are 13 or younger and three percent are 18 or older. 52 percent of the participants are girls and 43 percent are boys. 2.5 percent answered "other" to this gender question and 2.5 percent did not want to answer.

Values and goals in life
They were presented with a list of 23 values and life goals that they could rate on a five-point scale for importance, from "totally unimportant" through neutral to "totally important. The top three goals most often scored as important or completely important were: Being happy with yourself (93%), enjoying life (93%) and being free and independent (91%). The three life goals that were most often scored as unimportant or completely unimportant were: living a life guided by God, Allah or another higher reality (61 %), having faith in God, Allah or another higher reality (59 %) and having faith (47 %).

- Be happy with yourself   4.50
- Enjoy live   4.48
- Be free and independent   4.33
- Have a live guided by God or Allah   2.13

2

- Trusting God or Allah   2.21
- Having faith   2.46

More social goals were also mentioned by the majority as important, such as: being a good person (86 %), being just (82 %), having a happy relationship (82 %) and always being there for others (77 %).

The life goals on which people scored the most neutral, i.e. perhaps not really having an opinion about it nor finding it important in life, are: having a high position in society (48%), having children (42%), being open to things outside this world (42%) and being married (41%).

Religious variables
- 414 pupils at 5 roman catholic schools
        (and 388 on a protestant school)
- Reason to choose confessional school:
        1 % because of the identity (11 % at PC)
- Calls themselves as religion/philosophy of live:
         3 % Roman Catholic
         9 % Christian
        10 % Muslim
        23 % atheist
        46 % none

Also, the connectedness to church as well as their religious activities like praying or reading the Bible, were integrated in the research. Participants were asked what they call themselves in terms of worldview. 43 percent indicated they were not members of any church, religion or worldview, and 20 percent called themselves atheists. 18 percent call themselves Christian, three percent call themselves Roman Catholic, one percent Reformed and one percent Reformed. Seven percent call themselves Muslim and half a percent call themselves Alevi or Sunni. In addition, a few students call themselves humanist (0.8%), Buddhist (0.3%), Hindu (0.4%), Jew (0.3%) or Jehovah's Witness (0.1%). Finally, 4.5 percent chose an "other religious or non-religious worldview" with particular mention being agnostic, orthodox, nothing, spaghetti monster, isisism and "I don't know".
When asked what word they themselves chose for religion, faith, worldview or meaning, most mentioned faith or worldview.
Furthermore, questions were asked about religious activities (answers on agree and very much agree):
- I go to church (very) often   5 %
- I talk to my parents about faith   10 %
- I was raised religiously   16 %
- I read the Bible or the Koran   7 %
-

Apart from these activities, we are very curious how they would describe themselves in this respect. Interesting results came up (answers on agree and very much agree):

- I am religious   22 %
- I know exactly what I believe   53 %
- I think faith is old-fashioned   27 %

3

Inspiring and comforting matters

Students could choose from several answers to the question "Who inspires you?" and they were also allowed to choose multiple answers or fill in their own. 65 percent chose "someone close to them" with parents, and of these slightly more often their mother, being mentioned, as well as friends. 63 percent choose a movie star/vlogger/pop star and/or musician, 56 percent choose a sportsman and/or woman, 53 percent choose an artist and/or writer 50 percent choose people with an ideal and 50 percent choose world leaders and/or politicians and 49 percent choose founders of a religion and/or religious leaders. 41 percent choose 'someone else' with, incidentally, occasional mention of 'parents' or 'friends' or 'no one' as an explanation, and 38 percent choose 'no one' with frequent mention of 'no one inspires me' or 'I am who I want to be'.

It was possible to choose from a row of fourteen answers about which one is concerned and there was also an open box to add something of one's own. In order of frequency, students worried about bad grades (70 %), a loved one who is sick or has died (54 %), my appearance (44 %), problems with your parents (41 %), war in the world (37 %), discrimination and racism (35 %) society (33%), the climate (33%), death (31%), sexually transgressive behavior (29.5%), boyfriend or girlfriend is breaking up or has broken up (15%), problems related to sexuality (14%), the current corona pandemic (13%) or bullying (12%). Eleven percent say they are worried about something else citing, for example, "nothing," "friends" or "my mental health.

Above all this, the language of young people was gathered on their faith, their inspirational persons, their ideals, and their worries. Until now the analysis is not yet completed on this data, but we will work hard to follow up on this.

The answer on whose shoulders they stand can now just preliminary be answered.

Conclusion

What to do with religious education and youth work with young people in this secularised context? Gladly I would like to share some quotes of young people who pronounce themselves not to be religious and not to affiliate to any religion:

- Make your life meaningful by doing things you find important and nice.
- I think it is important people accept each other as they are
- People get their happiness and hope from somewhere
- I don't think it is important that everyone has a certain faith; people who believe do and people who do not, don't. I don't mind. I think it is important that everyone is there for eachother, whether it has to do with faith or with your duty as being human
- The wellbeing of others and being in connection with those you love, in whatever way that might be
- That you can talk to God whenever necessary

The answer on whose shoulders they stand can now be answered. We find many thoughts written down by pupils that inspire to really listen to them, let them speak what is inside them also when it is not 'religious' in their perspective. Churches could benefit from these ideas to bring the language in church closer to everyday life of the young. Learning from their language helps religious educators in narrative, synodal dialogues with young people.

4

A second benefit is creating new ways to have this language introduced in the youth group in church. This might be helpful in the synodal way in roman catholic churches as well as in protestant youth work. To learn to discern in religious communities (Sintobin 2021) and for instance in youth work and in classrooms of religious education enters a form of contemplative listening to each other, so also the rarely heard voice of the young gets full attendance. This will bring them, as well as the church, to full and actual growth and builds towards a vivid future.

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Educating Latter-day Saints:

A Covenant Relationship Responsibility

Barbara Morgan Gardner, PhD

The history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints begins in the early spring of 1820 with a fourteen-year-old boy asking God a question based on a scripture he read in the Bible, "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God." (Romans 1:5, KJV) Having received what he considered a clear answer to his prayer, young Joseph Smith returned to his mother, and upon her inquiry responds simply, "I have learned for myself. . ." (Joseph Smith History 1:10) This first moment in the inception of the Church, and subsequent revelations received as a result of an inquiring mind are foundational to the Church's emphasis on education. In our day, President Nelson, the Church's current prophet, and perhaps significantly a PhD, M.D. and former world-renowned heart surgeon, admonished young adults to "Pursue your education as a priority of the highest order. Gain all the education you can." He then explained, "With us as Latter-day Saints, education is a religious responsibility." He continued, "We educate our minds so that one day we can render service of worth to somebody else."[1] This paper seeks to demonstrate covenant relationship as a primary purpose for education among members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Purpose of Education in Context of the Plan of Salvation

Among the most fundamental beliefs held by Latter-day Saints regarding the covenant relationship between God and humankind and the relationship between individuals is woven the principle of education. Latter-day Saints believe in a pre-mortal,

mortal and postmortal continued and progressive existence, each building seamlessly upon each other, with birth and death acting merely as a "comma" in eternal progression.[2] In the premortal realm, all spirits lived as brothers and sisters with Heavenly Parents in a family relationship. Having a desire to become like Them, They, knowing that mortality was key to eternal progression, provided this experience which would require each individual to obtain divine qualities such as kindness, patience, faith, etc., as well as gain a mortal body. In the post-mortal realm, growth continues through the final resurrection and judgement, where each individual has the potential to become like Heavenly Parents and live in an eternal covenant family unit. These three realms fit under the umbrella of what Latter-day Saint commonly title, The Plan of Salvation. In Latter-day Saint doctrine, an eternal covenant family is the pinnacle of exaltation, highest level of joy and glory. In fact, the faith teaches that no one can reach and obtain the highest levels of joy, peace, etc., alone.

A unique teaching in the Church is that Eve's partaking of the fruit in the Garden of Eden, although a transgression, gave both Eve and Adam the opportunity to learn and progress in mortality, "a fall forward," per se. Prior to partaking of the fruit, our first parents were damned, or in a state lacking ability to progress. The consequence of partaking of the fruit allowed them to know "good and evil," and thus use their agency together, to choose to know, obey and become more like their Heavenly Parents. One could not fully progress without the other. In so doing, not only did they make that eternal reality possible for themselves, but for all future mortals. (Moroni 7:16)

This focus on a covenant relationship with another is demonstrated with Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebeckah, Jacob and Rachel and Lea. The covenant family is not

2

only focused on the covenant of the individual with God, but also on the covenant with each other, with a determination to help each other in this divine process of progress. This progress is not merely to become better, but rather to become as God's, male and female.

Speaking at the funeral of his friend only 2 months before Joseph Smith's own martyrdom, the prophet instructed the Saints, "you have got to learn how to be gods yourselves, and to be kings and priests to God, the same as all gods have done before you, namely, by going from one small degree to another, and from a small capacity to a great one; from grace to grace, from exaltation to exaltation, until you attain to the resurrection of the dead, and are able to dwell in everlasting burnings, and to sit in glory, as do those who sit enthroned in everlasting power." [3] The ultimate purpose of education for Latter-day Saints in mortality is to become as God is by developing an enlightened, intelligent, developed Godlike character, and to be instruments in helping others do the same. Again, there is no single exalted being.

The Church's First Presidency under the direction of Brigham Young, the prophet following Joseph Smith declared, "If men [women] would be great in goodness, they must be intelligent, for no man can do good unless he knows how. . . but strive to know what God knows, and use that knowledge as God uses it, and then you will be like him; [you] *will . . . have charity, love one another, and do each other good continually, and forever. . . .* [4]

It's the combination of the gaining of knowledge, understanding that knowledge both in the heart and mind, and acting upon that knowledge, or applying that knowledge, that has caused in great part, God to become who He is. With that gained knowledge

3

then, the obligation and necessity is to help others on that path. President John Taylor, who succeeded Brigham Young as prophet penned, "*We are here, as a people, ... that we may put ourselves in possession of every truth, of every virtue, of every principle of intelligence known among men, together with those that God has revealed for our special guidance, and apply them to our everyday life, and thus educate ourselves and our children in everything that tends to exalt man.*[5]

Clearly, education has the ability to create personal security, enhance capacity and open doors to opportunity. It increases one's reasoning ability and general productivity. The prophet Brigham Young taught that members should seek diligently to "improve our minds in all scientific and mechanical knowledge. . .to understand the great design and plan of all created things," so "that we may know what to do with our lives and how to improve upon the facilities placed within our reach."[6] Saints are commanded to "be prepared in all things," and whether that be parenting, serving a mission, building a house for a neighbor, etc., education is foundational to this pragmatic preparation. (D&C 88:80)

In addition to the temporal pragmatic purposes of education, there is a spiritual pragmatic component as well. According to a Pew Research study performed in 2014, among Latter-day Saints, "those who are more highly educated are not simply as religious as those with less education—[Latter-day Saints] with college experience are *more* religiously observant, on average, than [Latter-day Saints] with less education. Fully 92% of college-educated [Latter-day Saints] are highly religious, as are 91% of [Latter-day Saints] with some college. Among [Latter-day Saints] whose education topped out with high school, however, just 78% score high on the index of religious

4

observance."[7] For Latter-day Saints, being highly religious typically entails a high level of service and personal sacrifice and consecration on behalf of others.

Thus, under the overarching umbrella of the divine nature and eternal potential of each soul, education allows an individual to more effectively know and therefore glorify God, and fulfill the measure of their creation on this earth in both a pragmatic and spiritual manner. Sacred text from the Doctrine and Covenants reveals that "Whatever principle of intelligence we attain unto in this life, it will rise with us in the resurrection. And if a person gains more knowledge and intelligence in this life through his diligence and obedience than another, he will have so much the advantage in the world to come." (130:18-19) For Latter-day Saints, it is only knowledge and intelligence, that which we become, that we take with us beyond the veil of death. "Insatiable curiosity will be our hallmark," President Eyring declared to young adults, [8] and not just for now, but through eternity. For Latter-day Saints, education always has, does now, and will always be a fundamental part of who all humankind has been, is now, and will become.

How to Gain Education

"He who invades the domain of knowledge must approach it as Moses came to the burning bush; he stands on holy ground; he would acquire things sacred," said President J. Reuben Clark Jr. (1871–1961), a member of the First Presidency, the Church's highest leadership quorum. He continued, "We must come to this quest of truth—in all regions of human knowledge whatsoever, not only in reverence, but with a spirit of worship."[9]

The acquisition of knowledge and the process of becoming is thus a sacred endeavor that requires worship through "study and also by faith" through the use of both

intellectual and spiritual capacity, both being dependent on each other. Sacred scripture text invites learners to "ask, seek and knock," (3 Nephi 14:7-8; KJV Matthew 7:7-8) in their quest to obtain knowledge, with the Lord promising, "draw near unto me and I will draw near unto you." (D&C 88:63) The covenant relationship an individual creates with God and He in turn covenants with mankind is critical to this divine process of becoming.

By Faith

As the process of gaining education and knowledge is considered sacred, striving to become like God or developing His character is prerequisites to gaining the knowledge He has. Yet, as children of God, Latter-day Saints believe that within all humankind there is an element of the literal Divine. To those early saints in the school of the prophets the Lord commanded, "Let honesty, and sobriety, and candor, and solemnity, and virtue, and pureness, and meekness, and simplicity crown our heads in every place; and in fine, become as little children, without malice, guile or hypocrisy. And now, brethren, after your tribulations, if you do these things, and exercise fervent prayer and faith in the sight of God always, He shall give unto you knowledge by His Holy Spirit, yea by the unspeakable gift of the Holy Ghost (D&C 121:26)." It is this great foundational combination of godlike character, coupled with faith in that same Being, that opens a conduit between an individual and the Divine. Latter-day Saints believe that light and truth are gained through obedience as part of the covenant relationship with God. In fact, in the most sacred places on earth, obedience is the first covenant one makes with God in the holy temple.

Yet there is a warning for those who get caught up in the pride or self-serving purposes of education. The prophet Jacob in The Book of Mormon exhorts, "O that

6

cunning plan of the evil one! O the vainness, and the frailties, and the foolishness of men!

When they are learned they think they are wise, and they hearken not unto the counsel of

God, for they set it aside, supposing they know of themselves, wherefore, their wisdom is

foolishness and it profiteth them not. And they shall perish." He then declares this

critical principle of learning, "T*o be learned is good if they hearken unto the counsels of*

God. (2 Nephi 9:28-29) Thus, learning is not the objective, but rather becoming as a

result of learning and covenanting with God through obedience, rather than separating

ourselves from the covenant relationship with God through disobedience is critical.

Study/Mind

Regarding the importance of hard work, President Nelson explained, "When God

wanted to give the Ten Commandments to Moses, where did he tell Moses to go? Up on

top of a mountain, on the top of Mount Sinai. So Moses had to walk all the way up to the

top of that mountain to get the Ten Commandments." Nelson continued, "Now,

Heavenly Father could have said, 'Moses you start there, and I'll start here, and I'll meet

you halfway. No, the Lord loves effort, because effort brings rewards that can't come

without it." President Nelson then summarized, "It takes effort, a lot of hard work, a lot

of study, and there's never an end."[10]

Ironically, those whom Moses wanted desperately to enter into the rest of God

and covenant with God to receive all that he has would not put forth the efforet to do so.

Latter-day Saint scripture attests that Moses did all he could to prepare his people, but

"they hardened their hearts, and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his

wrath. . . swore that they should not enter into his rest."[11]

7

The effort involved in gaining an education is therefore a combination of perspiration, and the spiritual ability and purity to receive inspiration. Yes, God possesses all knowledge regarding the sciences, humanities, history, mathematics, the arts, etc., and has the power to fill an individual with that knowledge, but likely will not, as hard work, coupled with agency to keep covenants is a critical factor in one's receiving an education. God will not force the human mind to learn through obedience and humility, both prequesitives for divinity.

Our covenant relationship with God to learn and teach

While instructing on the importance of truth to BYU students, President Nelson explained that while in medical school, he was tasked, with a team of researchers, to develop and artificial heart and lung machine. At that time, there was no such thing as heart surgery primarily because, as young doctor Nelson was taught in medical school, that "if one touched the beating heart, it would stop beating." Yet, in his personal study of the Doctrine and Covenants he learned that "all blessings are predicated upon obedience to law" (Doctrine and Covenants 130:21) and, second, that "to every kingdom there is a law given." (Doctrine and Covenants 88:38)

Taking this truth as absolute, young Dr. Nelson reasoned that if there was a law for every kingdom, there must be a law regarding the beating of a heart. Dr. Nelson went about discovering the absolute truths behind those laws and eventually became involved in uncovering the complex laws of open-heart surgery. He that, "if we added potassium chloride to blood flowing into the coronary arteries, thereby altering the normal sodium/potassium ratio, the heart would stop beating instantly. Then, when we nourished the heart with blood that had a normal sodium/potassium ratio, the heart would spring

8

back to its normal beating pattern. Literally we could turn the heart off long enough to repair it and then turn it back on again." He continued, "Decades later, when I explained this to a group of medical students, one prominent professor asked, 'But what if it doesn't work?' My answer? It *always* works, because it is based on divine law."

Dr. Nelson concluded, "Divine law is incontrovertible!"[12] Critical to this experience shared by Dr. Nelson is that although he came to his conclusion regarding the ability of the heart to be touched and keep beating, he had to study medicine and specifically the human heart to gain the information and experience necessary to become a heart surgeon. To study and come to know God, one must understand and abide by God's laws. This requires more than "mere mental processes. . .The spiritual realm, which is just as absolute as is the physical, cannot be learned by the laws of the physical."[13]

Although there is much to learn in mortality, prioritization is in order. Generally speaking, the things of God, or the laws regarding spirituality take precedence over, and enhance one's ability to understand the physical, temporal or mortal. As Joseph Smith explained, "If men do not comprehend the character of God, they do not comprehend themselves."[14] Simply put, some knowledge is simply more important than others.

Fundamental Doctrine

Boyd K. Packer, one of the most influential Latter-day Saint educators in recent decades as well as an apostle, gave this counsel on religious education: "True doctrine, understood, changes attitudes and behaviors. The study of the doctrines of the gospel will improve behavior quicker than a study of behavior will improve behavior. . . . That is

9

why we stress so forcefully the study of the doctrines of the gospel."[15] If there is a priority on knowledge, therefore, the salvific, eternal truths or doctrines regarding the nature and character of God and mortal's relationship to Him and necessary knowledge and actions required to become like Him would be of highest priority.

Some doctrines are considered more fundamental than others and may be considered core doctrines. For example, the Godhead, the Plan of Salvation (as discussed above), the atonement of Jesus Christ, and individual divine nature and ability to become like Heavenly Parents would be considered core doctrines. Authoritative statements on Latter-day Saint doctrines and beliefs may be found on the Church's official website, churchofjesuschrist.org. In addition to doctrinal statements, an extensive array of videos, curriculum, manuals and other teaching and learning resources, including a specific site for religious educators, can be found for public use.

Perhaps one of the most critical principles of covenant relationship responsibility is that between a teacher and a student and both of their relationships to God. President Russell M. Nelson taught, "All those who have made a covenant with God have access to a special kind of love and mercy." Although the access is granted by making the covenant, the love and mercy are granted to those who keep the covenant. Teachers of students are counseled to "love one another; cease to be covetous; learn to import one to another as the gospel requires. . . cease to find fault one with another. . . and above all things, clothe yourselves with the bond of charity, as with a mantle, which is the bond of perfectness and peace."[16]

In line with the covenant relationship between teachers and students, pedagogically, teachers are taught to, "let not all be spokesman at once; but let one speak

at a time and let all listen unto his sayings, that when all have spoken that all may be edified of all, and that every man may have an equal privilege."[17] No one person is more important than another in the covenant relationship and responsibility with God, for each is a member of a divine family with the expectation of becoming a divine parent.

Institutions of Covenant Relationship for Education

While ideally, all truth could be learned in the same space, due to the cultural and pragmatic realities, it has become clear and, in many cases, necessary that some truths are to be learned in the private sanctuary of the home or in other holy spaces designated specifically for sacred learning such as in the Church and in the temple, while other truths are more prevalently learned in a more public or secular atmosphere.

Temple

In a revelation on education received in December of 1832, the Lord directed the saints to build both a temple and a school in Kirtland, Ohio to be housed in the same place. The Lord declared, "Organize yourselves; prepare every needful thing; and establish a house, even a house of prayer, a house of fasting, a house of faith, a house of learning, a house of glory, a house of order, a house of God." (88:119) The weaving together of the school and temple shows the essential and critical relationship between the two. In fact, the Lord commanded that "the school" was to be housed in the temple. (D&C 95:17) Eventually, the temple was built, and learning commenced within its walls, with the prophet and others learning such lessons as Hebrew and science in addition to receiving revelation and the study of scriptural text. Being driven from Ohio and upon arrival in Nauvoo, Illinois, the saints began construction once again on a temple and university. Due to the martyrdom of the prophet and his brother, and the subsequent

11

forced evacuation of the Saints in that city, the temple nor the University were fully completed.

In the temple members are promised the "key of the knowledge" and the "mysteries of God," and the "power of godliness." (Doctrine and Covenants 84:19-22) There, individuals commune with the sacred and learn of divine purpose and potential, make sacred covenants with the Lord and strive to obtain more divine light and truth. As sacred scripture teaches, "That which is of God is light, and he that receiveth light, and continueth in God, receiveth more light; and that light groweth brighter and brighter until the perfect day" (D&C 50:24). Thus, as one covenants with God, and fulfills that covenants, light, understanding and thus, intelligence increases. Second only to the home in sacredness, the temple is a house of divine education.

Home

The home is the primary place of application of divine covenants with parents being the responsible educators, but all involved in the covenant relationship with each other and God. In a sense, the home becomes the space for the testing ground of covenant education. The primary responsibility of parentsis not to teach facts and knowledge, but rather to "teach [their] children to understand," (D&C 68:25). It is in the home where the most significant questions are asked, the most important discussions are had, and where an individual learns to understand the potential of humankind, the significant of their covenant relationship with others and the reality of the potential for divinity for all. Past prophet and educator by profession, David O. McKay taught, "The home is the first and most effective place to learn the lessons of life: truth, honor, virtue, self-control, the value of education, honest work, and the purpose and privilege of life. Nothing can take the

place of home in rearing and teaching children, and no other success can compensate for failure in the home."[18]

It is also in the home where the most personal and private introspective and spiritual learning takes place. It is the personal scripture study, intense fasting and consistent private prayer that draws one to the sacred relationship with deity. It is in the home where one acutely experiences the fruits of the Godlike character including forgiveness, patience, charity and diligence. It is in the home, supplemented by the Church, that gospel knowledge is gained on a consistent and communal basis. Recently, this focus on the home as the primary place for gospel learning with Church programs, including Sunday School, has been emphasized.

Church

Although there was no formal curriculum in the early days of the Church, over the years, organizations for educational purposes began to take root. In addition to the School of the Prophets, which commenced in the Ohio era in connection with the building of the temple, a women's organization, known as the Female Relief Society of Nauvoo commenced in 1842. One of its prime objectives to educate women in preparation to enter to the temple. For nearly two centuries, this organization, now numbering nearly 10 million adult Latter-day Saint women, has been involved in "relieving" the needy, and has a specific charge of educating individuals and families throughout the world. In addition to these adult organizations, young men, young women and primary age children also have organizations with a covenant educational component dedicated to them. In this gathering of people, individual members publicly covenant

13

with God. All members of the Church enter into a covenant relationship to help in the salvation of the souls of the children of God.

School

The best documented revelation regarding formal education in the Church is found in conjunction with what has become known as, The School of the Prophets. (Doctrine and Covenants 88:77-78, 118) In this revelation, men were taught how to learn and teach in a covenant manner. In fact, even as the school commenced daily, the teacher was taught to, "offer himself in prayer upon his knees before God, in token or remembrance of the everlasting covenant." Then, upon arrival of the pupils the teacher was to, "arise, and with uplifted hands to heaven. . . salute his brother saying, "in token or remembrance of the everlasting covenant in which covenant I receive you to fellowship, in a determination that is fixed, immovable, and unchangeable, to be your friend, and brother through the grace of God in the bonds o f love, to walk in all the commandments of God blameless, in thanksgiving forever, and ever. Amen."

This focus on covenant relationships was used in the Relief Society, a women's "School of the profettesses," where they used as their theme, "Charity never faileth!" Like the school of the prophets, this instruction and covenant relationship built in this institution was preparatory for the covenants made and kept in the sacred temples with each other and with God.

Education was a serious and sacred matter to these early members. As the Church moved to the Great Basin, and the area became more populated by those outside and sometimes antagonistic to the faith, continuing the sacred teachings in a covenant environment was critical. Latter-day Saint prophet Wilford Woodruff, in response to the

14

influx of the public education system and its effect on the youth of the Church stated, "We feel that the time has arrived when the proper education of our children should be taken in hand by us as a people. . .Our children, if left to the training they receive in these schools, will grow up entirely ignorant of those principles of salvation for which the Latter-day Saints have made so many sacrifices."[19] Officials thus organized a central Church Board of Education to direct the educational efforts of Church schools.

Recognizing the difficulty of running an educational system, especially as the Church membership began to grow internationally, leaders of the Church began a supplementary system of education where the public school taught the students the more secular subjects, but the religious subjects were taught by local religious teachers, firm in the covenant, today known as the Church Educational System.

The Church Educational System

Years later, speaking to the Nation Press Club, Apostle David A. Bednar, a past professor and university president himself explained, "We give significant attention, energy and resources to educating our youth. All secular and spiritual education fall under the umbrella of our Church Educational System."[20]

The Church Educational System (CES) is led by nearly 3,500 professional administrators, teachers, and staff with each entity having its own line of leadership to the Board of Education. They are assisted by over 50,000 volunteer teachers and Church service missionaries in different areas around the world. All committed to serve others due to their strong feelings of their covenant responsibilities to each other and to God. These individuals support the nearly million students enrolled in high school seminaries, college institutes, Church schools throughout the world and various entities of higher

15

education, including BYU, BYU-Idaho, BYU-Hawaii, and Pathway Worldwide, serving a total of over a million students.

As of 2020, there were over 405,000 students enrolled in seminary for high school aged students.[21] The LDS Church now operates 645 institute programs that provide religious education for over 300,000 young single adults and married postsecondary students.[22] Institutes provide social interaction, leadership training, and service.[23] Classes at institutes focus on a variety of topics such as world religions, biblical studies, Latter-day Saint scripture, Church history and doctrine and family. Similar to the Jewish Hillel Foundation, many institutes are located near institutions of higher learning and provide Latter-day students a safe, social and friendly environment to learn the doctrine of the Church and more faithfully be mentored in how to blend together secular and spiritual teachings. In response to a recent decrease in enrollment, current Church Commissioner of Education Clark Gilbert explained, "institute has begun creating a more relevant curriculum and stopped treating institute like a university course with required reading, required attendance and a grade, unless the student wants credit to transfer to one of the BYUs."[24] Research has shown that during 2021-2022 school year, enrollment in institute has increased.[25]

Commissioner of Church Education Clark Gilbert, on BYU Pathway Worldwide explained, "As a Church, we believe that education can lift people both spiritually and temporally, and we have developed BYU–Pathway to ensure our people have access to affordable, high-quality education everywhere in the world." He continued, "I believe you can see that the Church strives to make education accessible and affordable to all of its members, no matter their background or circumstances.

16

The Church supports lower tuition costs for Church Educational System programs with an annual financial contribution. As you may know, the U.S. Department of Education publishes the annual financial contributions for institutions of higher education. For The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the amount last year was more than $1 billion. And such contributions have been taking place for decades. Many students who are not of our faith also choose to attend these institutions because of the academic rigor and the values of the students and faculty."

Higher Education

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints operates four college campuses, located in Utah, Idaho, and Hawaii. These schools have a combined enrollment of approximately 70,000 students, coming from all 50 states and over 100 countries.[26]. With an undergraduate population of over 33,000 students from all 50 states and over 100 countries, Brigham Young University, is the largest undergraduate private university in the United States. Speaking to the faculty and student body at BYU over half a century ago, past prophet, Spencer W. Kimball explained, "Brigham Young University seeks to improve and 'sanctify' itself for the sake of others-not for the praise of the world, but to serve the world better."[27]

Jeffrey R. Holland, past president of Brigham Young University as well as past Church Commissioner of Education, and now sitting on BYU's Board of Education recently reiterated to faculty that BYU is "an extension of "The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints." He reminded faculty that the university takes up a "significant amount of sacred tithes and other precious human resources," and therefore admonished employees, as was done previously, that their lives "be absolutely consistent with and

17

characteristic of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ." Acknowledging the unique

challenge of being a faith-based university in an increasingly secular world, Holland

declared, "We must have the will to be different and to stand alone," even if that means,

"foregoing some professional affiliations and certifications." He continued, "There may

come a day when the price we are asked to pay for such association is simply too high

and too inconsistent with who we are."[28] If it does come to that however, he concluded,

quoting William Jennings Bryan, "we will pursue our own destiny, a destiny [that] is not

a matter of chance; [but largely] . . . a matter of choice;. . . not a thing to be waited for,

[but]. . . a thing to be [envisioned and] achieved."[29]

Recognizing that not all students have equal opportunity to enroll in the Church's

institutes of higher education, likely due to finances, distance, or academic success, in

addition to these institutes of higher learning, BYU Pathway Worldwide, an online

program, established officially in 2017, has a current enrollment of over 70,000 students

in 188 countries.[30] In regard to education, past prophet Gordon B. Hinckley declared, "I

believe the Lord does not wish to see His people condemned to live in poverty. I believe

He would have the faithful enjoy the good things of the earth."[31]

With its low-cost tuition, variety of degrees and certificates, personal mentoring

and strong religious training, BYU Pathway Worldwide has reached many at-risk

students as well as opened doors to education that were not deemed possible. This

program now has the responsibility over all online certificate and degree programs

offered by the Church's Educational System.[32]

Conclusion

18

In what has become known among Latter-day Saints as a "sacred grove" in upstate New York, the young boy Joseph Smith sought for wisdom, and received it. Job once asked, "Where shall wisdom be found?" (Job 28:12.) Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints believe it emanates from God and it is used and applied by humankind, to become as He is through covenant relationships built on educational opportunities. For members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, education is not merely for the purpose of knowing, but rather of becoming and helping others do the same. In reality, the only way to "become God's ourselves," is through our covenant relationships with others and God, only possible through divine instruction.

19

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[5] The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Teachings of John Taylor* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2001)

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[18] Clare Middlemiss, comp., Man May Know for Himself. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1967).

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[27] Spencer W. Kimball, "Second Century Address," *BYU Studies Quarterly* vol. 16, no. 4 (Oct. 1976): 455–457.

[28] Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Second Half of the Second Century of Brigham Young University," BYU Speeches, August 23, 2021.

20

[29] William Jennings Bryan, "America's Mission" (22 February 1899), in Speeches of William Jennings Bryan, vol. 2 (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1913), 11.

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Childlike Learning: Teaching Adult Students using Slow-Pedagogy and Montessori Methods

Abstract: This paper examines ways in which adult students, especially undergraduates, can be better engaged in academic learning when they re-access some of the trappings of childlike learning, especially play, repetitive engagement with texts, and unstructured quiet times. Examining contributions from Montessori's written works, the nascent "slow pedagogy" movement, and the author's experiences teaching an undergraduate course designed with these inspirations in mind, this paper will outline the impetus for childlike learning in adults and suggest ways to integrate childlike methods into teaching.

Introduction

How can we teach more slowly? For professors and educators of young adults, this is precisely the opposite question that most of us face; our contexts push us towards teaching faster, more, and in more exciting ways, trying to hang onto the small pieces of attention and bandwidth that our learners can offer us. Their lives (and ours) are often being lived at top speed, and not necessarily by choice.

While many professors and religious educators who teach adults strive to create engaging and intriguing spaces and activities, academic spaces often come with the expectation of drudgery and piles of "slog" work that take up a significant amount of the time in any course. However, the nascent "slow pedagogy" movement offers ways to reframe teaching so that teachers can instead concentrate on the depth and creativity of learning while deliberately covering less material; the result, practitioners claim, will be more profound, and students will emerge with a sense of pride at having truly grasped and enjoyed the learning process. This methodology hearkens back to the famed early childhood educator Maria Montessori's oft-quoted characterization of children as "natural contemplatives" who will (when space and energy allows), spend long periods of time filling and emptying buckets of sand or water, contentedly learning through long engagement. This begs the question: can this ability to learn in this slow, gentle, childlike fashion be reclaimed for adult learning? In this paper, I will present my own experiments with slow pedagogy and Montessori-inspired learning with undergraduate students in hopes of addressing this question.

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For context, I teach undergraduates at a small Catholic and Mercy-identified women's college in the Midwest, and our student population tends to have more in common with the classic community college student than the stereotypical private Catholic college student; my students are heavily first-generation, nearly 25% are Hispanic, and a substantive minority are above traditional age. Nearly all of them work, and many are parents. The exhausting crunch of daily living, and the pressure to use higher education as a stepping stone towards a higher-paying job, are entrenched realities for them. Thus, the experiment of using childlike and slower forms of learning was especially countercultural in my space; others may find resonance or dissonance when considering their teaching space.

The course I designed to utilize these methods was entitled "Feminist Spiritualities" and focused on contemporary women writers in spirituality, primarily women of color in the U.S. seeking the connection between their religiosity and their antiracist commitments; the more contemplative methods of slow pedagogy and Montessori approaches felt well suited to the often emotionally heavy writing around experiences of racism, as well as the more poetic, ephemeral expressions of religious experience. All students enrolled in the course were Theology majors or minors with multiple years of higher education behind them.

This paper will examine sources from the slow pedagogy movement – especially Jamie Thom, a U.K.-based teacher and the author of *Slow Teaching* – as well as Montessori perspectives to suggest three aspects of adult learning that can benefit from exploring childlike spaces and methods: "playtime" (sensory experiences and lighthearted engagement); "story time" (slow, repetitive reading and engagement with texts); and "naptime" (the deliberate use of silence, quiet, and unstructured time to allow new insights to emerge).

Playtime and sensory experiences

If a student isn't frantically taking notes in a class, what *are* they doing? The course I designed deliberately did not include test-style assessments, nothing that would require a learner to recall names, dates, or content on the spot. Without this pressure to busily scribble, students were slightly mystified at what they should do with their hands, eyes, and attention at the start of the semester.

Montessori calls the teacher the "guardian and custodian of the environment"[1] and for a slow pedagogy course, shaping the environment to be deliberately and sensorily different was my first step. I was able to select a smaller classroom where tables could easily be moved into a circle only just big enough for the dozen of us; having classmates in their direct line of sight, and close at each elbow, helped encourage learners to look at one another, smile, converse, and generally interact in a way they were less accustomed to doing. The classroom was simple, almost sparse in design, which is common in many colleges and conveniently resonates both with Thom and Montessori's theories about how to generate focus on specific sensory moments

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[1] Maria Montessori, *Education for a New World,* 87.

2

by providing less visual stimulation.[2] We began classes with a deep breath and an Alice Walker poem to encourage transitioning from the high-pressure energy of commuting or studying into a softer class space. Once we had gotten more accustomed to the visual quietude of the classroom and the focus it helped create, we also experimented with place-changing; for example, spending a half hour in the school chapel with no aim other than to focus on new sensory experiences (smells, visual art, textures) and detect how our bodies felt in that space over time so that we could discuss later. Not all attempts at play and sensory learning were equally successful; the day I gave my students scrap paper and encouraged them to doodle somehow reignited the sensation of frenzied note-taking, and they ended up more stressed about the drawing than soothed by it. I imagine that fidgets, play-doh, or pipe cleaners might be a more productive avenue to explore for that kind of low-key sensory play.

I was forthright with my students that I was trying something new in the design of the course and was ready to laugh when I stumbled or we collectively failed to achieve what we expected during the class period; I found that playfulness as a teacher and coordinator was immensely helpful in encouraging playfulness among the students and the content. We poked fun at ourselves and the course content, got off topic, found our way back on topic, and crafted deliberately ridiculous comparisons. This is both part of my usual professorial persona and part of the kindhearted, gentle spirit that Thom recommends, especially the insight that "we often forget the value that a touch of humour can have in turning a lesson on its head."[3] Being less rigid about the time spent together did not always result in dramatic new insights, but when it did, they felt more like gifts to be enjoyed rather than prizes granted for drudge labor. Even the time that in another environment might have felt "wasted" was appreciated.

Story time and full engagement with reading

Anyone with small children knows the eternal refrain "AGAIN!" after finishing a story; oftentimes, a much-loved, constantly read story with a tattered cover and rumpled pages from overuse. How rarely do young adult students shout this after reading another dense and difficult theological text!

Telling students to engage with a text and showing them how are wildly different battles, and one hurdle is that we often assign too much for students to do more than skim before class; the sheer volume of what has to be covered often intimidates learners into fearing they will not have enough time to complete the reading alongside their other obligations, and thus they avoid, then panic, then race through, and bring surface-level insights to class with them.

My exploration of how to encourage the sort of long-standing engagement with texts that I know is crucial to learning comes both from my small children's obsession with repetitive reading and from a beautifully written slow pedagogy reflection by art history professor Jennifer Roberts, who described an assignment where she forces students to go see a piece of art and stare at it for a minimum of four hours, tracking the new insights and revelations that occurred over

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[2] Thom, *Slow Teaching,* 12.
[3] Ibid, 85.

that time.[4] This assignment is an experiential case study that helps convince her students that prolonged engagement does, in fact, change what a person notices, and that just because one has looked at a piece of art (or read a text) does not mean that they have fully plumbed its depths.

I set the expectation early in my course that we would cover significantly less text than most upper-division courses would cover, but only because the students were required to read each piece twice at a minimum, and come to class with at least one insight that had changed or shifted between their first read and their second. I reinforced this expectation by literally listing each reading on the syllabus two times, and mentioning "first and second reads" on every course page online that included reading. Montessori frames repetition as a way of expressing love and joy in knowledge, noting "how many times it happens to us in ordinary life to *repeat* the very thing we know best, the thing we care most for, the thing to which some living force in us responds."[5] My hope was to generate the sense of savoring the reading rather than pounding through it, offering the chance to hone in on whatever was most intriguing at that time. I also tried to demystify each reading by posting 5-minute introduction-to-the-author videos, following Thom's suggestion regarding priming a read so that students had a basic familiarity with the concepts they were about to encounter before facing them on a page,[6] as well as giving them additional time to mull over the context and content.

I did expect significant pushback to this requirement, and anonymously polled the students prior to the first day of class to ask for their honest feedback before we began in earnest. I was immediately surprised with the interest, and even enthusiasm, my learners expressed for such an expectation. It came from a variety of places; some students were used to being the only prepared person in class and were excited for peers that would be expected to match their commitment; some students commented that they never felt like they had "enough" time to really understand anything they read, and that they felt this norm would help with comprehension; some, I am sure, simply wanted to perform amiability and open-mindedness for me, even in a confidential space. Interestingly, one of the positive reactions to my requirement of double-reading came from a student who already used the practice, but who had worried throughout her college career that the fact that she read things twice was an indication that she was not as intelligent as other students, who seemed like they could race through the same text and still participate in class discussion. For her, affirming the necessity of double-reading reframed her learning methods – rather than being "too slow" for college, she was in fact learning in the preferred way.

Nap time and pursuing silence

While I do not advocate for letting your students sleep through class, despite how badly they probably need the rest, creating a space that can feel restful as well as engaging has, to me, been proven to be one of the better strategies for encouraging honest and deep discussion. I found myself frequently thinking of Montessori's description of the quiet that often dominated her Children's Houses; not the silence that was enforced by teachers, but where the children are

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[4] Roberts, *The Power of Patience.*
[5] Montessori, *The Montessori Method,* 357.
[6] Thom, *Slow Teaching,* 146.

so immersed in their work that they "hold their peace so perfectly that the absolute silence seems that of a desert."[7]

I began the semester by assigning my students to create a cozy "reading spot" in their dorm, apartment, or house – something that was deliberately crafted by them to evoke a settled feeling, often also with small rituals (such as lighting a candle, or using aromatherapy lotion) to make the area more enjoyable and distinct from the rest of their homework spots. The goal was to carve out literal space that they would be attracted towards, like children drawn to sit on the carpet circles my library uses for preschool events, where they could experience the silence they needed for reading and reflection. We talked in class about how frequently our best ideas or insights occur to us in the shower or just before falling asleep, when the brain has a chance to rest and free-associate, and I encouraged them to see if they could re-create that openness by shifting their spaces.

I found I needed to think about classroom silence in two ways; my own silence, that is, a my own refusal to "take over" or run the class to fill the time when conversation lags, and the silence that naturally occurs within discussions of any type. Within the classroom, I am forced to admit that I am not always a champion of silence – I tend to associate chatter with engagement, even though as a lifelong introvert, I know better. In this class space, I tried to embrace Thom's admonition to teachers that "muting ourselves regularly can help to ensure that students are actively thinking, and can save teachers much-needed energy."[8] I was actually forced into this quiet role when, four weeks into the semester, I became ill and was unable to attend class – but had them meet without me.[9] The next class period, the students were infused with a new confidence that they could lead themselves in interesting conversation, and relied less on me to structure the space – proof positive that my own silence could be generative for them in away that my talking could not be.

As for the silence of discussion, framing it at the start of the semester as an expected part of the class and allowing it to exist when it emerged – even sometimes praising it as a sign that students were deep in thought (though it may well have been due to the typical mid-semester slump) helped normalize a quieter, more thoughtful form of discussion. I still had my talkers and my listeners, but the gaps were less pronounced as the term went on, and when students began leading their own sections of class, I was surprised that several chose to design activities that incorporated and reflected on silence.

Considerations and drawbacks

As any teacher can imagine, formatting any course in a way that is different from what their learners understand as "typical" comes with growing pains. I found that I needed to block out significant time in the first weeks of the term to explain and re-explain our aims, our methods, and to assure students that awkwardness was both okay and part of the process. As long as the teacher is able to exhibit the patience that they want their learners to utilize in the space,

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[7] Montessori, *The Montessori Method,* 116.
[8] Thom, *Slow Teaching,* 54.
[9] For further details on this learning experience, see the Wabash blog listed in the bibliography.

this simply takes time and gentle nudges to overcome. Overall, students were more excited than resistant to trying something new.

Overall, the most pressing issue I faced in teaching in this slow and childlike format was simply that nobody else is doing things this way; the fact that my course seemed like it required "less" than others made it easier for the fast-paced, demanding classes to eat up time that should have been saved for slow reading and curious wondering. While students overall persisted better with the slow and doubled reading than I expected because of their own interest in the course and their learning, it feels easy for any course with lower intensity to fall to the bottom of a learner's priority list. This is where I noticed my own competitive (or perhaps jealous) impulse to want to make my course harder, more exacting, or more punishing so that I could demand the same attention; those moments were powerful reminders of how deeply I am inculturated into an academy where more and meaner is easily mistaken for quality and seriousness. I again and again had to re-ground myself in the content of slow pedagogy to avoid the slide back into a more frenetic and stressful classroom experience, recalling Montessori's proud description that "the children in [her] schools are the ones who are really at rest, ardently and blessedly free."[10] Learning need not be full of anxiety to be effective.

Conclusion

My experiments with slow and contemplative pedagogy, in the spirit of Thom and Montessori, were overall far more rewarding than problematic and gratifying enough that I felt empowered to push through administrative skepticism and some occasional awkwardness. I find that adult students do not only learn effectively in the midst of play, story, and quiet – they learn more joyfully, with clear satisfaction permeating their imperfect but earnest projects and papers. While the dominant forms of academic learning in higher education push back against slowness and quietude, the ubiquity of overfull and too-fast courses makes any break from the norm appealing to students who want to thrive instead of merely survive. Childlike and slow learning in higher education is an avenue well worth exploring for any instructor who sees this culture of fastness negatively impacting their learners and who wants to explore another way.

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7

Jewish Education - Celebration, Conversation and Repetition
Rabbi Dr. Stuart Halpern

Abstract:

Jewish learning often takes place in dynamic form. Ancient texts are discussed and debated in study pairs who utilize millennia of ancient and contemporary commentaries. Repetition is a key educational value. Deuteronomy chapter 6 instructs "And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up." Texts studied in their entirety – from the Bible to the Talmud, are celebrated for their continued relevance and the next cycle of study is swiftly begun again.

Keywords:

New Year's Day in 2020 was special.

Back in the before times, when masks were something Jews only wore on the holiday of Purim, and the words "social" and "distancing" had not yet gotten together as a couple, 90,000 people gathered in MetLife Stadium, in East Rutherford, New Jersey.

The stadium, home to the Giants and the Jets, was not home to a football game that day. If it was, frankly, 90,000 people probably would NOT have shown up.

All those in attendance that day were actually there for one specific, and one rather surprising, reason. They were there to celebrate the completion of the Daf Yomi cycle.

Daf Yomi is a practice started around 100 years ago in an effort to increase lay learning of one of Judaism's most ancient texts, the Talmud. Composed between 400-600 CE in ancient Babylon, the Talmud consists of 2,711 pages. If you learn one of those pages a day, you finish in around 7.5 years.

Due to the popularity of this practice, and recent translations of the Talmud into languages including both English and Italian, thousands of Jews worldwide, take time - before work, on the train, during the evening, or even in podcast form while driving or in the grocery store - to learn from the Talmud's laws, stories and moral instructions.

That day in January, close to 100,000 people, many of whom had completed this daily journey of learning, and others who had cheered them on, came to celebrate.

The context of that day's celebration - the idea of joyously honoring commitment to learning ancient texts *specifically* in a place where secular sports are usually conducted, was not an accident.

As Americans - as Tara Isabella Burton has noted (2020) - we can find spirituality in places ranging from the playing field, to the gym, to the political arena. By pedaling quickly on a bike we are told we can inspire our soul. By voting for the right politician, we will be cleansed of all manners of impurity.

But Judaism has always been about learning. About education. About text study through dynamic conversation across the generations.

The idea of celebrating the completion of studying a major Judaic text is an ancient one. Thousands of years before the Daf Yomi cycle was initiated, the Jewish tradition contained in its holiday calendar not one but **two** major holidays celebrating the Torah, the Bible, itself.

One, Shavuot on the 6th day of the Hebrew month of Sivan (usually around May or June in the Gregorian calendar), comes 50 days after the 2nd day of Passover, and - the ancient rabbis tell us in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate Shabbat 86b - commemorates the day that Moses received the Ten Commandments on Mt. Sinai.

When the Bible lists this day as a pilgrimage festival in the days of the Temple in Jerusalem, it does not directly connect it to the day Moses received his revelation on the mount. The holiday is given an agricultural reason for its commemoration - that of the wheat harvest (see Exodus 23:15, 34:22, Leviticus 23:15-21, Numbers 28:26, Deuteronomy 16:9-12).
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But in the rabbis' calendrical calculation, its historical origin lies in Sinai.

Thus, for over 2,000 years, Jews around the world have marked this day as a day to toast the Torah.

They do so not through parties or parades, but rather community-wide learning programs.

As the late Jewish historian Elliott Horowitz has documented (2016), when coffee spread through the Ottoman empire during the 16th century, there arose a Jewish custom to actually stay up all night the evening of Shavuot learning Jewish texts (Jewish holidays begin at sundown and then continue for roughly 24 hours until the next night).

In regular, non-COVID-19 years, if one was to walk into most synagogues throughout the globe, from Jerusalem to Johannesburg, one would see individuals studying in pairs (which we will get

to more in a little bit), listening to lectures from their rabbis, or, in some of the more liberal denominations, having multimedia or musical learning experiences centered around texts.

Young and old, male and female, whether elementary school students studying for their quiz in their Talmud class the next week, or hearing an unusually creative lecture on the implications of snow in Jewish law… (at 4am, you can only imagine what topics rabbis need to come up with in order to keep people awake) … Jews demonstrate, in this holiday, a passion for learning.

Even those, myself included, who lost the ability to pull an all-nighter once college was over, will set aside extra time during the course of the holiday for Torah learning during the daytime of Shavuot.

It is said that casinos always have great indoor lighting so those inside can't tell what time it is outside.

During Shavuot night, in a not-atypical synagogue, with all through-the-night lectures on topics ranging from the Bible to history, mysticism to messianism, the Sabbath to the Sinai desert, a midnight barbeque and Question and Answer session with the rabbi, grandparents learning with their grandchildren, parents learning from and teaching their children, and an unlimited supply of coffee and snacks is just as radiant and beyond a sense of time. But in a much more meaningful way.

As the rabbi of a friend of mine put it to explain this phenomenon - when you are in love, you do crazy things. Marathon dates, 3am walks over the Brooklyn Bridge while talking to your soulmate, can't hold a candle to the love the Jewish people show to their God and His word during the holiday of Shavuot.

But that's not all…

Just a few months later, on the holiday immediately following the last day of Sukkot (Tabernacles), Jews celebrate *Simchat Torah*, literally "the joy of the Torah." On that day, a holiday also of ancient rabbinic origin, we mark the completion of the full year cycle of reading a weekly portion of the Five Books of Moses.

Each week, throughout the year, on Shabbat, Jews read roughly 4-6 chapters of the Bible, starting with the first chapter of Genesis.

On Simchat Torah, we not only read the last verses of Deuteronomy, the last book of Moses, we also immediately begin to read Genesis all over again.

Some observers have called this day, where all Jews across the globe end and then re-start, their holiest of texts on the same day, the culmination of the world's largest book club.

For this, we dance and sing as part of the synagogue services, an expression of joy unmatched throughout the rest of the holiday cycle.

Like in the joyous occasion of that other celebration, the Daf Yomi *siyum*, or celebratory completion, is like that old Shari Lewis song from when I was a kid - "the song that doesn't end. It just goes on and on my friend."

Because what I didn't mention earlier is that after taking a few moments to mark the end of a 7.5 year cycle of studying the Talmud, through whatever life threw our way during that time - overwhelming work days, deaths in the family, the birth of children, global pandemics, whatever, the first page of the first Talmudic tractate is begun right away.

The cycle, just like the Torah reading on the holiday of Simchat Torah, begins anew. Bring on the next 7.5 years and I'll see you back at the stadium….

The idea of Jewish education through repetition actually originates in the Bible. Deuteronomy chapter 6 tells us:

> And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thy heart; and thou shalt teach them diligently [In Hebrew, *ve-shinantam*] unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thy hand, and they shall be for frontlets between thine eyes. And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates.

The Hebrew word *ve-shinantam* stems from the root to sharpen - like *shinayim*, which means teeth.

The mandate is to repetitively study God's words, over and over again, over the course of our days and our travels, by implanting them in our minds, and on our literal doorposts in the form of the mezuzah [a parchment containing select biblical passages]. We review and review and review.

We sharpen our understanding of, and our commitment to, learning our sacred texts.

In one of those classically profound and warmly humorous exchanges in the Talmud, in tractate Chagiga 9b, the sage Hillel says:

one who reviews his studies one hundred times is not comparable to one who reviews his studies one hundred and one times.

To this inspiring but difficult statement, Hillel's interlocutor, another stage named Bar Hei Hei says, wait a second (actually, I imagine him saying: Hey, Hey, wait a second….)

And due to one extra time that he did not review, the one who reviewed his learning "only" 100 times is to be criticized?

To which Hillel replies…Yes.

My Yeshiva University colleague Rabbi Benjamin Blech once suggested to me that what lies behind this value of educational repetition is one of beauty.

He noted that the recitation one reads to mark the completion a siyum, is called a "hadran," which essentially means "a going over" or "a return."

We say in this prayer, "*hadran alach…ve-hadrach alan*" - "we shall return to you…and you shall return to us," connoting that while we might have finished one tractate, one book, or even one whole compendium of books, we never actually leave it.

As Rabbi Blech noted, Leviticus 23:40, in the context of the details of the festival of Sukkot, contains the instructions:

And ye shall take you on the first day the fruit of beautiful trees [in Hebrew, *peri etz hadar*], branches of palm-trees, and boughs of thick trees, and willows of the brook, and ye shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.

The word "hadar" in Hebrew contains the same stem as the Aramaic word "hadran" - thus the implication that by returning to something, we are actually *beautifying* it. We are polishing it over and over as if it is a diamond.

But, as I mentioned, the recitation begins with two components - "we will return to you," we say about, or rather to, the text we just completed.

But we also say: you shall return to us. *Hadrach alan*. You will beautify us.

By learning you over and over again, you actually bring beauty to us.

The idea that our learning is restorative and beautifying through repetition is reflected in another talmudic tradition. In Tractate Nidah 30b the ancient rabbis tell us:

> **And** a fetus **is taught the entire Torah** while in the womb, **as it is stated: "And He taught me and said to me: Let your heart hold fast My words; keep My commandments, and live"** (Proverbs 4:4). **And it** also **states:** "As I was in the days of my youth, **when the converse of God was upon my tent"** (Job 29:4)...**And once** the fetus **emerges into the airspace of the world, an angel comes and slaps it on its mouth, causing it to forget the entire Torah.**

Jewish folklore even credits this teaching with why humans have a philtrum, the space above their upper lip - an indentation left by the angel's touch.

As the 20th century Modern Orthodox rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explained (1978, 69), "Rabbi Simlai wanted to tell us that when a Jew studies Torah, he is confronted with something . . . familiar, because he has already studied it and the knowledge was stored up in the recesses of his memory."

Being eager to restore knowledge originally gained in the womb might explain why Judaism has long emphasized education in our foundational texts starting at a young age.

The mishnah, the corpus of rabbinic texts in between the Bible and the Talmud, states, in Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) 5:21:

> At five years of age the study of Scripture; At ten the study of Mishnah; At thirteen subject to the commandments; At fifteen the study of Talmud [the word "Talmud" in this context means in-depth analysis of the oral tradition following the mishnah]

The Jerusalem Talmud Ketubot 8:11 credits Simeon the son of Shetach, who lived from120 BC - 40 BC, with instituting universal Jewish education. The Babylonia Talmud Bava Batra 21a credits the initiative to Joshua son of Gamla, roughly a contemporary.

Regardless, as my late friend and teacher Lord Jonathan Sacks has noted, the importance of the entirety of the Jewish people being educated was actually inspired by Moses, known in our tradition as *Moshe Rabbenu*, Moses our teacher.

As Rabbi Sacks (2018) writes:

> the last two commands Moses ever gave the Israelites were explicitly educational in nature: to gather the entire people together in the seventh year to hear the Torah being

read, to remind them of their covenant with God (Deut. 31:12–13), and, "Write down for yourselves this song and teach it to the people of Israel" (31:19), understood as the command that each person must write for himself a scroll of the law…

There was nothing like this concern for universal education elsewhere in the ancient world. Jews became the people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools, and whose passion was study and the life of the mind.

Moses' end-of-life transformation is one of the most inspiring in all of religious history. In that one act, he liberated his career from tragedy. He became a leader not for his time *only* but for all time. His body did not accompany his people as they entered the land, but his teachings did. His sons did not succeed him, but his disciples did. He may have felt that he had not changed his people in his lifetime, but in the full perspective of history, he changed them more than any leader has ever changed any people, turning them into the people of the book and the nation who built not ziggurats or pyramids but schools and houses of study.

Throughout our history, then, Jews have emphasized a robust education in our foundational texts.

While through much of our history, it was predominantly men who were the beneficiaries of formal education in Jewish subjects, particularly Talmud - besides the laws Jewish women learned in order to oversee the Jewish home, including the laws of kashrut and family purity- the past century has thankfully seen an exponential strengthening of women's Jewish education.

Spurred by the Beis Yaakov school movement started by Sarah Schenirer in post-World War I Poland, women's formal Jewish education throughout the globe has been maintained as a pillar of the Jewish community's flourishing. And in the mid-20th century, the aforementioned Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik gave the first Talmud shiur to women at YU's Stern College for Women.

In my own American Modern Orthodox denomination, elementary schools, high schools, and my home institution, Yeshiva University, offer a dual curriculum to both men and women, with half the day spent on Judaic subjects, including the Bible, the Talmud, Jewish prayer, Jewish law, Jewish history, Jewish philosophy, etc., alongside typical subjects you would find in any other school of that level.

The vast majority of our students spend a year in Israel studying Jewish texts full time there, before coming to campus in New York.

YU, though it does not grant rabbinic ordination to women, offers a 2-year, full-time Talmudic learning program, called the Graduate Program for Advanced Talmudic Study, whose graduates

go on to teach in our school system and serve as adult educators in synagogue and Jewish communal work settings.

The university also has a co-ed graduate school of academic Jewish studies, and another of Jewish education and administration.

If you ever visit our campus, and we would love to host you, walking into one of our *batei midrash*, plural for *beit midrash*, or "House of Study," in which traditional texts are learned in pairs, called a "chavruta," you might be struck by how different it is than a typical library.

Students, seated across from each other, are in various stages of standing, pointing, conversing, shouting, excitedly adjusting their glasses, working through, arguing, and refining their understanding of a 1,600 Babylonian rabbinic teaching utilizing 1,000 year old Egyptian commentators, 500 year old Italian interpreters, their synagogue rabbi, and a lecture their heard from their older sister, to explicate a particularly difficult passage.

When giving the celebrated political analyst George Will a tour of the Yeshiva University Washington Heights beit midrash a few years back, he turned aside, amid the bickering bustle of hundreds of chavruta pairs gesticulating vehemently over the Talmud's tractates and asked, "How does anyone get any thinking done amid all this shouting!?"

His question is funny but also profound: It's precisely the dynamic conversation with a study partner that propels all that thinking forward.

The Talmud in Taanit 23b recounts a story of a legendary figure who sleeps for 70 years only to awaken and realize he has no one to learn Torah with. The punchline of the tale is "*oh chavruta, oh mituta.*" Without a friend in learning, a person is as good as dead.

Graduates of Modern Orthodox school systems go on to attend, and excel at, besides YU of course, Harvard, Penn, Princeton, Yale and other elite American institutions of higher learning, both as undergraduate and graduate students.

For those not in YU, there are often Modern Orthodox rabbinic couples on secular college campuses offering extracurricular Jewish learning opportunities and spiritual mentorship.

While a bifurcated day in our school system of balancing Jewish and general studies could easily lend itself to young minds operating on two parallel, and therefore non-intersecting tracks, as my late grandfather-in-law, Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm, who served as president of Yeshiva University for 27 years, emphasized in his seminal book *Torah U-Madda*

Torah, faith, religious learning on one side and Madda, science, worldly knowledge on the other, together offer us a more over-arching and truer vision than either one set alone. Each set gives one view of the Creator as well as of His creation, and the other a different perspective that may not agree at all with the first ... Each alone is true, but only partially true; both together present the possibility of a larger truth. (2010, 236)

While emphasizing the primacy of Torah learning, Rabbi Lamm argued through his writing, the launch of the *Torah U-Madda Journal* and other leading initiatives, that Modern Orthodoxy firmly believes in an education and a value system in which the best of modernity can be brought into conversation with Jewish thought and tradition.

While Rabbi Lamm passed away this year after having retired from public life around a decade or so, his vision for the university remains strong.

At YU's Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, which I have the honor of running along with my colleague and close student of Rabbi Lamm - and the great nephew of Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik - Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, we offer YU students classes including:

- Psalms and Sonnets
- Shakespeare, the Bible, and Political Philosophy
- The Architecture of Election: Temple Architecture in Judaism and Western Thought
- Wholly Moses: Moses in Western Art
- Spiritual Autobiographies
- Economics in Jewish Thought
- American and Talmudic Law
- Judaism and Democracy
- Athens and Jerusalem: A Study of Greek and Jewish Philosophy
- Lincoln, the Bible and the Law
- and more...

Like so much of higher education these days, the emphasis on STEM has also led to the development of conferences and book projects at the intersection of emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence and the Jewish tradition, and we are looking forward to examining, in working groups and courses, how cryptocurrency, smart homes, self-driving cars and medical decision making being done with AI can be examined through the prism of Jewish ideas and responded to within the context of Jewish law.

The future of Jewish education is a story still to be written.

The day school system and Yeshiva University have been toughing out the pandemic, and delivering in-person instruction when health regulations allow.

In terms of community education, in the before times, the Sabbath and holidays, as well as weeknights, often were opportunities for synagogue lectures and educational institutional public programs.

Now, Zoom classes on every Jewish topic imaginable and video series - one rabbi has offered an 18 hour marathon zoom class to raise money for charity - are offered constantly, all over the globe.

Like in so many other realms of content delivery, podcasts have proliferated. One on the Daf Yomi cycle called "Take One" is downloaded tens of thousands of times a day, and features a range of speakers from Chabad rabbis to basketball players, journalists and politicians reflecting on a theme or teaching of that day's page.

Personally, though, some of my favorite educational opportunities are the quiet moments.

Stadiums in January full of freezing, but cheering, dedicated learners who carved out time for daily learning are amazingly epic celebrations.

Holidays with packed synagogue festivities are no doubt great.

But my favorite Jewish educational moments, the ones most special to me, are the much-less-grand walks home from synagogue Friday night with my young children, asking them about the Jewish teachings they learned in school, and sitting around the Shabbat table - singing songs, articulating something we are grateful for, and talking, over mouthfuls of dessert, about biblical teachings first given in the Sinai desert 3,000 years ago, passed down through millennia of conversations still echoing today.

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Imagining Belief and Belonging Anew:
Constructive-Developmental Theory as an Aid to Effective Formation

Abstract: Religious belief and belonging has implications for how persons interpret their world, affiliate with others in community, and express their agency as religious persons. This paper reads **interpretation**, **affiliation** and **agency** through the constructive-developmental lens of Robert Kegan. It provides religious educators a framework to understand and work with maturing adolescents and young adults. Attention is given to how their understanding can be used to prompt heightened belief and belonging as young people mature.

Introduction

There are numerous challenges for religious education in the twenty-first century in the United States, not least of which is the rate of religious disaffiliation, or lack of affiliation in the first place, among adolescents and young adults. As religious belonging - especially Christian belonging - becomes less of a given in the culture, religious educators cannot presume that the practices, values or vision of religious life are known, understood or engaged widely. In such a cultural atmosphere, religious communities have to work more diligently to articulate clearly and embody compellingly so as to have a positive impact. Yet they also have to do so in a mode that is appropriate to the recipient.

In this paper I argue that constructive-developmental theory (CDT) can offer a useful framework for understanding effective ways of educating individuals in this cultural moment. CDT offers valuable insights for understanding how older children, adolescents and young adults exhibit religious belief and affiliation and what that suggests for their capacity to engage meaningfully in religious life. Furthermore, reading CDT with nuance as it pertains to agency and affiliation, makes the two-step movement of early and later formal-operational thought more clear. In an earlier work, first offered at REA, my colleague Emily Jendzejec and I argued that religious belief and belonging among adolescents and young adults can be better interpreted through a CTD lens. At that time, we called for "initiatives and interventions that are appropriate to the way emerging adults are coming to see and make sense of religion"[1] In this paper, I attempt to offer such interventions.

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[1] Theresa O'Keefe and Emily Jendzejec, "A New Lens for Seeing: A Suggestion for Analyzing Religious Belief and Belonging among Emerging Adults through a Constructive-Developmental Lens," *Religions* 11, no. 573 (2020): 6. doi:10.3390/rel11110573.

The paper is in three parts. In the first part, I give an overview of constructive-developmental theory. In part two, I suggest how religious living has implications for interpretation, affiliation and agency. In part three, I offer thick descriptions of three successive "moments" on the developmental trajectory of CDT as it relates to religious living. In the fourth part, I offer recommendations for effective religious education for each of these three moments.

I.   *Constructive Developmental Theory*

Constructive Developmental theory is a branch of developmental psychology that offers frameworks for identifying changes in the human capacity for meaning-making. The field has grown over the past few decades, building off of Jean Piaget's (cognition) and Lawrence Kohlberg's (moral) developmental work.[2] Piaget claimed that persons grew in their cognitive complexity as they aged from early childhood to adolescence. Kolberg's research established that this change allowed for changes in moral reasoning. For both, the focus was largely on cognition. Later contributors - Robert Kegan, James Fowler, Sharon Daloz Parks, and Marcia Baxter Magolda - have built on this foundation to identify that cognitive development is not restricted to the world of ideas, but is interwoven with interpersonal and intrapersonal changes. Together, these three shape how a person is able to make sense of their lives in the world.

Each theorist has made particular contributions to the field, but there are strong foundational points of agreement among them that are both explicitly named and implicitly suggested.

- That thinking and feeling are not separate activities in meaning-making, but intertwined and mutually informing,
- That growth does not imply rejecting what was previously known, but subsuming it and organizing it within a wider framework of meaning. Just as Kegan suggests, a point is assumed into a line, which is further assumed in a plane.[3] Each still exists, but within a wider context.
- That development involves both long periods of transition, and moments of equilibrium.
- That development requires certain neurobiological foundations, but those foundations are not determinative of development.
- That development is not inevitable, but seems to be prompted by appropriate environmental challenges and support.
- That the individual is always situated within individual relationships and social contexts, but he or she is not automatically aware of such.

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[2] A good summary of the development of theories can be found in James Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning" in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed. By Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks. (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986).

[3] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 133.

- That as the individual becomes able to identify relationships and social contexts, they become more aware of their obligations to, freedom within and influence on these relationships.

According to constructive developmental research, the span from late childhood to emerging adulthood is potentially one of the most dynamic for growth in meaning-making. The growing person has the potential to dramatically change how he or she sees and makes sense of their world and their relationship with others. For religious educators, understanding the nature of that growth can be very helpful, as change in meaning-making has implications for religious belief and belonging.

Theological alignment
While not explicitly named by the theorists, constructive developmental theory reflects a presumption in the interconnectedness of all things, particularly human persons. The theory implies that developmental growth is the growing awareness of this interconnectedness and the decentering of the self. Developmental growth involves the ability to see one's self within an increasingly complex and wide ranging web of relationships.

As a Catholic Christian religious educator, I find the theory aligns well with my theological outlook. As a Christian, I believe in one God as the source of all creation, visible and invisible; I believe that I continue to encounter the resurrected Jesus in the world today; and I believe that the Holy Spirit is ever blessing and vivifying life in countless ways. As a person of Christian faith, I am constantly challenged to expand my awareness of the Mystery that I call God as wider than, different from, and more intimately present than I can imagine at any moment. For me, CDT offers a psychological framework that demonstrates how we come to increasing awareness of the mystery of life and our place in it.

Impact on Agency
By identifying a networked perspective of the human person and their capacity to make meaning, CDT offers a view of the person as never independent of or separate from relationships and social worlds, but increasingly able to see and take responsibility for his or her agency therein.

This growth is best recognized through illustrations. For example, the older child, who unselfconsciously sees themselves as the center of their world, can take responsibility for their immediate actions, but is less able to accurately see how they impact others. Yet, as they come into adolescence and young adulthood, they gain the neurobiological capacities that allow them to recognize the individual and social relationships around them.[4] While these changes in their

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[4] A helpful summary of this development can be found in Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2014) and Linda Spear, *The Behavioral Neuroscience of Adolescence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010).

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body create a new opportunity, improved recognition is not a neurobiological inevitability. If appropriately challenged and supported, they can learn to recognize and to be responsible *to* those relationships, acting in ways that are expected and appropriate.[5] As such, they gain a social awareness that draws them to align with others. They gain what Kegan calls a "socialized mind." It is further possible that as they age into adulthood, they begin to see the influence they have over those relationships and social settings. Here they can take on leadership and responsibility *for* those relationships and social settings. Also, rather than being concerned with fitting in, they develop a greater understanding and appreciation of their differences. They gain what Kegan calls a "self-authored" mind.[6] Such development is not inevitable; some people age into adulthood without gaining any sense of responsibility to others, while most do; and many do not gain the capacity to or for others.

Critiques and misconceptions

I find that many people tend to interpret developmental growth as a movement from mindless belonging and adherence to external authorities, toward an independent stance, free of the influence of authorities and relationships. I think these are unhelpful and limited. However, there are likely several things which drive this interpretation. One may simply be a lack of real familiarity with the theories and how to interpret them in context. Another may be the language the theorists use. The latter stage of development is described as "self-authorship" (Kegan and Baxter Magolda) and "individuative-reflective" (Fowler) which suggests the ultimate goal is to stand independently and apart from others. A third driver of this interpretation may be the preoccupation among White North Americans with personal independence. Only more recent research with non-dominant groups has developmental growth been described with more communitarian rather than individualistic language.[7] By offering rich descriptions of the different moments we would anticipate among adolescents and emerging adults, along with the implications for each for the person's ability to live as a Christian disciple, I hope to make the CDT more accessible and useful to ministry educators.

II. *Religious Living: Interpretation, Affiliation and Agency*

A person's meaning-making capacity has implications in three facets of living religious belief: their agency concerning moral and religious practices; how they interpret the world vis-a-vis their religious belief; and how they affiliate with a religious community. In this section, I briefly describe what I mean by each.

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[5] I argue that the primary task of moving towards adulthood is fourfold: learning to recognize oneself as a person, others as persons, the relationship between, and the expectations of that context. Theresa A. O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood: A Theology of Ministry with Adolescents* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018).
[6] Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).
[7] These critiques deserve more space than this paper allows.

Agency: Agency is the capacity to choose and to act, both moral and religious practices. It usually implies intentionality, but frequently the growing person is making choices, unaware of their agency in doing so or by attributing those choices to authorities outside oneself. An indication of growth can be recognizing the actions one has been doing by default, and taking ownership of those actions. Changes in meaning-making capacity affects how one understands religious practices and moral injunctions.

Interpretation: Interpretation is the lens through which one reads religious belief and moral values, as well as how one connects those beliefs and values to the rest of one's life and the world more generally. Since every religious tradition espouses a vision of life's origins, meaning and purpose, religious traditions invite adherents to take on that vision and interpret the world through its lens. However, one's meaning-making capacity deeply impacts how one interprets religious traditions.

Affiliation: Affiliation is a person's capacity to align with others. As meaning-making has inter and intrapersonal implications, changes in meaning-making has implications for how one understands and relates to members of the religious community and to the divine.

In the following section, I offer thick descriptions of three developmental moments (or stages) as pertains to religious living. Attention will be given to agency, interpretation, and affiliation, while also noting cognition, social awareness, and identity associated with each moment.

III. Enriching the Descriptions

Since my concern is ministry with youth and young adults, I focus on the transition from older childhood to young adulthood. This trajectory corresponds to Kegan's movement from 2nd order (the *Imperial Mind*) to 3rd order (the *Socialized Mind*) knowing[8] and Fowler's movement from *Mythic-Literal* to *Synthetic-Conventional* faith.[9] Each of these frameworks leads to a later stage/moment that is indicated by a more complex capacity for self-awareness, social connection and impact and ideological thinking, frequently identified as "self-authoring." While important and valuable, all the theorists find that this capacity is not reached, if it is attained at all, until one's later twenties to mid-thirties. Therefore, it is beyond the consideration for this paper.[10]

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[8] Robert Kegan, *In Over OurHeads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

[9] James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981).

[10] The works of Daloz Parks and Baxter Magolda inform this discussion, but they both start their frameworks within this latter stage and do not attend to the significance of moving into it. Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019); Marcia Baxter Magolda, "The Activity of Meaning Making: A Holistic Perspective on College Student Development" *Journal of College Student Development,* 50, no. 6 (2009): 621-639.

A. Coming into our Own

Cognition: We all enter adolescence starting from the unselfconscious, but self-interested space of later childhood. Piaget noted that the cognitive capacity is *concrete-operational*, where we gain the "capacity for ordering and categorizing the world of concrete reality….recognizing cause and effect", but of an immediate, tit-for-tat nature.[11] As older children, we are increasingly able to regulate our emotions and responses, and master self-control. We can be depended on to make reliable decisions, if given clear instruction and strong expectations for completion. We can make reliable sense of what is concrete, observable and immediate. What is interior to us (e.g., our feelings, thoughts, preferences) are very real; those of others are less so.

Social awareness: As older children, we are embedded in a world of relationships with other people, but do not recognize these relationships as such. Rather, other people are seen atomistically, each separate and within their roles (e.g., parent, friend, teacher). When we do begin to see the other as a person with their own opinions, hopes and dreams, we tend to dismiss those interests when they differ from our own. As older children, we assume others see the world as we do, because we believe that the way *we see* the world is the way the world *is*. At this stage, we cannot hold our point of view and an alternate point of view simultaneously. Also, our consideration is generally limited to what is immediate, both in time and space. As such, we may take responsibility for something that is close at hand and impacts us (like our parents' divorce), but not for something we have done, but did not intend and do not personally feel or see (like injury to a stranger). Simply, if we do not care about someone, their concerns are no concerns of ours. On the other hand, if we do care about someone, we expect others to care too.

Identity: As older children we have no "sense of identity," as that requires some capacity to see our "self" as others see it. Rather, if asked about ourselves, as older children we usually identify what we do, what we like, and who we associate with. We use more external descriptors rather than internal sensibilities to describe ourselves.

Religious agency and moral ordering: As older children we can learn to have agency over our actions. However, moral "frameworks" are not understood as such since frameworks live within the world of ideas. Therefore "morals" are best appreciated as particular rules for behaviors, either allowed or prohibited. The meanings, intentions, or values behind such rules or religious practice are not yet recognized. Nor are we likely to appropriately translate a value found in one rule to a different set of circumstances and options. To the older child, rules and practices seem arbitrary; whomever is "in charge" gets to decide. They come from some authority beyond us, such as parents, teachers, or God.[12]

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[11] Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 59.
[12] This kind of "moral reasoning" was found by Christian Smith when he found "fully one in three (34 percent) of the emerging adults we interviewed said they simply did not know what makes anything morally right or wrong."

At this stage, our practices and actions are largely determined by our self interest, even when that self interest intersects with making other people happy. At this point in life, we are most likely to do the "right thing" because someone important to us wants us to and it is in our best interest to follow through. On the other hand, when we think no one is watching, or there are no negative consequences, we may not follow through. In other words, extrinsic motivation is largely central to our religious practice or moral action. This characterization may seem harsh in considering "good kids." I suggest that "good kids" have consistently found benefits in being good. On the other hand, "bad kids" may not have experienced any consistent benefit in being good, and so their acting in their own self-interest is more obvious. In fact, the lack of consistency can contribute to feelings of frustration and "bad kids" acting out.

Religious interpretation: In older children we exhibit what Fowler called *Mythic-Literal* faith.[13] We read Bible stories in their most literal sense. Moral frameworks, like the Ten Commandments, are read as a list of prohibitions (and the Beatitudes make no sense at all). And God is perceived as some authority, much like others, but bigger and maybe all-seeing. If God is understood as all-seeing or all-present, then we may extend God's power beyond the confines of religious spaces, but that extension is not automatic. If we are able to articulate greater meaning to religious life, it is likely that important adults have provided us with the language and they know when and how to use it. In fact, as older children we can become very proficient in religious instruction. We can even contribute imaginatively to the interpretation of these elements.[14] However, in each of those instances we are largely depending on someone else to communicate what they mean or offer a framework for their interpretation.[15]

Religious affiliation: Our affiliations are largely determined circumstantially. As an older child, we belong to a religious community because our family does; or we go because our friends invited us. We are there because someone important wants us to be there and/or we like being there. If asked about what it means to belong to a particular religious community, we would most likely describe the things we do while there or who is there with us. Again, if able to articulate more, the language has been provided for us.

This more concrete, immediate engagement with religious practice, interpretation and affiliation may serve many people well throughout their lives. Development in meaning-making is not

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Christian Smith, et al, *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 36.

[13] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 135ff.

[14] In this instance I refer to the *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, or *Godly Play*, both Montessori based modalities of religious curriculum.

[15] Kegan writes of this as the "borrowable mind" in that we look to trusted others, external to ourselves, to help us navigate things beyond our complexity. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 105.

inevitable, or desirable if one is never deeply challenged by a world that questions one's present meaning-making. In fact, some people age well beyond childhood, and never develop beyond the basic consciousness named above. However, most of us develop beyond this stage, prompted by the demands of important relationships to become less focused on self-interest and more attentive to the world around us.[16]

B. *Looking to the World Around Us: Gaining the "Socialized Mind"*

Historically, human communities have held religious life as important and even central to how they identify who they are in the world. Until quite recently, it has been normative in the United States that young people would grow in their awareness of and affiliation with religious life. Religious living has the potential to be both deeply interiorized and highly social. As we grow in the next moment of meaning-making, both the interior and the social become new frontiers for us. We gain what Kegan calls the "socialized mind." Religious living can take on new richness and meaning.

Cognition: As we move toward adolescence dramatic changes begin to happen in the way we make sense of the world. This change can be attributed to the significant neurological changes going on in our pre-pubescent brain, as well as the experiences of wider social spheres and expectations, what Kegan calls "culture's 'curriculum.'"[17] With the right challenges and supports, our cognitive capacities develop beyond the *concrete-operational* towards *formal-operations*. With this cognitive shift, we are able to perceive the more "invisible" realities of ideas, values, intentions, and relationships. Now actions are not simply actions, they are potentially filled with meaning and intention. This shift will transpire over years and can be refined over time if we experience the appropriate challenges and support. Both Fowler and Parks indicate a two step move between concrete-operational thought and systemic/complex.[18] The second step is a refinement, that is called *later formal operations*. In section C, below, I expand on this later stage. In this section I describe the abilities of *early formal-operations*.

Social awareness: The neurobiological changes of puberty bring on the capacity for self-consciousness, the ability to see ourselves as being seen by others. As we begin to recognize our inner lives, we start to attribute the same to others. What had been largely invisible begins to become visible, including relationships, social connections, other's expectations and the consequence attached to other's expectations. This awareness starts in broad, undifferentiated ways. We can't help but say things like, "Everybody knows…" Everyone is going…" Only when prompted will we stop to distinguish who makes up "everybody," recognize individual actors and the differences among them.

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[16] This is a discussion I take up in *Navigating toward Adulthood*.
[17] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 10.
[18] Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 179.

As well, we begin to perceive the social currency of our associations. The circumstantial associations of childhood become more chosen.[19] Over time we may learn that the relationship itself is important (i.e., it has intrinsic value). Kegan describes the shift from self-interest towards awareness of and concern for other in this way: "in order to get what they want for themselves they must learn, gradually and with understandable ambivalence, the need to take out membership in a community of interest greater than one, to subordinate their own welfare to the welfare of the team, even, eventually, to feel a loyalty to and identification with the team."[20] Increasingly we can hold an alternative point of view alongside our own, can learn to anticipate the needs and hopes of others, have sympathy for others and respond appropriately without prompting.

At the same time, we begin to expect others will be able to anticipate our needs and be sympathetic to our emotions, even if we never explicitly tell anyone what we need or feel. To a great degree, we expect others to see us and the world much as we see ourselves and the world. And while we are learning about social realities, we assume others experience these realities just as we do. For we believe our experience of these social realities is the way they are. Thus, there's a strong tendency to assume that the people with whom we associate are just like us. In fact, it can be surprising, even disturbing, when we discover that people close to us can have very different perspectives from ours.

Identity: We may still identify ourselves by what we do, what we like and with whom we associate, but our language becomes more self-referential. As an older child we would have said "I play the tuba," we now might say "I'm the kind of person who likes to play the tuba." Or "I can see myself as a member of a band." Our language indicates a shift in our self-seeing that was not possible when we were younger (Unless as an older child we were mimicking the language of a more mature person).

Religious agency and moral ordering: As adolescents, we are still largely driven by self-interest, but a concern for how others perceive us begins to hold sway in ways it never did before. This is why peers become important to us. We want to do what is expected by others, so as to fit in and build relationships. Most of the theorists speak of this shift as a recognition of and assent to "external authorities," but Kegan names it best when he identifies it as the ability to subsume one's self-interest to the interests of others and the relationships with others.[21] In a

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[19] We may begin to distance ourselves from some existing associations. This accounts for the social brutality we exhibit in our early to mid teenage years, when we drop childhood friends in favor of groups that seem more acceptable. It also can be seen in our pursuit of romantic interests that we believe will reflect well on us, without much regard for who the other persons are in themselves.

[20] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 47.

[21] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 47.

sense, our self-interest never disappears, but it is seen as bound up in the interests of others, and not in the simple tit-for-tat reciprocity we would have expressed earlier.

The attention to the expectations of others means that, at this stage, we can exhibit inconsistent behavior, depending on the social context. Within our religious community, we exhibit the behavior and attitudes expected there. But in a different setting, such as at a party with friends, we may behave quite differently, because that is what is expected then and there. Social media platforms further complicate things, as each is its own world with expectations! It can be easy to charge us as adolescents with a lack of integrity. Yet this inconsistency may be better read as a sign of our new ability to recognize and respond to the expectations of others, without worry about our personal integrity.

Along the way, we begin to recognize values. We take on an understanding of what it *means* to be a friend, a member of a family, a member of a community, a good employer, a good citizen, a religious person. We learn the values and expectations of others and, rather uncritically, take them on as our own values and expectations. Yet as we come to know what it *means* to be' something, we gain greater agency. We can learn moral frameworks and the religious values and intentions found within moral injunctions and religious practices. We can also transfer them to new contexts.

Now that we understand what is expected of us, and what we expect of others, we don't require constant instruction, but can use our imagination to fill in what is not explicitly directed. More importantly, we become self-directed, acting out of these expectations or values because it is the kind of person we want to be. On the other hand, if prohibitions or practices make no sense to us, nor to people important to us, or conflict with other values, we will not take them on as our own and will likely drop them.

Religious interpretation: Here is where we demonstrate what Fowler calls *Synthetic-Conventional* faith, where "beliefs and values which link us with [important others] take form in tacit, largely unexamined, unity."[22] We take on the practices, values, even language of the religious community, but don't necessarily question them deeply. We place our trust that this is "what we do" as a community. We begin to use the language and extend the values into our own actions, especially when we are acting in the community. Even "being a good Christian" can be vaguely understood as something we all do. This is especially true if the religious language is broadly available in our world.

It may be possible for us to extend the religious imagination (and all it entails) to other settings, if we have been prompted to do so or see the example lived out by others. But it is not something

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[22] James Fowler, "Faith and the Structuring of Meaning" in *Faith Development and Fowler*, ed by Craig Dykstra and Sharon Parks (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1986), 29.

that we will know to do automatically. In fact, we are more likely to believe that God's power is restricted to the world of religion and other powers function in other worlds (e.g., politics, economics).

Religious affiliation: Up to this point, our religious affiliations have been largely circumstantial.[23] Yet as maturation progresses, we begin to imagine and make choices to continue or stop; affiliation now means something; it has social value. We will stay if continued belonging is important to people who are important to us. For example, as a young Catholic, we may stay until we receive Confirmation because it's important to a grandparent, or it's held out as necessary to get married in the Catholic Church.[24]

Our appreciation of the community and what it stands for tends towards binary thinking: one is either in or out; good or bad; right or wrong.[25] Similarly, we may assume that all Catholics are like the Catholics we know and one is either like those Catholics or "a bad" Catholic.

Again, development in meaning-making is not inevitable or necessarily desirable. Those described through this section are aware of what it means to belong and be a member of a community, and may speak, in general, about the values and standards of that community. At this *early-formal operational* cognitive stage, we do not necessarily have a nuanced understanding of those values and concepts, and the ideologies that inform and shape them. When everyone in our world is doing and saying the same thing, there is no need for us to understand or rationalize practices, interpretations or affiliation. While this is an important developmental foundation for religious living, it is not likely to stand up to significant challenges.

However, today there are many challenges. It is at this moment when many of us choose to end our religious affiliation because it is no longer compelling, required, or socially expected; this is the first wave of disaffiliation.[26] Self-interest, or the draw to competing social groups will win out. However, we may inquire more deeply, investigating what was previously tacit. This can potentially cause a new way of thinking to develop that allows us to become more deeply committed within the community and within ourselves.

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[23] O'Keefe and Jendzejec argue, "it requires at least third-order capacity to knowingly affiliate or disaffiliate based on a conception of belonging beyond pure circumstance or self-interest. In third order, one develops the capacity for agency over one's affiliation as such." Theresa O'Keefe and Emily Jendzejec, "A New Lens for Seeing: A Suggestion for Analyzing Religious Belief and Belonging among Emerging Adults through a Constructive-Developmental Lens," *Religions* 11, no. 573 (2020): 4-5. doi:10.3390/rel11110573.

[24] In the Roman Catholic Church it is strongly urged that those baptized also be confirmed before marriage (canon 1056).

[25] Parks, *Big Questions*, 130-131.

[26] Robert McCarty and John Vitek report that the average age for disaffiliation was age 13. Robert McCarty and John Vitek, *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaliation in Young Catholic* (Winona MN: St. Mary's Press, 2018). Cary Funk and Greg Smith, *"Nones" on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2012).

C. From Circumstantial to Selected: Self-Affiliating

As we encounter religious plurality, secularity and religious disaffiliation, living religiously is not an unquestioned given. It must offer clear meaning and social value if a person is going to persist in the face of the constant challenges, which become more evident to us in later adolescence and young adulthood as our social worlds expand.

Cognition: As we mature, our capacity for *formal-operations* can grow more refined, if given the appropriate support and challenges. Beyond recognizing ideas, values, and intentions (simple ideation), we can begin to recognize and understand ideological thinking. Now we can see that actions and ideas are organized into systems; they are filled with meaning and intention that project a vision. Our shift to *later formal-operations* will transpire over the course of years, if it happens at all. It is best witnessed across the course of our undergraduate education. Therein we are being trained to distinguish among theoretical frameworks in various fields of study.[27] We can become adept at distinguishing between ideologies and we come to identify and align with favored ones. Within the world of religion, we may begin to identify and align ourselves with different religious leaders or theologians and how they articulate faith and discipleship. However, it is important to note that at this moment, we are not knowingly constructing our own ideological framework, but looking to trusted authorities.[28]

Even as there is still a need to look to trusted authorities, this move does reflect a shift in locus of authority, from exterior towards interior. Parks writes, "it does so most solidly by moving first from dependence on a *given* Authority to dependence on a *chosen* authority - still external but one that I now choose in accord with my own observations and lived experience."[29] While Parks and Fowler both point to this second "step" within formal operations, the interpretation of that step needs to be expanded upon for its value for religious education, for I believe it is in this transitional space that we see young people choosing for or against religious affiliation or switching communities.

Social awareness: Just as we get better at paying attention in the world of ideas, we also are better able to listen to and learn about the lives of those close to us. We grow the capacity to distinguish among individuals and become more selective about the kinds of people with whom we want to associate. While associations may still have social currency, now we are more solidly at the point where relationships are valued intrinsically, and partners, friends, and other associates are chosen for who they are in themselves. Similarly, it becomes important that we

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[27] Kegan identifies the "goal" of undergraduate education of settling students solidly within third order. Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*.

[28] Such knowing construction would be Kegan's 4th order capacity, and generally the goal of good graduate education.

[29] Parks, *Big Questions*, 115.

share values and perspectives. However, there is still an expectation that those we have chosen to align with see us and the world much as we see ourselves and the world.

Similarly, we are better able to distinguish among groups, better able to recognize what it means to be a member of one group or another. Thus our group associations become intentional and selected rather than circumstantial. We gain the capacity for self-affiliation.

When we belong to groups that are different from each other, we can move between pretty easily, adapting our behavior or expressions to meet each group's expectations. We will become more selective about the groups we align with, which tends to reduce the chance for conflict among them. At this stage, we have not yet recognized that we can be the arbiter of our own integrity. Rather, we "borrow" integrity from communities or authorities we trust.[30]

Identity: As associates are increasingly chosen, our sense of identity becomes increasingly connected to these relationships and groups. We may develop what Erickson called "fidelity" to the group and what it stands for.[31] Thus, our sense of meaning and purpose becomes associated with something larger than oneself.[32] In fact, at times we may downplay or hide any differences between the collective identity and our individual identity in an effort to fit well into the collective.

Alternatively, we may actively claim membership in a group because it coheres with important values or an aspect of our identity, whether religious, race, ethnicity, sexuality, or politics. In those cases, there's a strong sense of standing for something important. Because we have chosen this group for its vision and values, we frequently think that this is the best or only group of its kind worth anyone's attention. Overall, we can develop a strong sense of responsibility to our relationships and can take on leadership within them, following the leadership models provided.

Religious agency and moral ordering: At this point, we are able to recognize and critically evaluate moral frameworks. We make a conscious choice to be part of a group, ascribe to its values as our own, and follow its vision or theological perspective. We can be quite principled in our choices and be well informed in our outlook. It is at this stage that we can speak of having a strong moral framework and be very conscious of our choices and what we hope to achieve through them.

In fact, we can make effective moral and religious educators, communicating the values and intentions behind moral guidelines. If asked why we hold the views we do, we may offer a very articulate response. We can become deeply committed to certain religious practices. We can

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[30] Kegan writes about the "borrowable mind" that "supports third order consciousness in the regulation of fourth order tasks." *In Over Our Heads,* 105.
[31] Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1968), 233.
[32] Erik Erikson, *Identity*, 241.

make, as well, courageous and imaginative leaders. However, we will be doing so within an ideological framework designed by someone in whom we have placed our trust, like a religious leader or exemplar.

Religious interpretation: We are still in Fowler *Synthetic-Conventional* faith, but our beliefs and values are no longer tacit and unexamined. Now the practices, values, and language of the faith community and theological vision are claimed as our own. In fact, we can think critically about our stance, examine ourselves and others in light of its claims, and identify God's action and presence in light of its theological vision. But we look to our religious authorities to determine that theological vision.

Since our religious perspective is more consciously chosen, we may become more consistent, but it is an integrity born of the religious community's direction, not of our interior design. Similarly, we are more likely to extend the religious imagination (and all it entails) to other settings, if we have been prompted to do so, and have the model and companionship of others doing likewise. However, if we don't have that guidance or modeling, we may demonstrate deep sincerity for our religious worldview, but pick up other worldviews in alternate settings.

Religious affiliation: When we consciously choose to stay in the religious community in which we were raised, we can have a strong affiliation to that community and the values for which it stands.This is a deeper, more conscious choice than described in the prior section, and is reflected in a greater sense of awareness of and responsibility to religious living within the community.

However, this moment of meaning-making can also invite disaffiliation with our "home" community and affiliation with another. This can be prompted by some disappointment with the religious community in which we were raised. Perhaps it does not reflect the values we have come to see as important in life. Or the values the religious community professes stand in opposition to its other teachings or practices.

When such disappointment happens, our first tendency is to imagine, as we would have earlier, that the community we have always known is the only legitimate expression of religious living. We are either religious like they are, or we are not religious at all. Yet if we persist in our inquiry, we may discover how communities, even within a single religious tradition or denomination, can differ from one another and that diversity can be legitimate. Once that diversity is recognized, we may feel freer to affiliate with a community that is quite different from the one in which we were raised. This choice sometimes comes with a fear of disloyalty to or disappointment of family members or other important people. Yet, once the choice is made, we usually think we have made the best choice and wish others would join us in our new community.

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Whether we consciously choose to stay with the church of our youth, or we choose to switch communities, we are demonstrating an internal authority over our affiliation. However, we are still looking to an external authority (the theological or religious leaders) to direct that community. We are affiliating with a given ideological or theology community; we are not knowingly shaping the theological direction of that community.[33]

In the United States, most of the work of drawing adolescents and young adults into a conscious affiliation is being done by those religious communities living a more traditional expression of their tradition.[34] In a very obvious way, they are already standing apart from society in general and have learned to articulate their positions clearly and compellingly. I suggest that more religious communities, especially those with more progressive theologies, need to become more intentional about religious education that draws people to intentionally affiliate and choose to live a meaningful religious life.For to simply believe that "young people need to choose for themselves" ignores the nature of the choice - to belong or not to belong - and the supports they need from religious communities to make such a choice well. In the next section I offer ways of thinking about religious education at these three different moments of development.

IV. Religious Education Initiatives and Interventions

As we move to this final section, recall the image of the point-line-plane mentioned above. Each element is contained within the next, not lost but contextualized. I suggest we can think similarly about religious living and religious education. Religious living incorporates religious practices and moral behaviors, which become organized by religious values and intentions. Those values and intentions are in turn organized by the theological vision of the ultimate.[35] Depending on a person's capacity for meaning-making, they are able to recognize and participate in religious practices, values and ideologies. As a religious educator, it is helpful to see each of these as connected, like nesting dolls or concentric circles. For the first moment (A above), learners focus on the practices, while we articulate the values and intentions that shape them. For the second moment (B), learners begin to take on the values and intentions, as we articulate them for them, sometimes pointing to the theologies that ground them. In the third moment (C), learners can articulate the values and intentions, while we increasingly articulate the theologies that ground those values. At every moment, they engage with us in the religious practices which will grow more meaningful and more widely used to interpret their world.

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[33] Such is the capacity of the next developmental stage (Kegan's 4th order; Fowler's individuative/reflective; Parks' tested commitment).

[34] Katherine Dugan, *Millennial Missionaries: How a Group of Young Catholics is Trying to Make Catholicism Cool* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[35] "Similar to Kegan's analogy of point-line-plane...we suggest the schema of practice-value-ideology. This schema reflects the kind of elements found within religious traditions (practices, values, and ideologies) and organizes them from the concrete, to thematic, to complex/systemic. Each becomes the organizing principle for the previous, and an ultimate claim about life's sources and purpose becomes the highest organizing principle." O'Keefe and Jendzecjec, "A New Lens for Seeing," 5.

A. Setting a Foundation

Agency: Recall that the learner in this place can most easily learn about those things which are concretely expressed, like practices and moral injunctions. Do this; don't do that. The ideas, values and intentions behind those concretes are invisible. Therefore, the most appropriate intervention for forming religious belief among older children is participation in the life of the community. Concrete actions, including worship, reading scripture, sacred rituals, and service work, are all things that older children can participate in and contribute to in a meaningful way. Furthermore, immersion in the religious practices of the community is important, and something at which they can excel because of the more concrete nature of practices.

Interpretation: Even if they are most able to grasp the concrete elements and practices of faith, it is important to provide some rationale, so these things make sense. While it is important to use language that is understandable to older children, that does not mean "dumbing down" the faith such that it becomes a distortion. For it is unwise to teach something that will have to be unlearned when they mature. In fact, there may be elements to the faith tradition that are not possible for a young person to fully comprehend, such as paradoxes.[36] In such instances it becomes valuable to the young person if the adult can say why such things make sense to them as adults. In that instant, the belief of the adult serves as a useful toehold for the older child.

In fact, religious formation is most effectively done within a wider, intergenerational community that is doing likewise. If the older child can see that what they are doing (e.g., worship, prayer, service, moral actions, etc.) is valuable as well to older peers and adults they care about, they are likely to participate in and support those activities. However, if these things don't seem to be important to others, and the older child does not enjoy them, they are unlikely to carry them on when they don't have to.

Affiliation: As mentioned above, religious affiliation at this stage is mostly circumstantial. If this is where they are expected to be or invited to be by those important to them, they will likely be present. Adults may hope that the older child is driven to belong through some intrinsic motivation, but at this age our motivation is more immediate and extrinsic. If religious belonging and participation are valued by the people who are important to the older child, belonging carries weight and participation matters. Otherwise, if it is something adults demand of the younger child, but do not do so themselves, showing up in the religious community can seem arbitrary and just something adults make kids do.

B. Learning who We are

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[36] Christianity is full of such paradoxes, such as: "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt 16: 24-25, NAB).

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As young people gain in agency over their time and associations, the rationale, "Because I/the Bishops/the religious authority says so" no longer holds the sway it did with the older child. This is especially true if the adolescent does not have a significant relationship with the one offering the rationale. Therefore, through adolescence as ideas and social connections gain value, it becomes more important that things make sense and that communities stand for something.

Agency: Once adolescents gain the cognitive capacity to ideate, they want things to make sense to them. They begin to recognize and appreciate values, therefore the practices and rules of the communities have to be backed up by meaningful rationale. Even if they do not like the particular ruling, they can come to appreciate the value intended.

Engaging in concrete practices remains important, but now be sure to invite them into deeper engagement with them; allowing them to shape them, learning from the community but also sharing their ideas and perspectives as well. Draw them into a deeper engagement than is possible with younger learners: close reading of scriptures and traditions sources; engagement in service; developing worship; designing prayer experiences; learning and leading religious music and movement. Draw in the more mature agency of the adolescent and they will begin to experience their tradition more deeply. Colleen Griffith writes, "practice itself and give rise to insight and to heightened consciousness."[37] Inviting them to reflect on their experience of the practices invites the learner to discover their own insights and potentially contribute to the wider community.

Interpretation: As well as engaging in the practices, spend more time talking about the practices and moral actions: their history, their intention or aspiration; their connection to other practices. They can begin to appreciate moral frameworks and extend the values into new settings. Discuss the intention behind liturgical acts and roles and they can make new connections. Dig into the biblical texts to discover greater meaning therein.

However, it is not sufficient to simply tell learners what they should think or believe, as if it is simply content to be learned for some final exam. Rather, they are being invited into a way of thinking, seeing, and being in the world. Therefore, invite them to reflect on these things. Encourage them to use their imagination, so that they can begin to understand what it means to think and feel like a member of this religious community. Help them extend beyond the immediate and obvious and invite their insights and perspectives. Help them learn to extend their religious sensibilities to other settings and situations.

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[37] Colleen Griffith, "Practice as Embodied Knowing: Epistemological and Theological Considerations," in *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*, ed. Claire E. Wolfteich (New York: Paulist Press, 2014), 54.

Affiliation: As they also grow both on an intrapersonal and interpersonal levels, they begin to
see and name themselves as they believe other people see them. Similarly, they develop a social
sense such that it becomes important to them to fit in. As they infer social value is attached to
different associations, being a compelling community takes on new importance. This does not
mean the religious community needs to be following the latest or coolest trend. Chances are you
will never beat out secular producers of "cool."[38] Rather, they can be attracted to communities
and people who look like they are about something meaningful, that their presence and
contribution matter, and that you notice them and want them there with you.[39] It becomes
important to be intentional about forming relationships with them. They can be brought into the
community, not only for what they gain from it, but also as contributors for the sake of others.

C. Choosing with whom to Affiliate

Of the three positions named, this last position promises the greatest stability for living a
religious life in a secularized and globalized society. For it reflects the position of someone who
has the capacity to understand and make a choice for religious life in the face of the many
challenges of contemporary society. It reflects a more nuanced understanding of membership
within a community. The vision of that community and how that community's vision is
communicated through its values and practices. While still looking for direction from trusted
sources outside themselves, this position makes knowledgeable affiliation possible. Whether one
chooses to stay, leave, or switch affiliations, at this stage it is a choice made recognizing variety
within communities. Unlike the prior position, which allows for a very vague, generalized
understanding of what it means to be a member of a community,

Agency: At this moment, ongoing and deepening engagement in religious practices remains
important. However, particular practices usually rise in significance, reflecting the particular
theological vision of that religious community. Whether that's study of important sacred texts, or
regular practice of particular prayers, or practices of social outreach and justice. At this moment,
learners can be drawn more deeply into a personal relationship with the foundations and tenets of
the tradition. Not only can they deepen their affiliation with the community, they can be invited
to deepen their spiritual lives. For example, for a Christian, it would be very helpful to
investigate the biblical texts to become more intimate with the person of Jesus found there.
Furthermore, their spirituality and life of prayer should also reflect the relationship with God,
through Jesus, that will deepen and sustain Christian discipleship.

Interpretation: At this stage it becomes more important to consciously express the theological
visions of belief and belonging that ground religious life. As maturing persons, learners may not

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[38] This is an important claim of David White, in *Practicing Discernment with Youth: A Transformative Youth
Ministry Approach* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2005).
[39] I make this argument that youth need to be "seen, known and valued" in themselves in *Navigating toward
Adulthood*, 130-132.

immediately understand the difference between theological perspectives, but they can come to a rich appreciation of how the religious life of this particular community can be understood and expressed. Furthermore, learners can become more able to independently use the lens of religious life to read the rest of their lives, and the world in general. As they gain this capacity, they can become able spokespersons for the community and tradition. Also, they are more able to engage and share their perspective intelligently with those different from themselves .

Affiliation: At this point, the community and its leaders need to more obviously live out of the vision it professes. Furthermore, it can be very helpful if leaders consistently and frequently articulate its belief about what is ultimately held, and how that belief shapes the values and practices of the community. It matters that the community represents the values it professes, for the conflicts between professed value and lived reality undermine the community's ability to sustain rich affiliation.

Not only might learners be invited into deeper engagement with the community, they may also take leadership roles among their co-religionists. By being encouraged to take on such roles they grow more deeply formed in the life of the community.

Finally, as the individual grows the capacity to knowingly affiliate with a religious community, they can also decide to switch affiliations. A first affiliation, made consciously to a particular religious community, as described here, can in time lead to disenchantment with that community. If that is the case, they may switch affiliation to another community and perspective that is more in line with their understanding and vision for themselves as the individual is still looking outside themselves to the community to identify the vision.[40]

Conclusion

Constructive-developmental theory can be helpful for understanding how religious living can change dramatically over time. As we work with youth and young adults, these can be dramatic years for change in the person's meaning-making capacity, and so too their sense of what it means to interpret the world, affiliate and act in the world as religious people. Awareness of the differences can greatly enhance our effectiveness as religious educators, whether of young teens or young adults.

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[40] This is different from the next moment that Kegan, Parks and Fowler identify. Descriptions of these are beyond the scope of this paper, but briefly, these moments reflect the individual who can intentionally and with self-awareness, develop their own vision and practices within their religious tradition. This next moment is what is expected of religious leaders.

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Religious and Spiritual Influences in Adolescent Prosocial Cross-Group Interactions:
A Qualitative Study Among Students in Christian Secondary Schools

Abstract

This paper will look at religious and spiritual influences that motivate adolescents to show kindness toward their peers who are outside their friend group. Incorporating data from semi-structured interviews with 21 students from eight Christian high schools and relevant literature, this paper will show how presence, modeling, resources, and education contribute to adolescent prosocial cross-group interaction. This study acknowledges the many existing prosocial motivational mechanisms, religious and non-religious, and will share practical insights for communities of faith who wish to prioritize, encourage, and support acts of kindness among their teens.

Introduction

A central prosocial value in the Christian faith tradition is to treat others, especially those outside one's friend group, with kindness. As a religious educator who works with adolescents in a private Christian high school, I appreciate research that assists me in better understanding, encouraging, and supporting my students in developing prosocial behavior. This study asked the following questions: What are the religious and spiritual influences that motivate adolescents to behave prosocially toward their peers who are outside their social group? How do those influences operate in the complex and dynamic social world of adolescence? What can we learn about cross-group interactions from the stories of students who walk the halls of Christian high schools?

Prosocial refers to behavior that benefits others without expectation of reward.[1] As I prepared to visit high schools to recruit participants for this study I chose to frame the research in language more familiar to teens and used the term kindness. Definitions of kindness include many behaviors also included in prosocial behavior such as generosity, care, compassion, and doing good for others.[2] The Middle English origins of the word kind are related to the idea of kin.[3] On a deep level, kindness affirms that we are all of one common humanity which creates a strong motivation to be for others.

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[1] Paul Henry Mussen and Nancy Eisenberg, *Roots of Caring, Sharing, and Helping: The Development of Prosocial Behavior in Children* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1977), 3-4.

[2] Christopher Peterson and Martin E. P. Seligman, *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Handbook and Classification* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2004), 28. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/DTL/detail.action?docID=279797.

[3] Janet Martin Soskice, *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 5. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/DTL/detail.action?docID=415900.

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Religion is generally viewed as adherence to specific beliefs and practices while spirituality is often seen as an openness to, searching for, and discovering of the sacred.[4] Both concepts contain factors that influence adolescents within religious communities. This paper acknowledges the many existing prosocial motivational mechanisms, religious and non-religious, and will share practical insights for communities of faith who wish to prioritize, encourage, and support acts of kindness among their teens.

Methodology

This was a qualitative study with semi-structured interviews in which students were invited to tell stories about their acts of kindness for those outside their friend group. The narrative emphasis highlights the lived experience of students. Ammerman suggests that listening to stories about daily life can help us better understand the social shape of religious influences.[5] Hauerwas and Burrell argue that narrative is a more powerful way for people to frame their moral values and choices than abstract principles.[6] Rather than trying to ask students to talk about kindness in terms of moral principles, I chose to start with stories showing kindness in action and context. Out of these stories and conversations came observations about the spiritual and religious influences at work in the lives of the participants.

The structure of this research followed Osmer's suggested approach for practical theology which outlines four tasks with their corresponding questions: The descriptive-empirical task asks, "What is going on?"; the interpretive task asks, "Why is this going on?"; the normative task asks, "What ought to be going on?"; and the pragmatic task asks, "How might we respond?"[7] The descriptive work in this study privileged the experiences and voices of adolescents as they told their stories about prosocial cross-group interaction. In the interpretive task I used constructivism as a tool to challenge prior assumptions about adolescents and religious education and behavior.[8] However, my framework retained space for God to be present and active in the lives of the participants and in the normative work of theology.[9] In the normative task I created a dialogue among prosocial theories, selected theological and biblical works, and specific insights from the living texts of the participant interviews – all of which informs adolescent faith and practice. The pragmatic work looked for how religious educational leaders, youth ministry leaders, parents, and teens can shape practical responses that encourage and support prosocial cross-group interaction. My own experiences as an adolescent, as a religion teacher in a Christian school, and as a parent of three teenagers, positioned me in this

[4] Kin-Kit Li and Wai-Yin Chow, "Religiosity/Spirituality and Prosocial Behaviors among Chinese Christian Adolescents: The Mediating Role of Values and Gratitude," *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 7, no. 2 (2015): 150-51. doi:10.1037/a0038294.

[5] Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10.

[6] Stanley Hauerwas and David Burrell, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics," in *Why Narrative?: Readings in Narrative Theology*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1989), 175.

[7] Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2008), 4.

[8] Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *The Constructivist Credo* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2013), 29.

[9] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), 89-90.

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study. My interactions with the students in the interviews also provided part of the construction of knowledge and understanding about prosocial cross-group interactions.[10]

Participants included 15 female students and six male students in grades 10-12 from eight Catholic and Protestant schools in Southern California. Single setting interviews, conducted in 2019, ranged in length from 17-49 minutes. All participants demonstrated a clear interest in kindness but several provided negative case analysis by stating that religion and spirituality did not influence their acts of kindness. Warm-up questions invited each student to describe their social world. Students were then invited to tell stories about their own acts of kindness. Within these stories, students often provided statements or clues to their reasoning, motivation, and values. Follow up questions encouraged students to talk specifically about the role religion and spirituality play in their prosocial motivation and decision making. The final part of each interview asked students to speak directly on how to best encourage and motivate their peers to perform acts of kindness to others outside their friend groups.

Analysis began with emergent codes from interviews and codes created from the literature.[11] I looked for common codes and noted density but also looked for those stories and statements that indicated alternative viewpoints and unique experiences.[12] My approach to analysis was similar to Creswell's data analysis spiral in which the researcher learns by doing and circles multiple times around the tasks of reading, memoing, reflecting, organizing, and representing the product.[13] The narratives provided a thick view of how teens perceive their own motivation and action. The statements and shorter observations gave additional perspective on how teens understand kindness, motivation, and religious and spiritual influences.

Findings and Discussion

In my analysis of the interviews, four major themes emerged as areas in which religious and spiritual influences contribute to adolescent prosocial cross-group interaction: presence, modeling, resources, and education. Osmer's framework for practical theological interpretation provides the structure for this section.[14] Each theme contains several unique expressions that reflect the particular experiences and thoughts of the participants and also lead to suggestions for religious educators and parents.

Presence

Presence is the willingness to be with another person in a caring, attentive, and supportive role. Significant influences identified from the interviews include: God's presence; adults and peers functioning as tools of God's providence; and communities of faith that prioritize a comprehensive theology of presence.

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[10] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2013), 24-25.
[11] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 185.
[12] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 216.
[13] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 183.
[14] Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 4.

Presence: What is going on?

Peers positively impact each other with intentional presence. Lucy[15] chose to reach out to a girl who was quiet and isolated. She tried talking to her but that didn't work out so well so she just kept on saying "hi" to her everyday. Lucy wasn't sure how this girl felt and was pleasantly surprised at the end of the year. "I asked her to sign my yearbook and she did this really pretty design and she wrote, 'I really like you and I'm really happy that you said hi to me everyday, it made my day special.'" Lucy based her motivation to reach out in this story on the golden rule and her own ability to imagine what she would feel like in the same situation.

Adults positively impact students with intentional presence which can, in turn, motivate students to reach out to each other with kindness. Mr. Wilson was present for Emma by listening to her story of personal trauma, giving her a safe space at school, assisting her with food and transportation, and framing this kindness in the teachings and practices of the Bible. Emma described the impact of this ministry of presence by saying, "It's huge how amazing a man he is. He is one of the people I trust with anything in my life. And I want to be that person for someone else, and not just one other person but for many people." Emma shared her personal testimony in a school-wide chapel and many peers talked to her about their own similar experiences with trauma. She described how an informal ministry of presence grew out of this situation. "Like, kids have reached out so we all go and get in a car and we just talk. Whatever is in the car stays in the car, it doesn't leave. We call them car talks. So we just talk to each other, kids talking to kids."

Presence: Why is this going on?

God's loving presence, experienced as a mental and spiritual connection, can motivate adolescents to show the same loving presence to other teens. David says, "I'd say focusing on the love, having a connection with God and knowing that he loves us. Throughout all of the things through life, the bad or the good, knowing that God still loves us, helps me understand other people and what they're going through and to show that love to them because others have shown it to me."

God's presence, experienced through another person who shares kindness, can motivate and strengthen adolescents to reach out with similar kindness to others. When Anna was going through a difficult time in her life she was very sad and isolated. Her classmate, who wasn't a close friend, chose to reach out to her every day to make her smile and laugh. Anna describes this experience as an answer to prayer and a catalyst for her own choices to reach out to other isolated peers. "I saw that, me crying for help, it was answered. I was being heard. So I feel like I can go up to God whenever I'm in any sort of distress, even if I'm happy or sad, any emotion, and I can do anything with him by my side or watching over me. That inspires me to go out there."

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[15] All participant names and some narrative details have been changed to protect participant confidentiality.

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Presence: What ought to be going on?

The teens who told their stories about the powerful impact of presence open up a significant dialogue between the Christian theology of the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ and the actual practice of presence in Christian communities. Root critiques the traditional model of church-based youth ministry as a strategy of influence which, even when successful, can divide young people into ingroups and outgroups. In contrast, he presents an incarnational approach to youth ministry in which the clear priority is accompaniment.[16] Prioritizing presence in church and school communities accustomed to performance, competition, and social ranking ought to be a significant intentional commitment.

Destro and Pesce explain how Jesus challenged fixed social roles by granting each individual, regardless of status, direct access to him.[17] This model challenges contemporary Christian communities to address their social divisions. Schools ought to critique authoritative administrations, teacher-centered classrooms, and rigid adolescent social hierarchies.

Yong pushes the idea of Christian hospitality to include Derrida's play on the word host, indicating that the host is hostage to the visitor.[18] We cannot always be in charge of our prosocial acts. Yong challenges us to place ourselves in the service of others, hostage as it were, to their true needs and not simply acting on our ideas of what we think they need.

Presence: How might we respond?

Each community has the opportunity to listen first to their teens to see what God is already doing in their lives through his presence and celebrate and support this activity. Anna experienced an answer to prayer in her time of need and it motivated her to reach out to others on her campus. Adults and teens could intentionally create a community culture more attentive and supportive of God's presence in and through their lives. The story of Mr. Wilson and Emma highlights what is possible when faculty prioritize presence in word and deed.

Religious communities can increase kindness through presence by decentering the dominant forms of achievement and competition that make up so much of an adolescent's social world. Clark observes the pervasive nature of competition as it shapes children. "Today, even very young children learn that they are only as valuable as their ability to contribute. Rarely are youth activities, especially group activities such as sports and dance, safe places that allow children to explore latent potential, develop appreciation for a sport or activity, or even simply enjoy being involved."[19] Competition and the value of certain types of achievement have their

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[16] Andrew Root, *Revisiting Relational Youth Ministry: From a Strategy of Influence to a Theology of Incarnation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2007), 79.

[17] Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, "In and Out of the House: Changes in Women's Role from Jesus's Movement to the Early Churches," in *Gospels: Narrative and History*, eds. Mercedes Navarro Puerto, Marinella Perroni, and Amy-Jill Levine (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2015), 301. doi:10.2307/j.ctt175x2sz.19.

[18] Amos Yong, Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 120. http://search.ebscohost.com.dtl.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1901157&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

[19] Chap Clark, *Hurt 2.0: Inside the World of Today's Teenagers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 31.

place, but communities such as schools can begin to prioritize presence, accompaniment, and involvement in creative ways both in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities. Given support and encouragement, students are capable of leading out formally and informally in changing their culture to one of kindness through presence.

Modeling

Modeling is the representation of kindness in ways that are relevant, impactful, and inspiring. Significant influences identified from the interviews include: God's example; adults and peers modeling through deeds and testimonies; schools and churches modeling through religious symbolism, stories, and events; and communities of faith that comprehensively integrate word and deed.

Modeling: What is going on?

Adolescents are influenced by modeling in a number of ways, including peer pressure, social norms, and exposure to opportunities for behavior.[20] Several participants publicly shared their personal stories of how kindness shown to them helped them deal with trauma. In turn, they chose to reach out through their testimonies to help others. After they shared their personal stories their peers responded by seeking them out for help. Exposure to kindness in action can create that cascade effect in a community.

Parental modeling is one of the strongest influences on adolescent prosocial behavior.[21] John told a story about his grandpa helping homeless people and Alina declared that her mother is "the most kindest person that I could ever name on this planet." Even though Ashley didn't like how her parents forced her to accompany them to perform acts of kindness, she still retains an appreciation for what they were doing for others.

The teens in this study also noticed the other adults in their world and were able to appreciate the positive modeling and critique the negative modeling. Alina credits her coaches with teaching her how to care for athletes and lead a team's support crew with a kind and firm hand. Ryan appreciated the positive example that several pastors showed him at his local church. However, Ryan critiqued the adult members of his church for showing a negative model of judgment. "God wants us to do well but if we mess up, he says, 'It's okay, you can try again,' but the members of my church don't really give second chances, but if they do they hardly ever give a third chance."

Modeling: Why is this going on?

Mason and Lucy talked about how the example of Jesus motivated them to perform acts of kindness. Lucy said, "Spirituality is probably the biggest thing that motivates me to be kind.

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[20] B. B. Brown and C. Klute, "Cliques, Crowds, and Friendships," in *Handbook of Adolescent Development*, eds. G. R. Adams and M. Berzonsky (London: Blackwell, 2003), 336. https://web.archive.org/web/20191202015529/https://prsg.education.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Brown-Klute-2003-Friendships-cliques-crowds.pdf.
[21] Mussen and Eisenberg, *Roots of Caring*, 74-100.

Seeing all the things that Jesus did for other people…" Mason located his motivation for being kind in his identity as a Christian. "It's something we should do because we are Christians and want to follow in his footsteps."

Barry and Wentzel identify two motivational elements of friendship. They point to "affective quality and interaction frequency," as key factors in peer influence.[22] Anna's story of her classmate, who reached out to her every day in kindness, shows how frequency with warmth and caring influenced her to do the same for others. The affective quality of the relationship at home impacts the parental model as well.[23]

Peers and adults can also influence teens by modeling kindness and inviting someone to do it with them. Lucy described how she sees this working. "Even just saying, 'Okay, today I'm going to do this,' and then asking people, 'Can you help me?' and then including them in that activity. It helps them feel like, 'Wow, this is what it looks like!'" Alina suggests that religion teachers should just talk with teens about life and kindness. "A lot of students don't have the social skills to have a conversation with an adult about kindness or about morals or about beliefs and stuff. They're kind of shy and they wanna stray away from topics like that cuz teenagers are kind of scared to let their feelings out and talk about things. I think that maybe if we're just open from the start, teenagers wouldn't have that problem."

Modeling: What ought to be going on?

Jesus clearly states the task for Christian communities. "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you."[24] Jesus provides an example of love that extends across social groups to even include our enemies.[25] Volf acknowledges that while we may fail at times to love like Jesus, the motivation and vision of such love is a vital part of the Christian hope and identity.[26] When kindness is modeled in the Christian community, Jesus is present in a tangible way. Like Emma said, "But I think that when people show you kindness, it's him trying to say, 'Hey, I'm still here for you, lookit, I sent this person who is showing you kindness, who is showing you love, who is showing that they care for you. I'm here always and forever, like, please don't let go of me.'"

Noddings lays out an agenda for teachers that prioritizes a caring environment in which students learn, not just by content, but by process and modeling. "If what we do instructionally achieves the instructional end – A learns X – we have succeeded instructionally but, if A hates X and his teacher as a result, we have failed educationally. A is not 'better' as a result of our and his efforts. He can receive neither the teacher nor the subject as one-caring... He must be aware

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[22] Carolyn McNamara Barry and Kathryn R Wentzel, "Friend Influence on Prosocial Behavior: The Role of Motivational Factors and Friendship Characteristics," *Developmental Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2006): 161. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.42.1.153.
[23] Mussen and Eisenberg, *Roots of Caring*, 74-100.
[24] John 15:12 (NIV).
[25] Matthew 5:44 (NIV).
[26] Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 7.

always that for me he is more important, more valuable, than the subject."[27] bell hooks pushes the concept of a teacher modeling kindness to include both standing in solidarity with a student and showing a student how to do things differently.[28] Noddings and hooks both challenge the community of faith to make kindness and caring clear priorities in all that we do.

Rogers worked with teens to understand the role of stories in their culture and in their own ability to imagine a better world.[29] Just as personal testimonies open up new ways of seeing the world, storytelling, dramatic arts, and music can embody a positive and inspirational model of kindness. Rogers' work reminds us that a critical consciousness is vital for understanding and discerning the life affirming narratives from those that have a negative impact on society and teens.[30]

Modeling: How might we respond?

Religious communities can comprehensively model kindness in the way that each person, in their sphere of influence, treats people. This challenges teachers to not just be kind but to examine their pedagogy and classroom management strategies to create better models of kindness. This challenges school administrators to look at both their personal interactions with staff and students and also the policies and hidden curriculum that drive the school culture. This also challenges parents to reflect on how they treat their children even as they instruct them to be kind to others.

Adults in the church and school can prioritize mentoring students into positions of responsibility and leadership in the context of kindness. Often these mentor roles take place in the midst of curricular and extracurricular programs, some of which need a reorientation toward kindness. Religious communities can boldly prioritize kindness and collaborate – church, home, and school – to learn, model, and support acts of kindness.

Resources

Resources are those elements of social capital that empower adolescents to reach out and perform acts of kindness for others, especially for those outside their friend group. Significant influences identified from the interviews include: God's power; everyday acts of kindness; specific resources for particular needs; and communities of faith that prioritize making social capital available and accessible to students.

Resources: What is going on?

One type of resource that emerged in several of the interviews was providing support and help for mental health issues. When Hannah arrived at her current school she was coming from a school where she had been bullied and she was struggling with self-harming behaviors. The two

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[27] Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics & Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 172.
[28] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 89.
[29] Frank Rogers, *Finding God in the Graffiti: Empowering Teenagers Through Stories* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2011), 105.
[30] Rogers, *Finding God*, 105.

8

biggest resources in her recovery and in her motivation to help others were the caring faculty and staff at her new school and the caring medical professionals at the local treatment center. Hannah recognized that many teens do not have easy access to treatment centers and one of her career goals is to work toward providing more mental health resources for teens.

Resources also exist in how friendly the school is and how many social activities are available to bring people together. Caroline's senior class chose to change their school culture and befriend younger classes because they didn't like how they were treated as freshmen. When Alina and her friends started high school they chose not to join cliques or be exclusive in their behavior. They said, "We're going to be friends with everyone, our little group." Her friend group also joined the Associated Student Body, which was not cool at the time, and decided to make it fun for everyone. She says, "And now, everybody wants to do ASB cuz they finally realized it's the cool thing to do. I hate that phrase, 'Oh, that's not cool to do,' or, 'That is cool to do.' Everything's cool if you make it cool." Students like Caroline and Alina and their friends can transform parts of school culture from resource-less to resource-ful. Haag's research showed girls wishing their schools would create more opportunities to develop new friendships and give more support for healthy relationships.[31]

Resources: Why is this going on?

Hannah referred to God's power giving her courage to tell her testimony in front of the school and she points to God's power as the source of the wise counsel she is able to give her peers who seek her out for help. Anna draws on God's power to be the courageous one who will reach out to unpopular students and speaks of God's power helping her stand up to bullies. These students who see God's power as their resource are able to turn around and be a resource for others.

In many of the participants' stories, resources shared with them turned into resources shared with others. Schools where adults provide resources for students increase student engagement and school connectedness.[32] When teens find resources at their schools, they tend to add to those resources for others.[33] Social capital can influence adolescents through trusting and supportive relationships at church as well.[34] The nature of social capital appears to be that if people invest relationally in others, the capital grows and the profit is shared.

Pickering's ethnographic research in the Balkans shows how weak links between divided groups can lead to peaceful and cooperative relationships. These weak links are everyday

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[31] Pamela Haag and American Association of University Women, *Voices of a Generation: Teenage Girls Report About Their Lives Today* (New York: Marlowe, 2000), 64.

[32] Yael Kidron and David Osher, "The History and Direction of Research on Prosocial Education," in *Handbook of Prosocial Education*, eds. Philip Brown, Michael W. Corrigan, and Ann Higgins-D'Alessandro (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 64.

[33] Jenifer Cartland, Holly Ruch-Ross, and David B. Henry, "Feeling at Home in One's School: A First Look at a New Measure," *Adolescence* 38, no. 150 (Summer, 2003): 305, 318. http://search.proquest.com/docview/195943815?accountid=10143.

[34] Pamela Ebstyne King and James L. Furrow, "Religion as a Resource for Positive Youth Development: Religion, Social Capital, and Moral Outcomes," *Developmental Psychology* 40, no. 5 (2004): 709. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.40.5.703.

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opportunities to interact in helpful ways with each other.[35] Nora described a fun day on her campus that gives students opportunities to form weak links. Caroline also discussed how her school plans spiritual events at the beginning and end of each year that give opportunities for students to connect, form friendships, repair friendships, and increase the resources of kindness.

Resources: What ought to be going on?

A Christian theology of the church sees each member of the community belonging to Christ's body.[36] Volf explores this metaphor and emphasizes the biblical invitation to see all the members of the community as interrelated and in need of each other, yet remaining distinct individuals with appropriate personal boundaries and identities.[37] When Hannah came from public school to her new Christian school the campus was friendly, but she felt like she was the only one with problems. "When I first came here in eighth grade, it's like, I'm the only one with issues, like everyone has it perfect here. And it's a Christian school, everyone's great, everyone's happy, everyone has the perfect family, and like, my parents are newly divorced and I self-harm." Her own testimony in chapel as a senior appears to have broken the silence for other students who felt isolated in their struggles. Religious communities can offer a powerful resource to students when they seek ways to be intentionally open about brokenness and suffering and affirm a culture of interdependence.

Bolling cites numerous studies which highlight the damage that social exclusion creates for young people.[38] Therefore, encouraging inclusive behavior through the sharing of social capital should be a priority. However, Mary tells a cautionary tale about coming to her new school. A group of girls were friendly to her for the first few weeks but soon she realized that they never intended to fully include her in their group. Kamitsuka discusses problems of inclusion and exclusion and quotes Spelman: "[t]he power to include implies the power to exclude."[39] The challenge for religious communities is to transform relationships from the fixed use and abuse of power to the flexible and generous sharing of power. Moyaert and Jansen suggest a logic of abundance based on the generosity God has already shown us.[40] This abundance can transform relationships stuck in a power struggle for inclusion and exclusion.

Resources: How might we respond?

Churches and schools can intentionally create opportunities for adults to connect with teens in attentive and caring ways. Religious communities already possess the means for these connections but they are not always prioritized, planned, or supervised effectively. Sometimes

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[35] Paula M. Pickering, *Peacebuilding in the Balkans: The View from the Ground Floor* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 166.

[36] 1 Corinthians 12:12-27.

[37] Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 7.

[38] Danielle Z. Bolling et al., "Development of Neural Systems for Processing Social Exclusion from Childhood to Adolescence," author manuscript, Yale Child Study Center, Yale University (2011): 1-2. https://web.archive.org/web/20191202012310/https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4 457505/.

[39] Margaret D. Kamitsuka and American Academy of Religion, *Feminist Theology and the Challenge of Difference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

[40] Marianne Moyaert and Henry Jansen, Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 313. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/DTL/detail.action?docID=668978.

other priorities can crowd out these opportunities. In addition to formal interactions, adults can find simple and everyday ways to connect with teens in their sphere of influence.

Churches and schools can also prioritize the activities where teens can meet each other and form new positive relationships. Brody et al. point out that the classroom is a place where certain planned activities can randomly pair students forming connections that can serve as social capital.[41] These types of activities, curricular and extra-curricular, require time and careful planning and schools and churches often struggle to fit them in. However, such activities can be seen as vital to the overall growth and wellbeing of students.

Religious communities can work to increase resources for mental health and create openness regarding mental health issues. Removing the stigma of mental health issues may involve changing the very structure of how students are valued and seen on campus. Since Christian schools market whole person education, it is tempting for the school and its students to portray themselves as problem free – like Hannah first perceived her new school. "It's a Christian school, everyone's great, everyone's happy, everyone has the perfect family." Embracing brokenness, valuing everyone equally regardless of achievement, prioritizing love over status more closely resembles the biblical body of Christ.

Education

Education is creating a safe and inspirational space where intrinsically motivated kindness can be learned through action and reflection. Significant influences identified from the interviews include: God's guidance; pedagogy that develops the social brain; learning through experience, reflection, and leadership; and communities of faith that prioritize caring and kindness as both visible and hidden curriculum.

Education: What is going on?

Many participants built their motivation to be kind to others on biblical teachings. Mary said, "In school I'm having the Bible read to me and learning new bible lessons every day and I feel like I take stuff from that and I exhibit it in my character and it plays a role in where I go, who I talk to, what kind of things I do for other people." Emma described how Mr. Wilson connected the teachings in the Bible to social challenges and she felt it encouraged her personally and impacted the entire student body.

Ashley's story illuminates the struggle teens can experience moving from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation. Her parents taught her she must obey Jesus, but her response was, "Like, I don't really even know this guy and apparently I have to do all these things because this guy told me to do it." Attending religious outdoor camps Ashley gained experiential knowledge that Jesus loves and cares for her and now she wants to be like Jesus. She tells the teens she helps through

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[41] Salena Brody et al., "Compassionate Love for Individuals in Other Social Groups," in *The Science of Compassionate Love: Theory, Research, and Applications*, eds. Beverley Anne Fehr, Susan Sprecher, and Lynn G. Underwood (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 302. https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781444303070.ch10.

peer counseling, "because of the kindness that God has shown me, I would like to show kindness to you."

Challenges in real life and experiencing empathy can lead adolescents to unique perspectives on kindness. Chloe says, "I feel like most of the motivation comes from within us. It may be that going through tough experiences might help us be more understanding toward others and form more acts of kindness toward them." This life experience can produce some complicated decisions for teens. Valeria chose not to report a fellow classmate who she suspected was being abused at home. Her own mixed experiences with adults and social services led her to decide that saying nothing was more kind than saying something which could drastically upend her classmate's life. Without diminishing the vital role of social services, this story illustrates the complex role experience plays in adolescent prosocial behavior.

Education: Why is this going on?

A number of students referred to God's guidance working in their lives and through the lives of their peers. Landon describes the role his conscience plays in motivating acts of kindness. John shares his experience of the Holy Spirit guiding him in acts of kindness. God's guidance can come from within as well as from the Bible and encouragement from adults and peers. Chloe and Nora did not attribute their acts of kindness to God but rather the values of sharing a common humanity. Their perspective underscores Saroglou's position that both religious attitudes and psychological mechanisms can exist in motivating human behavior and it is important for researchers to try to understand the roles of each rather than set them up as mutually exclusive.[42]

Masten, Morelli, and Eisenberger's study using fMRI scans of the brain show that the regions of the brain, that researchers call the social brain, became activated when the participants observed social exclusion and felt empathy.[43] Ashley noted that when religion teachers show more than tell she is motivated by empathy to respond. "Seeing things that are so 'unright' makes me want to do something 'right.'" David told stories of reaching out to two classmates who each lost a parent because he had lost his dad when he was younger.

Ryan and Deci's self-determination theory shows how students are more likely to make values and behaviors their own when relatedness, competence, and autonomy are all present in the learning environment.[44] Students shared some of the challenges they face when they feel they are forced to be kind or when they don't feel they are able to do anything for others in specific situations. Other students emphasized the importance of parents and teachers who are caring, empowering, and who effectively teach kindness through example and practical insights.

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[42] Vassilis Saroglou, "Introduction: Studying Religion in Personality and Social Psychology," in Religion, Personality, and Social Behavior, ed. Vassilis Saroglou, (Hoboken, NJ: Psychology Press, 2013), 18. https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/dtl/detail.action?docID=1323297.

[43] Carrie L. Masten, Sylvia A. Morelli, and Naomi I. Eisenberger, "An fMRI Investigation of Empathy for 'Social Pain' and Subsequent Prosocial Behavior," *NeuroImage* 55, no. 1 (2011): 381-82. doi:10.1016/j.neuroimage.2010.11.060.

[44] Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci, "Self-Determination Theory and the Facilitation of Intrinsic Motivation, Social Development, and Well-being," *American Psychologist* 55, no. 1 (2000): 76. doi:http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68.

Education: What ought to be going on?

Noddings argues for all schools, secular and religious, to teach caring for others. She opposes the view that schools should only train the intellect and leave morality to the church or home. "It is not that these functions cannot be separated theoretically. It is, rather, that the human being who is an integral composite of qualities in several domains is thereby shaped into something less than fully human by the process."[45] Noddings claims that the values of kindness and caring should permeate all aspects of education including grading, discipline, curriculum, and how adults relate to each other and students.[46]

Religious education ought to exercise the cognitive functions of the social brain through specific pedagogical strategies. Day's research showed a very high correspondence between adolescents' ability to handle complex moral thinking and the application of multiple perspectives in addressing the actual moral dilemmas they experienced.[47] Blakemore shows that significant structural changes take place in the social brain throughout adolescence and argues that education ought to intentionally develop strategies that assist in social development.[48] Religious education cannot just tell students what they should know and what they should do but ought to create opportunities for social and moral problem solving and autonomous decision making.

Schools can begin to reform an educational system that favors competition over cooperation. Eisenberg shows a counter example from the subsistence culture of the Aitutaki. "If a fisherman caught more fish than his family could use that day, he would 'store the surplus in his neighbor's belly.' Then he and his family could expect a constant supply of fresh fish through gifts from his neighbors."[49] The Aitutaki principles of mutual obligation, caring, and concern match key principles in the Bible and challenge religious educational communities to rethink the role and nature of competition in academics. Schools seek to prepare students for success in the "real world" but perhaps we should prepare students to change the real world by changing our educational world to be more collaborative and caring.

Education: How might we respond?

Schools and churches contain enormous potential for connecting teens with adults who genuinely care about them and their world. Kidron and Osher cite research showing that positive adult influence on students translates to positive student engagement in school.[50] Prioritizing

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[45] Noddings, *Caring*, 172.
[46] Noddings, *Caring*, 186-201.
[47] James M. Day, "Narrative, Postformal Cognition, and Religious Belief," in *Religious Stories We Live By: Narrative Approaches in Theology and Religious Studies*, eds. Reinder Ruard Ganzevoort, Maaike De Haardt, and Michael Scherer-Rath, 33-53 (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2014), 45-46. https://doi-org.dtl.idm.oclc.org/10.1163/9789004264069_004.
[48] Sarah-Jayne Blakemore, "Development of the Social Brain in Adolescence," in Self- Regulation in Adolescence, eds. Gabriele Oettingen and Peter M. Gollwitzer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 199. doi:10.1017/CBO9781139565790.010.
[49] Nancy Eisenberg, *The Caring Child* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 79.
[50] Kidron and Osher, "Research on Prosocial Education," 64.

caring relationships in schools can have the larger impact of improving student learning and prosocial behavior. The challenge is for schools to embrace this priority, not as just another school initiative, but as a valid and sustainable goal, worthy of doing well. Schools who choose to partner with churches and parents can increase the potential for adolescents to grow in kindness.

Several stories told by students referenced religious events such as weekly assemblies, church services, and outdoor gatherings. Xygalatas et al. show in their study that religious primes, physical or verbal representations of religious concepts and values, enhance the prosocial behavior of generosity.[51] Cappellen, Saroglou, and Toth-Gauthier show in their study that the social aspect of attending mass in a community increased the emotion of love which increased the desire to share with others.[52] These events provide both space for God to work and for appropriately presented primes and socialization to work. Students are often quite savvy about what works and what does not work in religious programming and thus including them in planning and leadership roles can help.

Religious communities can involve students in planning and implementing prosocial initiatives. This could take the form of creating a culture of participatory action research (PAR). Ryan and Deci point to autonomy and competence as two of the three key elements contributing to intrinsic motivation.[53] The process of PAR equips and empowers the subjects of research as the ones who author and implement their findings.[54] Informally and formally, schools can invest students with real leadership roles that empower them to impact policy, curriculum, activities, and school culture. This research has attempted to give adolescents a voice to share with us what kindness looks like in their social world. PAR seeks to take the next step and empower teens to listen to each other and use action and reflection to initiate ways to influence their peers to be more kind.

Limitations and Future Research

All participants attended Christian schools, volunteered for the study, and indicated a prior interest in kindness and religious and spiritual influences. Future qualitative research involving a larger sample size including multiple religious traditions and non-religious world views could provide greater understanding of how complex motivational mechanisms work in the adolescent social world.

This study only used a single setting for the interviews. I found the single setting most efficient for securing approval for research with adolescents and for the scope of this study. More

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[51] Dēmētrēs Xygalatas et al., "Location, Location, Location: Effects of Cross-Religious Primes on Prosocial Behavior," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 4 (2016): 312. doi:10.1080/10508619.2015.1097287.

[52] Patty Van Cappellen, Vassilis Saroglou, and Maria Toth-Gauthier, "Religiosity and Prosocial Behavior Among Churchgoers: Exploring Underlying Mechanisms," *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26, no. 1 (January 2016): 19. doi:10.1080/10508619.2014.958004.

[53] Ryan and Deci, "Self-Determination Theory," 68.

[54] Tina M. Durand and M. Brinton Lykes, "Think Globally, Act Locally: A Global Perspective on Mobilizing Adults for Positive Youth Development," in *Mobilizing Adults for Positive Youth Development: Strategies for Closing the Gap between Beliefs and Behaviors*, eds. E. Gil Clary and Jean E. Rhodes (New York: Springer, 2006), 249.

14

real life qualitative data is needed to continue adding depth and nuance to how we understand prosocial behavior. Specifically, future studies can provide more ethnographic data utilizing a variety of sources and more narrative data with smaller samples and more narratives over time.

Future research could benefit from participant action research in which a group of adolescents in a school are trained and given support to do the study, analyze the data, and create action plans that could profoundly impact their own campus. Each young person is unique and yet teens share many things in common as they navigate this stage of life called adolescence. This marvelous group of people are interesting, capable, and dynamic. Their acts of kindness can inspire young and old if we give them the attention, respect, and support they deserve.

15

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19

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The Practice of Ignatian Discernment for Adolescents in the Age of Social Media

Abstract

The Church offers adolescents the horizon of God's love to shape their practice of meaning-making. The task of sharing this vision is challenged by contrary cultures that youth encounter in their engagements in social media. In response, religious educators and ministers can engage developmental theory and adapt positive youth development's proposals for promoting the thriving of youth through mentoring, skills building, and promoting agency. I propose that the practice of Ignatian discernment can be a site to adapt these proposals towards assisting youth in situating themselves and their decisions within Christianity's vision.

Introduction

Young people face the task of finding their place in this world and, in doing so, live meaningfully. Theresa O'Keefe refers to this task as the "project" of adolescence, wherein the young person is "called to move from the unselfconscious place of childhood to the more self-aware world of adulthood" and to navigate relationships more responsibly.[1] The capacity of young people to carry out this project is influenced by their socio-cultural context for better or worse. In the face of various broader cultures influencing them, they need a wisdom community who can offer a broad horizon to navigate this task. The Church is one such wisdom community who offers guidance through its teachings and practices developed through the years and the accompaniment of mature adults of the community.

Among the rich resources of the Christian tradition, this paper focuses on the practice of Ignatian discernment and its contribution to this task of older adolescents who are in the latter years of high school. This paper responds to the question: "How can the practice of Ignatian discernment aid adolescents living in the present Philippine context use social media in a way that is consistent with the horizon offered by the Christian community?" The first section presents the Christian vision of personhood and relationships that the community offers to adolescents. The second section considers the capacities for meaning-making and need for belonging of adolescents from a developmental theory perspective. The third section discusses some challenges posed by social media to the development and thriving of adolescents and the horizon offered by Christianity. The fourth section describes the role of the Christian community in sharing the Christian horizon to adolescents. The final section proposes Ignatian discernment as a developmentally appropriate practice can facilitate the integration of adolescents within the horizon of Christianity. This paper addresses ministers and adults in the Church that seek to accompany young people in this project by drawing from the life and wisdom of the Church.

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[1] Theresa A. O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood: A Theology of Ministry with Adolescents* (New York: Paulist, 2018), ix, 4, 60.

The horizon of the Christian community for adolescents

What is a horizon and its role in the project of adolescence? A horizon is a vision for understanding and valuing oneself, others, and the relationship in between thereby offering a sense of direction for how to live meaningfully in the world.[2] A short horizon may give the person a direction for the situation at hand; however, it fails to provide an all-encompassing vision to unify one's choices.[3] By offering a world of meaning, it shapes the person's choices and manner of living in the world.[4] Thus, one understanding of the project of adolescence is the expansion of the horizon of the adolescent through the process Gadamer calls "fusion of horizons."[5] In this ongoing process, the adolescent is engaging and situating oneself within a broader and meaningful horizon that is shared with a community. The Church as a faith community offers the horizon of God's abiding presence and infinite love as the person's central relationship that shapes all other relationships such that these are of love, mutuality, and justice.[6] It is through the lens of the Trinitarian God revealed by Jesus Christ that Christians come to an understanding of ourselves and others as persons and how to relate with one another. This vision offers a direction for how to live meaningfully.

The Church teaches that every person is *imago Dei*, which is often attributed to the biblical text "man and woman are created in the image and likeness of God" (Gen 1:26) and, therefore, is endowed with inherent dignity. Apart from this text from Genesis, Elizabeth Johnson states that through the Incarnation, "God has so identified with our humanity that each of us as human beings has been lifted to a dignity beyond compare."[7] The text "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (John 3:16) attests to the depth of God's love. God's love is the source of the inherent dignity and enduring value of the person that is contrary to the perception that one's value is earned through one's achievements or acquisitions or that some persons are more valuable than others. To speak of love of self and others, we need to pay attention to concrete bodies. Though marked differently due to gender, race, or socioeconomic status, we are called to recognize each person in their embodied selves as *imago Dei*.

O'Keefe draws from John Zizioulas's conception of personhood derived from the doctrine of the Trinity in saying: "[To be person] means three things: to be freely giving of oneself (not compelled by anything outside oneself); to be in communion, in relationship; and to be unique among humans in that free gift of self. The discovery of our personhood only happens in relationships of love."[8] This claim that personhood is discovered in relationships is in sharp contrast to cultural narratives that portray this search as a solitary endeavor, independent from other people.[9] To recognize oneself as beloved and, therefore, having enduring value can only happen in loving relationships with God and others. These relationships of love prompt a response of love.

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[2] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 8-10, 109.

[3] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 66.

[4] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011), 107.

[5] Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 306 as cited in O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 69

[6] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 106-10.

[7] Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 32.

[8] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 6.

[9] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 20.

2

We love by sharing ourselves freely and, in doing so, come to know ourselves and others as mystery. LaCugna writes, "To say someone is a person is to acknowledge that we cannot exactly and completely define him or her."[10] Persons are mystery and so discovering one's personhood in the context of loving relationships is an ongoing, lifelong endeavor. O'Keefe claims, "[W]e can say that the most profound and fundamental freedom for the adolescent—as for all persons—is the freedom to accept himself as gift of God, and to give himself as gift to another."[11] The Christian anthropology outlined in this section tells us that we, as persons, find meaning and fulfillment not in acquiring and achieving but recognizing ourselves as beloved by God and giving ourselves generously and fully in loving others.[12] Thus, all persons are called to right and loving relationships with others.

LaCugna proposes characterizing loving and right relationships based on the doctrine of the Trinity. First, like the Trinitarian persons, we are called to the free and generous self-gift to other persons in our relationships.[13] Second, LaCugna uses the image of the "*perichoresis*" to assert that uniqueness of persons is to be recognized and nourished rather than being lost in these relationships. Consequently, it encourages the flourishing of diversity among persons.[14] Finally, to avoid the dangers of self-giving that is utilized to promote subservient and unjust relationships, LaCugna draws from the work of ethicist Margaret Farley who broadens the understanding of self-giving to being "actively receptive" that "[frames] right relationships as mutual and reciprocal."[15] Such caution is necessary to distinguish right relationships from dysfunctional ones.[16] Furthermore, as liberation and feminist theologies point out right relationships entails protesting and working against individual actions and social structures that distort the foundation assertion of the dignity of every person and commit violence against bodies.[17] M. Shawn Copeland proposes the praxis of solidarity hinged on the self-donation of Jesus Christ that calls us to join the struggle of Jesus and the victims to end all forms of oppression and promote justice.[18] LaCugna's description for right relationships and Copeland's proposals for fostering right relationships are helpful guides for adolescents, who are becoming more conscious of the nature of their relationships and their capacity to shape these relationships, and the Church that seeks to nurture such relationships.

The capacities and needs for meaning-making of adolescents
The Church can accompany adolescents in this process by offering them a meaningful horizon that engages their meaning-making capacities. Sharon Daloz Parks writes, "To be human is to dwell in an ongoing process of meaning-making, to dwell in the sense one makes out of the whole of life—what is perceived as ultimately true and trustworthy about self, world, and cosmos."[19] Older adolescents are becoming more conscious of the need for a source of meaning

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[10] Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperFrancisco, 1991), 302 as cited in O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 8.

[11] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 42.

[12] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 58.

[13] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 54-55.

[14] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 55-56.

[15] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 57.

[16] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 55.

[17] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 50, 57-58, 66, 81, 89-90.

[18] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 99-101.

[19] Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 10.

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to guide their lives and their capacity to choose meaningful frameworks to situate their lives.[20]
The work of developmental psychology and constructive-developmental framework can help us
recognize their capacities.

Laurence Steinberg, who studies the cognitive development of adolescents, claims
adolescence is "a period of heightened plasticity . . . [that] allows [adolescents] to learn from
experience, it enables [them] to adapt to the environment."[21] At this stage, both positive and
negative experiences can have a permanent impact on the malleable brain and, thus, the
importance of an environment that facilitates growth by offering optimum balance of support and
challenge.[22] Steinberg identifies three "phases in the development of the adolescents brain."[23]
This paper focuses on adolescents in the last phase when "[they] get better at controlling their
impulses, thinking about the long-term consequences of their decisions, and resisting peer
pressure."[24] While having greater self-control and self-awareness, they continue to be influenced
by aspects of their environment, such as stressors.[25] The emphasis on fostering a suitable
environment for adolescents to grow in self-consciousness and responsibility for their actions
reiterates the call for the Church to nurture right relationships.

From a constructive-developmental perspective, Robert Kegan describes the gradual,
nonlinear shift occurring in adolescence until early adulthood as the transformation from the
Second Order of Consciousness, which operates on durable categories, to Third Order, which is
capable of cross-categorical meaning-making.[26] Considering the cognitive, affective, and
interpersonal faculties of the person, Kegan states the person operating on the Third Order

> can reason abstractly, . . . think hypothetically and deductively; see relations as
> simultaneously reciprocal; . . . can be aware of shared feelings, agreements, and
> expectations that take primacy over individual interests; . . . can internalize another's
> point of view in what becomes the co-construction of personal experience, thus creating
> new capacity for empathy and sharing at an internal rather than merely transactive level;
> coordinate more than one point of view internally.[27]

Kegan's work can be supplemented by James Fowler's study on faith development, which
recognizes similar cognitive capacities among adolescents. For Fowler, adolescents have
capacity for synthesis and awareness of their interiority, and they begin consciously constructing
their identity and worldview by drawing from their own stories and values often derived from a
community of belonging.[28] They are endowed with the capacity to recognize and communicate
the values of this community to others and to choose to affiliate or disaffiliate with this
community.[29]

The shift from one order of consciousness to the next does not lead to disappearance of previous
capacities rather they become subsumed under new capacities. Kegan further describes these

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[20] Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams*, 10.

[21] Laurence Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity: Lessons from the New Science of Adolescence* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2014), 21, 24.

[22] Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity*, 27-31, 35.

[23] Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity*, 69.

[24] Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity*, 71.

[25] Steinberg, *Age of Opportunity*, 84-85.

[26] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 28-29.

[27] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 30-31.

[28] Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 47.

[29] Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 47.

4

shifts through the notions of 'object' and 'subject.' "'Object' refer to those elements of our knowing" that the individual are conscious of, can reflect on, and, therefore, can be the object of one's choices.[30] In contrast, "'[s]ubject' refers to those elements of our knowing or organizing that we are identified with, tied to, fused with, or embedded in."[31] An individual on Second Order can name and communicate their point of view on a matter at hand, which at that point is a subject, and can recognize another person's point of view as similar or different from one's own. However, they struggle to recognize the value and validity of the other person's differing perspective as they hold onto their own. The shift to Third Order allows persons to recognize their point of view as an object to be situated within the notion of mutual interests where different points of view are valued.[32] This consciousness and its implications for the one's capacity to empathize with others are essential for being responsible in interpersonal relationships and in society.

To facilitate this shift from Second Order to Third, adolescents need a holding environment that offers a balance of support and challenge.[33] Such environments set within a community would have to tap into the adolescent's initial desire for self-enhancement or interests. Through commitment to endeavors, they gradually see beyond themselves, identify with the group, and start caring for others as persons of value.[34] Kegan's proposal for an appropriate environment can be supplemented by the studies in the field of Positive Youth Development (PYD) that studies the different elements in the context or environment and individual strengths that could contribute to the thriving of young people. According to Richard Lerner et al., the three key ecological assets in the PYD conceptual framework are "positive and sustained positive relationships between youth and adults," "activities designed to build important life skills," and "opportunities for youth to use these life skills as both participants in and as leaders of valued family, school, and community activities."[35] Both Kegan and PYD studies highlight the need for positive relationships wherein adults accompany and assist adolescents in the interpretative work necessary to relate with others responsibly and to recognize their agency and skills and an environment wherein they are encouraged to offer their perspective and use their skills for their personal development and to contribute to the well-being of a broader community. The Church should attend to these observations on the capacities for meaning-making and needs of adolescents in offering God as their ultimate horizon and the holding environment for coming to know themselves and others as beloved and to recognize aspects of dominant culture that challenge these claims.

Challenges posed by social media to adolescents
Social media as a medium for engaging the broader cultural context can support or hinder the development of adolescents, particularly growth that is consistent with the aforementioned understanding of personhood in the Church. The youth in the Philippines are often on social media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. A study in 2019 claims that "[f]or

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[30] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 32.

[31] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 32.

[32] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 28-32.

[33] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 42-43.

[34] Kegan, *In Over Our Heads*, 47.

[35] Richard M. Lerner et al., "Positive Youth Development in 2020: Theory, Research, Programs, and the Promotion of Social Justice," *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 31, no. 4 (2021): 1122, https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12609.

the 4th straight year, the Philippines is top in worldwide social media use."[36] The widespread and constant use of social media influences these youth's development, including their perception of themselves and others and, for this reason, the Church should consider it in their ministry to youth. Pope Francis observes that young people are "living in a highly digitalized culture that has had a profound impact . . . on [their] self-understanding, [their] understanding of others and the world, and [their] ability to communicate . . . and enter into relationship with others."[37] I propose considering three aspects of the cultural context in the Philippines in relation to engagement with social media, namely, the culture of consumption, cancel culture, and polarizing approaches to social issues. I ask: Do they contribute to an appropriate holding environment? What are the notions of personhood and interpersonal and social relationships do they promote?

Though set in the American context, the work of Angela William Gorrell that describes how the dominant culture of consumption coupled with social media shapes the young people's sense of value of oneself and others is applicable to youth in the Philippines.[38] The culture of consumption has undeniable influence on Filipinos. The sociologists Sarah Webb and Anna Pertierra observe:

> Mass consumption shapes the lives of most Filipinos, whether they are regular shoppers in the country's many shopping malls or working as scavengers on rubbish sites. . . . It is no exaggeration, therefore, to suggest that Filipinos are deeply immersed in consumer capitalism, and that such consumer capitalism shapes the lives of the very rich and the very poor—and the growing middle class in between—in different but equally important ways. In the Philippines, socioeconomic relations that result from deeply uneven market engagements have long made consumption a moral affair.[39]

The culture of consumption operates on the narrative that the person's happiness is dependent on what one consumes, which is promoted and reinforced through social media, and, consequently, promotes a provisional sense of self value in imaging oneself and others as brands.[40] This culture not only affect young people's interpersonal relationships but also their social relationships. At its worse, Gorrell says, "[W]hen we consume without concern for who it affects, and when our consumption has no boundaries, it contributes to dehumanization, exploitation, violence, poverty, and suffering."[41] It promotes unreflective purchasing practices that does not consider how one's purchase may be produced through unjust labor practices in poorer countries.[42] The culture of consumption promotes an understanding of the person and one's relationship with others that is contrary to the enduring sense of value of every person and the call to right relationships that are constitutive of the horizon of God's infinite love.

The cancel culture and the polarizing discourses online, particularly in relation to politics, influences how adolescents engage with other people, whether these are persons they have met in

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[36] Gelo Gonzales, "Filipinos spend most time online, on social media worldwide – report," *Rappler*, January 31, 2019, https://rappler.com/technology/philippines-online-use-2019-hootsuite-we-are-social-report.

[37] Francis I, *Christus Vivit*, § 56.

[38] See: Angela Williams Gorrell, *Always On: Practicing Faith in a New Media Landscape* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 55-82.

[39] Sarah Webb and Anna Cristina Pertierra, "Some Dilemmas of Political Consumerism: Class and Ecotourism Practices in the Philippines" in *The Oxford Handbook of Political Consumerism*, eds. Magnus Boström, Michele Micheletti, and Peter Oosterveer (Oxford, UK: Oxford University, 2018), chap. 34, doi: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190629038.013.29.

[40] Gorrell, *Always On*, 59-60, 78-80.

[41] Gorrell, *Always On*, 64.

[42] Gorrell, *Always On*, 74.

person, have only communicated with online, or have no direct interactions with. Cancel culture is the practice of calling out, excluding, or dismissing someone who has done something that is perceived to be unjust or unethical.[43] The barometer for what is considered wrong is dependent on the person using social media and with enough like-minded people expressing their opinion someone can be considered "cancelled." Cancel culture affects both interpersonal relationships and individual's participation in civil society. As Pope Francis observes, relationships that are mediated through social media that have its limitations in developing "authentic interpersonal relationships . . . and blind [them] to the vulnerability of another human being and prevent [them] from [their] own self-reflection."[44] In the area of civil engagement, David, San Pascual, and Torres' study on the influence of Facebook as the main medium for news access on political engagement in the Philippines depicts how its use gives people a false sense of greater political knowledge when in fact the algorithms of the platform limit news in their feed to those that are popular in their social networks, thus, creating echo-chambers.[45] Apart from its algorithms creating echo-chambers, Agnes Brazal explains that

> [Facebook] enable[s] the polarizing approach of populism . . . [through other features, namely, allowing persons can have access to] multiple accounts under fake [or stolen] names [through] [t]he combination of visual anonymity, mobility, and the virtual nature of computer-mediated communication, . . . not sufficiently policing professional trolls [who disseminate fake news], . . . [and allowing] the use of 'social bots' [that increase perceived] public support for a particular candidate or opinion.[46]

David, San Pascual, and Torres' study also shows that the perceived increase in political knowledge did not correlate with an increase in political engagement.[47] The prevalence of cancel culture and echo-chambers in social media platforms bring only like-minded people together and does not foster dialogue with other views. As such, it does not foster empathy and the capacity to value the views of other people as part of the process of discerning what contributes to the common good. By keeping persons among like-minded people, they are less likely to hear about the needs of those from a different position and, consequently, fail to respond to their needs. Cancel culture does not recognize the inherent value of persons, wherein their significance is reduced to particular actions, and does not make space for forgiveness. In these examples, the way interpersonal and social relationships are mediated by digital platforms do not promote Christianity's vision for relationships.

The Church should assist adolescents in navigating this context where certain cultural aspects are dehumanizing and polarizing. This does not mean that people are called to abandon the digital platform, which remains an avenue for formation, but the Church should recognize the ways they influence behavior negatively. Similarly, the Church also need to encourage promising signs such as young people organizing for various advocacies and protests against unjust

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[43] Allyson Tutay, "[OPINION] The problem with cancel culture, virtue signaling, and everything in between," *Rappler*, June 8, 2020, https://www.rappler.com/voices/imho/263196-opinion-problem-cancel-culture-virtue-signaling/https://www.rappler.com/voices/imho/263196-opinion-problem-cancel-culture-virtue-signaling/.

[44] Francis I, *Christus Vivit*, §§ 88, 90. See: O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 32-39.

[45] Clarissa C. David, Ma. Rosel S. San Pascual, and Ma. Eliza S. Torres, "Reliance on Facebook for news and its influence on political engagement," *PLoS ONE* 14, no. 3 (March 19, 2019): e0212263, http://dx.doi.org.proxy.bc.edu/10.1371/journal.pone.0212263.

[46] Agnes M. Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-Postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019), 153-55.

[47] David, San Pascual, and Torres, "Reliance on Facebook for news and its influence on political engagement," e0212263.

7

practices in society through social media in the context of the pandemic. To share in the horizon of Christianity, adolescents need to be accompanied to grow in their capacity to empathize and respect the other, regardless of differences. Furthermore, the Church must assist them by offering models who embody their commitment to promoting the dignity of persons and opportunities for the praxis of solidarity with the marginalized in society.

The Church sharing the Christian horizon to adolescents

The Church is a place for ongoing formation of young people—and all persons—in relating responsibly. The Church seeks to foster right relationships of empathy, respect, mutuality, reciprocity, and solidarity in the community and to relate similarly with people beyond the community.[48] Young people learn to love because they have experienced the grace of God's unconditional love through loving relationships with others.[49] Pope Francis reminds the Church: "Young people need to be approached with the grammar of love, not by being preached at. The language that young people understand is spoken by those who radiate life, by those who are there for them and with them."[50] The Church needs to build a suitable environment for the youth to feel welcomed, even those who have a different vision for life.[51] Considering the capacities and needs of adolescents from the lens of constructive-development theory and Positive Youth Development theory, adolescents can grow in sharing this vision through having opportunities to exercise their agency towards this vision and to have positive relationships with adults, which I will call mentoring relationships, that offers support and challenge.

Young people need to be heard in the Church and to recognize that their participation enriches the life of the community. Sharon Ketcham writes, "A reciprocal church values mutuality and makes giving and receiving a central practice in its community's life."[52] Young people need opportunities to share their faith and responsibilities with the community according to their capacities.[53] Pope Francis calls the Church to recognize the ingenuity and passion of young people and how they can take a more active role in evangelizing, particularly among peers.[54] Beyond the community, the Church can encourage to engage in their interpersonal relationships and participate in society in a way that reflects the Christian notion of personhood and right relationships.

The support of young people in exercising their agency needs to be coupled with accompanying and guiding them, particularly through mentoring relationships that also reflect mutuality. To serve as mentors to young people, adults need to develop trusting relationships with them. O'Keefe explains that such relationships help them grow by exhibiting transparency in communicating the expectations regarding their actions, taking time to accompany them as they gradually learn to responsibly relate with others, and treating them with care and respect to affirm their enduring value.[55] Overtime these robust relationships need to be characterized by the exchange of listening and speaking, the space for forgiveness and reconciliation, and respect for

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[48] See: Sharon Galgay Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church: Becoming a Community where Faith Flourishes Beyond High School* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2018), 108-124.

[49] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 58.

[50] Francis I, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to Young People and to the Entire People of God *Christus Vivit* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), § 212.

[51] Francis I, *Christus Vivit*, §§ 218, 235.

[52] Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church*, 119.

[53] Ketcham, *Reciprocal Church*, 119-122.

[54] Francis I, *Christus Vivit*, §§ 202-03, 230.

[55] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 93-97.

8

the dignity of every person.[56] Apart from these qualities, mentors are also called to be sincere in seeking holiness manifested in commitment to the common good, caring for the poor, and living with integrity, while being honest about their shortcomings to serve as good companions to young people.[57]

The practice of Ignatian discernment for adolescents

The practice of Ignatian discernment can be the space for mentoring relationships to offer guidance, support, and challenge to young people in the Philippines as they navigate their use of social media. For St. Ignatius of Loyola, the practice discernment is essential for one's life of faith in God.[58] There are two distinct kinds of discernment in Ignatius' practice: "discernment of spirits and the discernment of God's will."[59] Barton Geger defines "discernment of spirits" as "the process in which people analyze their own thoughts, emotions, and desires—or they analyze someone else's—in order to determine their quality and origin. Which ones come from God, which come from the enemy, and which from a human source?"[60] The Rules for the discernment of spirits in the Spiritual Exercises outlines ways to identify the source of these movements and the appropriate responses for the person of faith.[61] Dean Brackley describes two key "emotional states" discussed in the discernment of spirits:

> 'Spiritual consolation' refers to the peace and joy that arise from our center and affect our interior state as a whole. . . . [It] releases new energies, widens our vision, and directs us beyond ourselves. . . . [W]e feel God attracting us (cf. John 6:44), touching us. . . . Desolation is sadness and inner turmoil, . . . a disturbance arising from deep within and therefore touching us globally. . . . [It attracts us] to the gospel of satisfaction [and draws us] backward into ourselves.[62]

The "discernment of God's will," according to Geger, "is about making choices to act. That is, when Christians have two or more good options that they can do in the service of God, which does God invite them to desire and choose?"[63] The main criterion should be "that which serves the more universal good, i.e., that which makes the widest impact."[64] In this discernment, God is calling us to participate in God's saving work by considering how God directs our deepest desires towards greater service to others.[65] To discern what serves this purpose in a given situation, the person is called to pay attention to one's emotions, thoughts, and desires and to use one's reason.[66] Brackley adds that the practice of discerning God's will today should be coupled with efforts to grow in moral sensitivity towards the structures of sin that perpetuate oppression

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[56] O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 123-127.

[57] Francis I, *Christus Vivit*, § 246; O'Keefe, *Navigating toward Adulthood*, 117-119.

[58] Barton T. Geger, ed., *A Pilgrim's Testament: The Memoirs of Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Parmananda R. Divarkar (Chestnut Hill, MA: Institute of Jesuit Resources, 2020), 11.

[59] Geger, ed., *A Pilgrim's Testament*, 11.

[60] Geger, ed., *A Pilgrim's Testament*, 11. The "enemy" refers to Satan and the devil that seeks the destruction of persons.

[61] See: St. Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University, 1951), §§ 313-336, http://spex.ignatianspirituality.com/SpiritualExercises/Puhl.

[62] Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 48-49.

[63] Geger, ed., *A Pilgrim's Testament*, 11.

[64] Barton T. Geger, "What *Magis* Really Means and Why It Matters," *Jesuit Higher Education* 1, no. 2 (2012): 18.

[65] Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 144-145.

[66] Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 152.

9

in our world.[67] Following the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, a person ought to practice of the discernment of God's will and discernment of spirits accompanied by someone who can assist in sifting through one's inner movement.[68]

The practice of Ignatian discernment is a developmentally appropriate practice for adolescents. The Synod of Bishops and Pope Francis proposed the practice of discernment found in different spiritualities of the Christian tradition in accompanying the young people towards orienting themselves and their lives towards God.[69] This practice is learned gradually and with the guidance and accompaniment of spiritually mature adults in the Christian community, who can serve as mentors. Mentoring relationships, characterized by respect for the young person's agency, care for the whole person, and service of God and others, are the ideal context for learning the art of discernment.[70] These relationships encourage adolescents to see the reciprocity in relationships and the exchange with the mentor helps them engage a different perspective interacting with their own, which are characteristics of Third Order mind. As such, these relationships contribute to making the Church a suitable holding environment to facilitate their development. Mentors encourage and assist them in recognizing how God is personally speaking to them and moving in their own lives through the discernment of spirits and how they are being called to participate in God's redemptive work in the world through the discernment of God's will. To recognize these ways of finding God's presence and responding to God in their own lives is a call for Christians throughout their lives. Considering Steinberg's observation of the adolescent brain's heightened plasticity, adolescence is an opportune time for mentors to assist them in learning this practice.

This practice of discernment along with mentoring relationships can assist young people in navigating the aforementioned challenges to the Christian vision in the Philippine sociocultural context. The culture of consumption that pervades their lives online and offline tells them to equate one's value and the value of others on the possessions and recognition they acquire. It also prompts them to consume without considering how this affects other people, especially the poor who are forced to work in subhuman conditions. In response, the Church should invite adolescents to participate in its prophetic role in the world, that is, to be persons that honor the dignity of every person and live in right relationships. For Walter Brueggemann, to be prophetic the Church ought to both "criticize in dismantling the dominant consciousness . . . [and] energize persons and communities by its promise of another time and situation toward which the community of faith may move."[71] The discernment of spirits can assist adolescents in exercising their prophetic role by helping them identify and respond to inclinations that could hinder this task. This helps them to recognize the temptation to go with the flow of the dominant culture as leading one away from responding to God's call to build right relationships and,

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[67] Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times*, 157.

[68] St. Ignatius wrote the Spiritual Exercises with the intention of giving them in the context of a retreat where the retreatant is accompanied by a spiritual director. The 17th annotation at the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises speaks about the importance of being transparent about one's inner movements with one's spiritual director to discernment the movements of the spirits. St. Ignatius, as seen in his letters, and practitioners of Ignatian spirituality today recognize the value of practicing the two kinds of discernment in daily living where the importance of transparency with a spiritually mature and trusted companion will also be essential.

[69] XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *Final Document of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), §§ 104-105; Francis I, *Christus Vivit*, §§ 283-286.

[70] Francis I, *Christus Vivit*, §§ 291-295.

[71] Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2018), 3.

therefore, to act decisively in going against these temptations. Considering the consumerist culture, a young person may be invited to reflect on what are their motivations for their posts or how do "likes" in Facebook affect their sense of self-worth and their perception of others. If they see that these do not affirm their and other's inherent value, then they may opt to take time off from Facebook or to turn to other activities or interactions with peers that do not have this effect on them. The cancel culture and polarizing discourses on political issues also call for similar self-reflection. At times, it may seem that these actions are rooted in good intentions such as speaking against injustice or correcting fake news, but, as Ignatius' Rules point out, even good intentions need to be discerned, particularly if these actions truly bear good fruit. Cancel culture does not make space for forgiveness and reconciliation that are called for right relationships. Mindful of how polarizing discourses prevent people from constructive engagement and to hear from one another, actions that further divide should be resisted. A commitment to the truth is not only about correcting fake news but also promoting right relationships.[72] In the same vein, one should resist the comfort of political echo-chambers by intentionally being in dialogue, where mutual listening happens, online or offline with persons or groups who have a different point of view on a social issue.[73] This reflective practice of discernment assists adolescents towards being less impulsive and more intentional and responsible for their daily choices. Overtime this helps them recognize and resist unhealthy behaviors towards healthier engagements in social media. Following the rules of St. Ignatius helps them grow in their capacity to be responsible for their actions, to care for other's well-being, and to build right relationships with others.

The discernment of God's will can be engaged by adolescents as individuals or members of a community or a group. As a discernment between two good choices, it can be way for adolescents to consider how they are being called to direct their passions and gifts in the service of the Church and society and even how they are called to respond to socio-cultural challenges posed by social media use in their particular contexts. As mentioned, mentors can assist adolescents in recognizing these gifts. Peers can discern together how they can resist any cultural practices, such us the cancel culture, that do not recognize the enduring value of persons and that sow division and prevent productive dialogue. They can also offer each other support in this commitment. To encourage them to discern respects their agency and to use it to contribute to the Church's communal discernment. The constant practice of the discernment of spirits and discernment of God's will are means for adolescents to make choices in social media use guided by God's abiding presence and unconditional love as their ultimate horizon.

Conclusion
The Church can assist adolescents in practicing Ignatian discernment that engages their meaning-making capacities. Discernment involves noticing and analyzing one's inner movements towards making decisions, including their experience and engagement in social media, that participate in God's work of bringing forth human flourishing. This practice can help young people sift through actions stemming from good intentions such as promoting social justice to determine which ones truly serve that end. It can also assist them in making commitments as individuals or as communities to resist cultures that are inconsistent with the Christian vision of personhood and right relationships. Discernment is learned gradually with accompaniment of spiritually mature adults in the Christian community, who can serve as mentors or mentoring communities that respect the gifts and agency of youth. The practice of Ignatian discernment assists

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[72] Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-Postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines,* 160.
[73] Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-Postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines,* 162-63, 168.

adolescents to use social media in a way that situates themselves, others, and their relationships in the horizon of God's enduring love.

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They Grow Up (and Leave) So Fast:
Responsive Religious Education for Disaffiliating Youth

Abstract
This paper addresses concretely and contextually the questions of how religious education is shaped and who does the shaping, discussing them with an eye to current experiences of ministering with young people at the boundaries of religious affiliation. Following an exercise of listening pastorally to young people, the paper builds on recent work on pastoral accompaniment to present a proposal for an approach to religious education in parishes and schools that is dialogical and responsive to the existential, psychological, and spiritual needs of learners.

Introduction

It is no longer news to anyone that young people are leaving the Catholic and mainline Protestant churches in droves.[1] Their exodus has precipitated much anxiety among parents for their children and among pastors and parish catechetical leaders about their programs. Today one often hears questions raised like "How do we keep young people in the church?" or "How do we get them back?" While I generally assume that such questions spring from a genuine desire for the spiritual well-being of the young people, I believe that the framing of these questions betrays a mindset that is ill-suited to the situation at hand.[2] Such questions presume an in-out dichotomy, "in" being good and "out" being bad. In this mindset, salvation lies inside the church where we are, and those who venture outside are putting their souls in peril. However, reality often defies simple categorizations and distinctions, and I would argue that this holds true when it comes to the issue of religious belonging (affiliation, disaffiliation, quasi-affiliation, etc.). I would argue, as have others, that stepping outside of the religious community of one's youth is sometimes an appropriate developmental step toward mature faith.[3] But this developmental and spiritual need is in tension with the structures and pastoral approaches that currently predominate in the many churches, which are designed to bring people "in" and to form them "within". They are far less well suited to reaching "out" and supporting people who venture "outside". Operating outside of these structures is *terra incognita* for many people in Christian ministry.[4]

Fortunately, structures and approaches can change, and, indeed, in some places change is underway. Keeping members in is not the ultimate goal of the church (certainly not in the short-

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[1] The Christian share of the U.S. population has dropped from 90% in 1990 to 63% in 2019. (Pew Research Center, "Modeling the Future of Religion in America" (Pew Research Center, 2022), https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2022/09/13/how-u-s-religious-composition-has-changed-in-recent-decades/.)
[2] James Nagle has made similar observations. James Nagle, *Out on Waters: The Religious Life and Learnings of Young Catholics Beyond the Church* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 116.
[3] See, e.g., Nagle, *Out on Waters*, and Meredith Gould, *Desperately Seeking Spirituality: A Field Guide to Practice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).
[4] In this paper I write out of my experience as a Catholic religious educator, but readers from other religious traditions (especially mainline Protestant denominations) will no doubt resonate with the situation and challenges I describe.

1

term). The goal is mediating an encounter with Christ, and that can happen and has happened in many different ways throughout history.[5] My aim in this paper is to help religious educators envision alternative approaches better suited to facilitating an encounter with God's love for those who find themselves "outside" the church in some sense. Central to this paper is the proposal that this kind of religious education will be more effective when the educator allows the other person to take the lead. Said more precisely, it will be more effective when responding to the needs and desires of the young person than when expecting them to conform to a predetermined program, structure, or curriculum. In a word, it is religious education as "accompaniment." I will elaborate upon this proposal in two parts: In the first part, I will undertake an exercise in pastoral listening, endeavoring to understand the present reality of young people as they experience it and what that might suggest to us in terms of approaches to religious education. In the second part, I will describe some elements and examples of the kind of accompaniment approach that current research and practice suggests is better suited to our present situation.

Listening to Those on the Margins of Affiliation

At its best, Christian religious education is modeled on God's own divine pedagogy. One feature of this divine pedagogy is respect for the agency of human beings. God does not compel or overpower us in the way God reveals Godself to us but rather "meets human beings in the condition in which [God] finds them."[6] The manner in which we educate others ought to embody the same respect for the agency of those we educate, and one of the primary ways of showing respect for another is by listening. In the words of theologian Paul Tillich, "love listens. It is its first task to listen."[7] These theological insights have direct bearing on the questions at the heart of this year's conference: How religious education is shaped, and who does the shaping? While the agency of the learner ought to be respected in proportion to the degree to which the learner is able to exercise their agency, respect is demanded in all cases. In other words, the learner ought to have an active role in shaping their own religious education to the extent that they are capable.[8] The corresponding role of the religious educator is therefore not only to instruct but also to discern the needs and empower the agency of the learner. This can only be accomplished by asking what learners need and by listening to what they say.

In this spirit, I will engage here in an act of pastoral listening by asking, What has been the experience of newer generations as relates to their religiosity and spirituality? How would they answer Jesus' question: "What are you looking for?" (Jn 1:38) I proceed in this section by considering recent events from the perspective of young people and later drawing upon the thousands of interviews conducted by the Springtide Research Institute and other researchers.

In just the past few years we have all lived through a great unsettling caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic recession, global protests around race issues, and heightening tensions among nuclear powers. Americans have also played witness to the chaos of the 2020 presidential election, the events of January 6, and a succession of mass shootings with no end in sight. This time has been particularly difficult for young people, whose world has been thrown into turmoil at

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[5] John Paul II, "Catechesi Tradendae: On Catechesis in Our Time," Vatican website, October 16, 1979, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae_en.html.

[6] Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, *Directory for Catechesis* (Washington, D.C.: USCCB Publishing, 2020), #158.

[7] Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice: Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 84.

[8] Cf. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, #197.

2

a key moment of their development. Extraordinary though these past years have been, growing uncertainty has been a long-developing trend, and that trend does much to explain the spiritual lives of today's young people.

Current generations are the heirs of a legacy of modern and postmodern challenges to established religious traditions. Enlightenment thinkers like Baruch Spinoza, David Hume, and Immanuel Kant challenged unthinking acceptance of religious doctrines and authorities and demystified religious texts and practices. Postmodern thinkers like Michel Foucault, Jean François Lyotard, and Jacques Derrida undermined the legitimacy of metanarratives that would claim to give explanatory meaning to all people. Novel, non-religious accounts of human flourishing - for example, what Charles Taylor terms "exclusive humanism" - rushed into the vacuum left by the abandonment of religious traditions, but these likewise came under critique and have failed to fill the void.[9]

The result is that increasing numbers of people have entered a world in which nothing -- one's identity and purpose in life, the nature of the world, what awaits us after death -- can be taken for granted. They suffer from an awareness fragilized by this multitude of conflicting accounts. They are burdened by the untenable task of constructing for themselves an identity and worldview out of the diverse fragments of meaning impinging upon their consciousness (the opinions of others, political ideologies, religious traditions, marketing slogans). They begin life out at sea with no firm ground beneath their feet and no land in sight.

The personal experiences of our youngest generations exacerbate the sense of uncertainty that comes with being religious orphans. Today's young people have grown up in an age of perpetual political, religious, and financial scandal.[10] Who can blame them for distrusting the church when they have repeatedly heard accounts of religious leaders abusing those for whose spiritual wellbeing they were responsible and covering up the abuses of others? Living in a world of ideological echo chambers and culture wars, today's youth are just as likely to see religion used to bludgeon and condemn as to uplift and unite.

Where does all this leave today's young people? Like all other human beings throughout history, they seek meaning, community, and happiness, but they are understandably disinclined to look for them in religion where most people throughout history have sought fulfillment of these basic human needs.[11] Recent sociological research paints the picture in granular detail. Despite the potential for connectedness offered by social media networks, many people today are terribly lonely. One in three young people report feeling completely alone.[12] Two-thirds report having three or fewer meaningful interactions in a typical day.[13] Young people yearn for meaningful community and relationships, relationships in which someone knows them intimately and listens to them attentively and non-judgmentally. In the words of one 19-year-old, "It's not just knowing people in the group but the people knowing you… It's not enough to just be like, 'I'm a part of this group.' It needs to be like, 'We're so glad Chris is here,' like because they know who I am."[14]

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[9] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007).

[10] Gallup's "Confidence in Institutions" survey has tracked the steady decline in trust in public institutions: https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx

[11] Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion & Young People: Navigating Uncertainty* (Farmington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2021), https://springtideresearch.org/the-state-of-religion-2021-digital-edition/?page=1.

[12] Springtide Research Institute, *Belonging: Reconnecting America's Loneliest Generation* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2020).

[13] Ibid., 25.

[14] Ibid., 26.

3

An overwhelming number of young people suffer from poor mental health. They know it, and they want to be well. Today nearly one in three adolescents experiences an anxiety disorder.[15] Teen depression doubled between 2010 and 2019, even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.[16] Thirty-four percent of young people say that they are not flourishing when it comes to their mental health.[17] If there is a silver lining in this otherwise bleak picture, it is that young people are more likely today than in the past to talk about their mental health, to seek professional help, and to engage in practices like yoga and mindfulness in order to cope with mental health issues. Yet overcoming mental illness is not enough. Young people, like all of us, want a life marked by happiness and wholeness. This desire is manifested in the unprecedented number of students seeking wisdom on happiness in academic courses like Dr. Laurie Santos's "Psychology and the Good Life," which has emerged as the most popular course in the history of Yale University.[18]

Young people also yearn for lives of meaning and spiritual depth. According the Springtide Institute's national survey, young people expect support for spiritual development in school. In the words of Alec, a student at Princeton University, "There is and always has been a large number of people who have not been in tune as regularly as they would like with the most profound aspects of human experience and want to have structures to make those experiences as rich and deeply meaningful as they could be."[19] It is clear that for these young people religion and spirituality are not the same thing. In fact, some see them as diametrically opposed. Only 17% of young people who consider themselves religious say a religious institution helps them discover their meaning in life.[20] As a result, they tend not to turn to religious institutions and leaders for help with the above. Nonetheless, as the authors of the *How We Gather* report explain:

> When they say that they are not looking for a faith community, [they] might mean they are not interested in belonging to an institution with religious creed as the threshold. However, they are decidedly looking for spirituality and community in combination, and feel they can't lead a meaningful life without it.[21]

What, in sum, are young people themselves telling us that they are looking for? They are looking for life that is more stable, healthier, happier, more meaningful, more spiritual, and above all a life shared with others who care about them. And why do they say they are not turning to religious institutions in their search for these things? Some of the most common responses the Springtide Institute received in response to a similar question were: "I don't believe some of the things I hear talked about at religious gatherings." "I don't like to be told answers about faith and

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[15] National Institute of Mental Health, "Mental Health Information," https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/any-anxiety-disorder#part_155096, accessed May 30, 2023.

[16] Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, "Key substance use and mental health indicators in the United States: Results from the 2019 National Survey on Drug Use and Health," Rockville, MD: Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Retrieved from https://www.samhsa.gov/data/

[17] Springtide Research Institute, *Mental Health and Gen Z: What Educators Need to Know* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2022), 16.

[18] Nearly a quarter of the undergraduate student body at Yale enrolled in the course the first year it was offered.

[19] Springtide Research Institute, *Meaning Making: 8 Values That Drive America's Newest Generations* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2020), 122.

[20] Springtide Research Institute, *Mental Health and Gen Z: What Educators Need to Know* (Bloomington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2022), 58.

[21] Sue Phillips, Angie Thurston, and Casper ter Kuile, *How We Gather*, 6, https://caspertk.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/how-we-gather.pdf, accessed May 30, 2023.

4

religion. I'd rather discover my own answers." "I don't feel like I can be my full self in a religious organization." "Religious communities try to fix my problems instead of just being there for me." "Religion is about certainty, and doesn't welcome uncertainty, doubt, or asking questions."[22] There is clearly a tension between the ways in which young people are seeking these things and the ways in which churches offer them. For religious leaders to insist that young people come to Christianity on the terms dictated by the institution is simply a non-starter. We must seek another path if we have any hope of engaging these young people today.

Religious Education as Accompaniment

The dominant model of religious education throughout the 20th and early 21st century has been the classroom model in which church teaching was dispensed by official teachers of the faith (priests, religious, lay catechists) and received by students who (it was presumed) were motivated to do so. This approach to religious education is in tension with the sensibilities of today's youth in a number of ways: It presumes respect for and trust in religious authorities, which these young people do not have. This model is built upon authoritative answers to major religious and existential questions, but young people want to explore and seek answers for themselves and with their peers. It presumes affiliation and identification with the religious institution, but young people are suspicious of institutions and feel very free to cross the boundaries of religious traditions, if they engage traditional religion at all.[23] In short, young people today frequently reject Christian teaching because they do not trust the people who offer it to them or the way in which they offer it.

The conclusion I draw from listening to the voices of these young people is not that Christianity no longer has anything of value to offer them nor that they are best left to their own devices. To the contrary, I agree with Alasdair MacIntyre when he writes, "Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words."[24] There is no doubting the anxiety levels among today's youth, and I and others have made the case that detachment from religious traditions has contributed to the contemporary crisis of meaning.[25] Stating the case more positively, Theresa O'Keefe suggests, "The Christian community, in its narratives, practices, and ancient wisdom, offers a meaningful horizon upon which the adolescent can learn about love. Giving access to that collective wisdom may be the primary gifts we can offer adolescents."[26] It is not that the Christian tradition is bankrupt. Rather, the problem is that the means of accessing its riches have become repugnant to many. The solution, it would seem, is to identify alternative ways of giving people access to those riches.[27] Pope Francis has recognized as much himself. He writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

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[22] Springtide Research Institute, *The State of Religion & Young People: Navigating Uncertainty* (Farmington, MN: Springtide Research Institute, 2021), 30–31, https://springtideresearch.org/the-state-of-religion-2021-digital-edition/?page=1.

[23] See James Nagle's discussion of "remixing religion" on pp.12-15 of *Out on Waters*.

[24] Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theology*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.

[25] Patrick R. Manning, *Converting the Imagination: Teaching to Recover Jesus' Vision for Fullness of Life* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2020).; Andrew Fenelon and Sabrina Danielsen, "Leaving My Religion: Understanding the Relationship Between Religious Disaffiliation, Health, and Well-Being," *Soc Sci Res* 57 (2016): 49–62, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2016.01.007.

[26] Theresa O'Keefe, *Navigating Toward Adulthood: A Theology of Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 2018), 73.

[27] I conclude, as did the leaders of the National Dialogue, that we need to get away from the classroom model. See National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, "National Dialogue on Catholic Pastoral Ministry with Youth and Young Adults: Final Report" (Washington, D.C: National Confederation for Catholic Youth Ministry, 2021), 19.

5

Attention to the sources however has to be complemented by attention to the present needs of mankind and of the Church. To drink at these ever inspiring sources without sacrificing anything of their values, and at the same time to know how to adapt oneself to the demands and needs of today- these are the criteria which will make it possible to seek wisely and to discover the ministries which the Church needs and which many of her members will gladly embrace for the sake of ensuring greater vitality in the ecclesial community.[28]

I would add here that to say that religious communities need to adapt their methods of handing on the faith is not to say that no change will be required of those who seek to access their riches. The analogy of the bank fails when we consider that the "riches" in question are most essentially a Person and a relationship. Receiving these riches is not a matter of providing the credentials required for entry but rather of becoming a different person entirely, that is to say, of undergoing a conversion. In a sense, we ourselves become the riches "like gold that has been tested in fire" (1 Pt 1:7). O'Keefe recognizes the precariousness of this situation:

> It may seem like a double bind. We need good relationships to learn to relate well; we need to relate well to form good relationships. Which comes first? Throughout this period of maturation, the onus– particularly that of teaching how to be in relationships, interpret contexts, and be responsible–rests on the more mature adults within the adolescent's world [including religious educators]. To do that job well, those adults need to have sufficient rapport with the young person to be a credible voice for such lessons.[29]

But how do religious educators gain that trust and credibility? How does a religious educator accompany a young person so that they feel more free to engage the tradition in which the educator stands and thereby to advance in their journey of transformation? In the following, I will offer a number of suggestions along with examples drawn from faith communities that I believe have something to teach us in this regard.

Reaching Out

Today many young people are seeking meaning, purpose, and community outside the bounds of religious institutions. Even many of those sitting in religious education and Christian school classes do not expect to receive teaching there that will be meaningful for their lives. Given this state of affairs, religious educators can blame the students for not seeking what they want to offer (and they often have), or they can go out to meet young people where they are.

Pope Francis espouses the latter approach in *Christus Vivit*. The pontiff urges that today's ministry with youth should be "broader and more flexible" and "goes out to those places where real young people are active."[30] Some parishes have been heeding the Pope's suggestion, moving events out of the church and parish hall and into local bars, cafes, and virtual spaces where young people are more at home. The Springtide Institute suggests that in many cases such outreach will be more effective when partnering with organizations and establishments that young adults

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[28] Francis I, "Evangelii Gaudium" (Vatican, 2013), #73, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

[29] O'Keefe, 72

[30] Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* (Vatican, 2019), #230 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20190325_christus-vivit.html#CHAPTER_SEVEN.

6

frequent.[31] Theology on Tap events, at which people meet in bars to enjoy a drink and discuss theological issues, is one well-known model. Religious educators such as Katherine Turpin,[32] Patrick Reyes,[33] Boyung Lee,[34] and Mai-Anh Le Tran[35] have suggested possibilities for more adaptive religious education in the context of the workplace, social activism, and communities of solidarity. The Rimini[36] and New York Encounter[37] events hosted by Communion and Liberation provide a model of reaching out to larger audiences in urban centers. On college campuses this might mean leaving behind the dedicated space of campus ministry and bringing events to the students' home turf – dormitory lounges, cafes, and the quad. One such model is Agape Latte, which originated at Boston College and has now spread to over 50 campuses.[38] Another is Saint Paul's Outreach, a highly effective Catholic evangelization group that trains young adult missionaries to reach out to students on college campuses and to lead them to God primarily by forming caring friendships.[39]

Whether religious educators meet young people inside or outside of traditional church spaces, "going out" in the most important sense involves reaching out in a spirit of humility and openness rather than superiority or presumption. This spirit of *kenosis* is evident throughout Jesus' ministry. Yes, Jesus taught in the synagogues, but much more often we see him teaching, healing, and spending time with people in the streets, fields, and people's homes, even in regions like Samaria that his fellow Jews considered unclean. Jesus' way of going out in order to accompany is dramatized in particularly powerful fashion in the story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus. In this case Jesus walks with two disciples for some time in what seems to be the wrong direction, listening to their lamentations, answering their questions, and helping them to understand the Scriptures in reference to himself, before they finally recognize him as the risen Lord. Likewise, religious educators must be prepared to accompany young people patiently, moving at their speed and on God's time, sticking with them when they seem to be heading in the "wrong" direction and hanging out in the "wrong" places with the "wrong" people.

Listening

As Pope Paul VI recognized in 1975, "modern man is sated by talk; he is obviously often tired of listening and, what is worse, impervious to words."[40] Given the "fatigue produced these days by so much empty talk," what makes an impression is when we encounter someone who actually listens. Though well-worn with use, the saying is true: "People don't care what you know until they know you care." Both Theresa O'Keefe and the Springtide Institute arrive at this same conclusion based on their research: Young people yearn to be known and accepted, and they feel known when someone listens to them actively and non-judgmentally. Even when they are

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[31] Springtide Research Institute, *Navigating Uncertainty*, 79.

[32] Katherine Turpin, "Religious Education beyond Congregational Settings," *Religions* 9, no. 348 (2018): 1–8, https://doi.org/doi:10.3390/rel9110348.

[33] Patrick Reyes, *Nobody Cries When We Die: God, Community, and Surviving to Adulthood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2016).

[34] Boyung Lee, *Transforming Congregations through Community: Faith Formation from the Seminary to the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

[35] Mai-Anh Le Tran, *Reset the Heart Unlearning: Violence, Relearning Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2017).

[36] https://www.meetingrimini.org/en/theme-2022/

[37] https://www.newyorkencounter.org/

[38] https://www.bc.edu/content/bc-web/centers/church21/programs/agape-latte/

[39] https://www.spo.org/

[40] Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican, 1975), #42. https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html

7

navigating uncertainty, young people say that what is most helpful to them is when someone just lets them talk and listens.[41]

Again, Pope Francis appears attuned to this pastoral need. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he writes:

> We need to practice the art of listening, which is more than simply hearing. Listening, in communication, is an openness of heart which makes possible that closeness without which genuine spiritual encounter cannot occur. Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simply bystanders. Only through such respectful and compassionate listening can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God's love and to bring to fruition what he has sown in our lives.[42]

Religious leaders' inability or unwillingness to listen in this way is a major reason they fail to connect with young people. James Nagle observes that religious leaders' assumptions -- especially the assumption that disaffiliation is a deficiency – can prevent them from really hearing what youth are saying.[43] Religious educators' hardness of heart hardens the hearts of their students towards themselves. They thus find themselves attempting to sow the seed of the Gospel on rocky soil. That seed may have the potential to produce a beautiful flower, but that flower will never bloom if the seed is not received into the soil beneath the surface. The best way to cultivate the soil, to gain entry to a person's heart, is to listen attentively, lovingly, and without judgment.

O'Keefe points out that listening is important not only for cultivating openness in the young person but also for helping them to make sense of the content of the faith. A religious educator facilitates another's learning not only by providing the content but also by listening as the learner struggles to articulate and give shape to the meanings and understandings emerging in their minds. Our typical mental image of a teacher is someone talking rather than silently listening, and yet today's young people are making it clear that they will not listen to teachers unless they are willing to listen to them first.

Creating Space for Exploration

Many young people today describe themselves as "spiritual, not religious." Despite the aspersions frequently cast upon this label by those who identify strongly with a religious tradition, this attitude among young people points to an opportunity. There is a widespread spiritual hunger among younger generations. They yearn for meaning, purpose, depth, wholeness, and connection, and they want to seek these things for themselves, not to be given answers and definitely not to be judged for how they seek them. Unfortunately, our churches are not always hospitable to questions and doubts. I think of one friend who as a young man raised a question in his religious education class about how Jesus dying on the cross saves us and was kicked out of the class for "causing trouble." Current survey data reveal that such experiences are a common reason young people walk away from their religious communities.[44]

O'Keefe contends that young people's seeking and testing is developmentally appropriate and therefore should be embraced rather than punished. At the same time, young people express frustration with the complexity and uncertainty of the world they find themselves in, and they value trustworthy guidance. Psychologist Robert Kegan suggests that, faced with the mental

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[41] Springtide Research Institute, *Navigating Uncertainty*, 41; cf. NFCYM, 19.
[42] Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, #171.
[43] Nagle, 116.
[44] Robert McCarty and John Vitek, "Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics" (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2017), 22. Cf. Springtide Research Institute, *Navigating Uncertainty*.

demands of contemporary culture that overwhelm most people's meaning-making capacities, young adults require an "ingenious blend of support and challenge."[45] Kegan employs the term "holding environment" to describe this kind of environment that helps a person to navigate successfully a developmental transition or a crisis of meaning.[46]

Unfortunately, church communities have often failed to balance challenge with support, resulting a dearth of spaces for growth. Creating a holding environment requires, first of all, giving permission to ask questions and express doubts, for example, about one's own sexuality or a difficult church teaching. A holding environment is a space where one can make mistakes. This contrasts with the experience of many members of religious communities that, when they make a mistake or diverge from the church's moral teaching, are labeled a "bad Catholic," "not really Christian," etc. To make people feel that asking questions and making mistakes is impermissible creates an ideal breeding ground for inauthenticity and hypocrisy while stifling genuine spiritual development, which occurs through trial and error and incremental growth.

More positively speaking, religious communities encourage spiritual and personal growth when, rather than demanding unquestioning assent to doctrine, they share elements of their tradition that inspire wonder and curiosity.[47] This is the difference, for example, between shutting down a student when she questions the compatibility of scientific evidence with biblical creation accounts and inviting deeper reflection upon these texts. O'Keefe illustrates the point thus:

> By unpacking the theological sense of our stories, we open a world of possibility and enter more directly into a discussion of life's meaning, value, and direction. We invite the adolescent into an interpretive tradition that takes the Bible seriously, to be surprised by the truth encountered therein. By shifting to a discussion of meaning, we move the religious discourse to an arena more appropriate and needed for a modern and postmodern world, and one needed by the adolescent growing toward adulthood.[48]

Even more profoundly, adds O'Keefe, being a community that supports growth requires vulnerability and forgiveness. When a religious educator, mentor, or other faith leader admits their own imperfections and need for growth, it signals to their students or mentees that everyone here is trying to get better together; it is not about certain holy people fixing the people with problems. Religious educators can also model asking for forgiveness and forgiving others. When a young person sees that mistakes need not be fatal, it lifts the unbearable weight of perfection and gives them permission to expose and explore the tender areas of their lives where growth is occurring.

Although creating such spaces for exploration and growth has not been a strength of some churches, positive examples do exist. Landings International, for instance, is "a Paulist program to welcome returning Catholics [and a] process that helps faith communities welcome inactive Catholics who want to take another look at the Church."[49] Key to the success of Landings, which has helped over one million people worldwide to once again find a home in the Catholic Church, is creating small communities where participants to tell their stories and listen to the faith stories of others in a welcoming, non-judgmental way. Another positive example is the small groups sponsored by the ecclesial movement Communion and Liberation. Within these "schools of

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[45] Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 42.

[46] Robert Kegan, *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1982), 115.

[47] Cf. Springtide Research Institute, *Navigating Uncertainty*, 69.

[48] O'Keefe, 112.

[49] https://landingsintl.org/

9

community" participants receive a Christian proposal (typically in the form of a text written by the movement's founder, Msgr. Luigi Giussani), which they can compare with their own lived experience.[50] What distinguishes the CL approach from virtually any other Catholic community I have encountered is the radicalness of the group's commitment to asking and honoring difficult questions about the Christian proposal. I believe the environment of honesty and authenticity this method creates is why many people find a home in CL when they could not find one anywhere else in the Catholic Church.

Forming Relationships

Creating a space where people feel safe and challenged to grow is, above all, the work of building relationships. For O'Keefe, this is crucial for how the church thinks of its ministry in the contemporary world. "The role of the church," she writes, "is to create the spaces wherein robust relationships are promoted."[51] She explains what such robust relationships mean for adolescents in particular:

> By robust I mean relationships wherein you are known well and loved fully. It is a relationship that the adolescent cannot easily ignore, but that over time develops intrinsic value. A robust relationship invites the adolescent to discover himself as a person, unique and valuable, by drawing him into attentive relationships with another. It allows him to take chances and be vulnerable for the sake of new discoveries both in himself and in the world."[52]

As O'Keefe's explanation suggests, a holding environment is not so much a physical space as it is a relationship. According to O'Keefe, developing robust relationships requires three key ingredients – transparency, caring, and time.[53] Given the low level of trust younger generations have with religious institutions and authorities, it is easy to appreciate why transparency is important. They have heard a plentitude of stories of religious authorities harming and manipulating the people entrusted to them and perhaps have experienced abuse themselves. As a result, they need to understand our intentions and see that we genuinely have their best interests at heart if they are to open up to us.

Showing genuine care for young people is much more than a strategy for gaining their trust. By offering such care, a religious educator may be communicating the most important thing their student or mentee ever learns about the faith. I believe Pope Francis again cuts to the heart of the matter in *Christus Vivit* where he writes, "Rather than being too concerned with communicating a great deal of doctrine, let us first try to awaken and consolidate the great experiences that sustain the Christian life. In the words of Romano Guardini, 'when we experience a great love… everything else becomes part of it.'"[54] What we all desire most of all is to be known and loved. When a religious educator establishes a personal, caring relationship with a young person, all the rest – handing on the wisdom and practices of the tradition and integrating into a community of faith – flows more naturally. This is undoubtedly a key to the success of Saint Paul's Outreach where everything begins from the authentic friendships the missionaries establish with other young

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[50] https://english.clonline.org/school-of-community
[51] O'Keefe, 72.
[52] Ibid., 67.
[53] Ibid., 123-127.
[54] Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 212.

people. Likewise, many people seem to find a home in Communion and Liberation (and in other movements and small faith communities) because of the way the people there care for them.

Over twenty years ago Sharon Daloz-Parks made a compelling case for the tremendous value of mentoring relationships in supporting young adults in making meaning of their lives and faith.[55] Today's young people are seeking guidance of this kind, and when they find it, it is highly impactful for their lives.[56] The more "trusted adults" (i.e., adults they can turn to when they are in trouble or need to talk) a young person has in their life, the less likely they are to suffer from loneliness, social isolation, and stress.[57] The Springtide Institute, Parks, and O'Keefe all emphasize the benefits of young people having access to not only *a* mentor but a mentoring community or network of support.

These research findings are fully consonant with the Christian vision of how people grow toward mature faith. The early Christian community evangelized by John the Apostle expressed this vision in these terms: "we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:3). This "fellowship" (*koinonia*) or "beloved community" is at once the soil in which the seed of faith is nourished and the fruit of that growth. It is the primary locus for encounter with God's love in the post-resurrection world. According to the new *Directory for Catechesis* published by the Vatican, "The Christian community is the origin, locus and goal of catechesis."[58]

This work of nurturing relationships and spiritual growth requires ditching artificial timetables. Religious educators cannot expect learners to work through developmental transitions and achieve deeper levels of spiritual maturity in a period of time that conforms neatly to the program schedules or the parish calendar. Genuine growth takes time. In the words of Pope Francis, "we have to respect different stages of growth, and at times need to wait patiently for the right moment."[59] In the same vein, the *Directory for Catechesis* says, "On this journey, in which a decisive contribution comes from the participant himself with his personality, the capacity to receive the Gospel is commensurate with the person's existential situation and phase of growth."[60]

Sharing Wisdom

From what I have written thus far it might be inferred that religious education as accompaniment is merely a matter of being good company. But if that is the case, what value is there in the knowledge and expertise of the well-trained religious educator? Are they any more helpful in this ministry than the average person? I expect most religious educators would respond to these questions, as I would, with an unequivocal "Yes!" I suggest that what the expert religious educator has to offer is their deep knowledge of the tradition and their practical know-how regarding when and how to best share that wisdom with one who is seeking.

In keeping with the theme of authenticity discussed above, religious education in this understanding is a sharing of life and of living faith among two or more people more than it is the transmission of teachings from an adult endowed with authority to students who are obliged to listen. It presumes that the religious educator is a person whose own life has been transformed by

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[55] Sharon Daloz Parks, *Big Questions, Worthy Dreams: Mentoring Emerging Adults in Their Search for Meaning, Purpose, and Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000).
[56] Cf. NFCYM, 19.
[57] Springtide, *Belonging*, 58.
[58] Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, #133.
[59] Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, #229.
[60] Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, #77.

11

faith and who desires to share that gift with others.[61] That gift is a religious tradition that originates in and points to an encounter with God's love. Thomas Groome describes this tradition as the "Christian Story and Vision."[62] Sharon Parks employs terms like "worthy dreams," "vital images," and "humanizing practices" to describe its gifts.[63] What Groome's and Parks's language accentuates and what I believe is crucial is the existential and spiritual value of the tradition. It is not merely a static body of doctrines but much more a community and a way of life entailing wisdom and ways of being.[64] Ideally a religious educator desires to share this tradition because they have discovered therein the kind of meaning, purpose, and community that the other is currently seeking.

So one value of the religious educator is their knowledge of this tradition and wisdom that the other understands less well (or not at all) and that stands to enrich that person's life. Another value (and more crucially for the present day) is the religious educator's ability to share that tradition in a way that the other person wants to receive it. As we discussed earlier, many church leaders have struggled with this in recent decades. This is another regard in which contemporary religious education requires a break from the classroom model wherein teachers typically present church teachings to students according to a fixed curriculum. Teaching according to such a curriculum was more appropriate when it could be presumed that students had a common foundational understanding of the faith and were regularly involved in the life of the church. However, the diversity of the present generation of young people (the most diverse in history) makes such a common understanding unlikely.[65] Furthermore, today many young people lack a foundational understanding of their faith tradition, are not regularly involved, and are not intrinsically motivated to seek religious instruction.

Given these circumstances, it is more appropriate to revert to the style of teaching Jesus employed when he was first proclaiming the Gospel to his Jewish and pagan audiences, namely, one that was responsive to the situations, questions, and needs of the people he encountered. People responded to Jesus because they recognized in his teaching and his person something they sought -- healing, liberation, peace, belonging, love. The research of the Springtide Institute is relevant to this point: "Gen Z is less interested in a complete and intact *system* and more interested in a complete and intact *self.*"[66] Seeking wholeness, they gravitate toward spaces where they feel they can be their true selves and eschew environments where they feel they must deny some part of themselves in order to belong.

In this regard, contemporary religious educators must be willing to enter into the tradition at the learner's own pace and following their unique path. They need to possess the capacity to discern which aspects of the tradition exert some attraction on the young person or address their needs (e.g., certain spiritual practices, teachings about social justice, stories of holy women and men) and be willing to explore that aspect for some time. With time and patience, that road may lead (if not to Rome) to the heart of the faith, an encounter with the loving God. Once a person has

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[61] Based on the input of thousands of young people, the *National Dialogue Final Report* identified authentic witness as a key element in new approaches to ministry with young people (NFCYM, 19).

[62] Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (Harper San Francisco, 1991).

[63] Parks, 146, 148, 154.

[64] Cf. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, #26. I do not have space here to go into detail regarding the specific teachings and practices that comprise this tradition, but I have done so elsewhere. See Manning, *Converting the Imagination*, 90-96.

[65] NFCYM, 19.

[66] Springtide Research Institute, *Navigating Uncertainty*, 74.

12

been seized by God's love, often they then discover a desire to learn about the church's teaching in its fullness.

It seems to me that God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, has recently been leading the church in this direction and equipping it for this work. Since the time of the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, God has initiated a flowering of ecclesial movements like Sant'Egidio, Focolare, Communion and Liberation, the NeoCatechumenal Way, and the Charismatic movement. Each of these communities is animated by a particular charism (e.g., promoting peace, Christian unity, nurturing spiritual gifts) that attracts different people in different ways, including people who would not otherwise find themselves in the church. Although not every person will be attracted by an ecclesial movement, this general stirring of the Holy Spirit in our time suggests a form of accompaniment that has already borne much fruit. Many today are wary of the institutional church but are nonetheless finding their place in small faith communities that unite their members around a particular charism, mission, or focus.[67]

Conclusion

The kids have grown up, and there is no use in religious educators treating them like children any longer. By this I do not mean that today's young people have no use for expert religious educators. As shown above, young people are very much in search of trustworthy guidance. What I mean is that they have use for religious leaders who patronize, talk down, or judge them. Growing up in a milieu pervaded by critical consciousness, they will not accept a pre-packaged faith on the word of some authority figure. However, they are seeking meaning, a way of life, and community. The great opportunity of religious education today lies in responding to these needs by giving young people access to the religious traditions that have transformed our lives. To accompany young people on this journey comes with no guarantee that they will "come back" (i.e., affiliate with a particular church). Ultimately, we must respect the freedom of the people we accompany and trust that, in the words of the prophet Jeremiah, if we "ask for the ancient paths, where the good way lies; and walk in it," we and those we accompany will find rest for our souls (Jer 6:16).

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[67] This is what Pope Francis is speaking about when he describes the parish as a "community of communities" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #28).

13

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14

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15

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I Come From the Between:
Belonging and Spiritual Formation of Migrant Youth

Abstract: How do migrant youth experience spiritual formation, and what impacts their religious path? Due to their unique social location, they experience multiple belongings and un-belongings. Migrant youth is not the same as their former generation, those with whom they reside, or those from their home country. As youth experience cultural clashes and tensions between their identities and navigate the messy middle ground, they develop a hybrid religious identity. I explore the Korean Canadian youth life and church experience, including the challenges and complexities of their spiritual formation in the Presbyterian Korean Canadian church context. I also introduce the religious hybridity they inherit, which deepens their hybrid identity. These youth come from the between, dwell in the between, and in this in-between, they become themselves.

Introduction

One of the essential components of youth is having a sense of "belonging." When I say belonging, I do not refer to owning material objects but to having a sense of affinity to other people or places. Youth find belonging in school peer groups, a church community, and a bike gang. Whichever group they associate with, youth look for a place to belong. Korean Canadian youth experience multiple belongings and un-belongings in society, school, and churches.

Youth identity is formed in relation to one's geographical and social location. A church community is also essential to shaping the answer for "whose children youth are." Notably, Korean Canadian youth uniquely form spirituality due to their hybridity. I explore the Korean Canadian youth life and church experience, including the challenges and complexities of their spiritual formation in the Presbyterian Korean Canadian church context with the lens of hybridity. These youth come from the between, dwell in the between, and in this in-between, they become themselves. They are both their ancestors' children and the land they come from. Youth are the children of the land they are physically located in and the future they create within that land.

Korean Canadian Youth' Belongings and Un-belongings in Society

In current transnational society, Korean Canadian youth belong to two worlds: Canada and Korea. Extensive scholarly work points out those subsequent Korean generations in North America experience difficulties being in between the mainstream society and their own immigrant communities. Unlike some inter-cultural societies, Canada blankets itself as a "multicultural" or "mosaic" country. It encourages all ethnic groups to root their identities in their own backgrounds and come together as Canadians.[1] Although Canada conveys the message that Canada is a multicultural society and everyone is welcomed, due to the colour of their eyes, hair, and skin and the way they speak, eat, and dress, ethnic minorities will always stand out as different from mainstream white Canadians. Himani Bannerji, a Bengali Canadian

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[1] John Murray Gibbon et al., *Canadian Mosaic: the Making of a Northern Nation* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Limited Publishers, 1938).

writer, describes how the current Canadian multiculturism paradigm in fact becomes the very vehicle for racialization. She writes that Canada "establishes Anglo-Canadian culture as the ethnic core culture while 'tolerating' and hierarchically arranging others around it as 'multiculture.'" Despite its ideal of multiculturism, what defines the "multi" is still "the ethics and aesthetics of whiteness."[2] Marianne S. Noh powerfully echoes Bannerji's point in her dissertation about the second generation Korean Canadian experience.

> they experience frustration over the ambiguity in the meaning of being Canadian because dominant group messages of Whiteness and Anglo Saxon ideals as purely Canadian are still prominent… Canadian experiences included exclusion, racism and discrimination from and within mainstream social settings, similar to American experiences, which prevented second gens from fully integrating into the multicultural Canadian model.[3]

In schools, youth are also visible yet invisible. According to the most recent Census Portraits conducted by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2018, 36% of the students identified themselves as being of Asian descent and 14% identified as East Asians, while 29% of students identified themselves as white.[4] TDSB is one of the school districts that contains a racially diverse student population. As seen by the percentages, the population of Asian students is highly visible. But despite the a significant number of Asian students, there have not been many courses and literature included in the curriculum and lack of cultural diversity including resources available to inform teachers regarding racism and microaggressions. Only in 2021, after the Atlanta shooting and with the rise of the anti-Asian hate movement, did TDSB finally release a new document for teachers on how to address racism.[5] In a news article on the subject, Terri Chu, who researches anti-Asian racism in Canada, explains that racism and marginalization of people of color have worsened to a point where "people don't always perceive racism for what it is because it has become so commonplace." Yet, as mentioned above, Canada tends to hide behind the magic term "multicultural society" and hesitates to address Asian Canadian marginalization.

Asian students were also stereotyped as less comfortable answering questions, speaking up, or participating. A report conducted by TDSB in 2011 entitled "Census Portraits: Understanding Our Students' Ethno-racial Backgrounds" examines that "East Asian students are less confident about many of their skills, including their communication, reading, and writing

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[2] Himani Bannerji, *The Dark Side of the Nation: Essays on Multiculturalism, Nationalism, and Gender* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2000), 78.

[3] Noh, Marianne S. "Contextualizing Ethnic/racial Identity: Nationalized and Gendered Experiences of Segmented Assimilation Among Second Generation Korean Immigrants in Canada and the United States" (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2008), 127.

[4] Toronto District School Board, "Student & Parent Census," November 2018, last accessed October 28, 2021, 3, https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Search/Search?q=student%20census.

[5] CBC News, "Teachers Get New Resource to Address Anti-Asian Racism in Toronto Public Schools," posted February 9, 2021, last accessed October 30, 2021, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/toronto-district-school-board-elementary-teachers-federation-ontario-anti-asian-racism-resource-1.5906406.

2

skills, social skills, problem-solving skills, and leadership skills." However, an interesting result the report shows is that "more East Asian students meet or exceed the provincial standard (Level 3) on Gr. 6 Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) Reading and Writing tests, and many more meet the standard on the Gr. 6 EQAO Math test" than students of other races. This discrepancy between how Asian students are portrayed and the results they produce shows the stereotypes Asian students experience. In Toronto, supposedly one of the most racially diverse places, diversity is visible yet invisible.

Korean Canadian youth's lived experiences of in-betweenness are not only related to being in two worlds but also to the concept of age. Youth are considered to be out of childhood but not fully adults. Youth need less protection from their primary caregivers and are expected to be more independent. At the same time, they are considered as mere kids with few rights and privileges. They are expected to take some responsibility, yet still must listen to the words of authorities, such as parents and teachers. For many immigrant households, adults even rely on their children to be the literal and cultural translator due to their lack of English skills. Those children become caregivers of the household because they filed necessary documents on behalf of their parents. Yet in the household and in churches, adults retrieve the caregiver role they lent to their children. Youth are placed in the liminal stage, which is the in-between of not being fully adults nor being little kids.

This betwixt-and-between space may make youth anxious that they will remain irrelevant in the eyes of adults and insignificant in the eyes of mainstream Canadian culture. Yet, Fumitaka Matsuoka writes, "A person in a liminal world is poised in uncertainty and ambiguity between two or more social constructs, reflecting in the soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions."[6] It is in this in-betweenness where youth can exercise their agency by being intensely alert and refusing to accept easily what is regarded as common sense.

Youth are taught to maintain dominant white adult subjectivity. However, rather than subverting the center and creating another hierarchy, youth agency based on interstitial integrity[7] does not occur by abasing the other but goes beyond the center/youth dichotomy. Youth's internalizing their status leads them to project that neglect onto others, but a youth agent with interstitial integrity knows that it is dehumanizing to build one's agency on neglect of the other. They enter deeply into the oppressive system, yet rather than staying passive in the system, youth can act and transform it. Although youth agency is confrontational, it acknowledges the center's fear that they might lose control when affirming youth agency. Youth as insiders and outsiders of their traditions will be able to construct a new space, a space in which their well-being and voices are considered seriously.

Korean Canadian Youth' Belongings and Un-belongings in Church Community

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[6] Fumitaka Matsuoka, *Out of Silence: Emerging Themes in Asian American Churches* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 1995), 54.

[7] Rita Nakashima Brock coined the term interstitial integrity and defines it as an ability not only to cope with the experience of being liminal and peripheral, but also to make meaning out of the multiple worlds one is experiencing by refusing to disconnect from any one of them, while not aligning with a singular one. Rita Nakashima Brock, "Cooking without Recipes: Interstitial Integrity," in *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology,* ed. Rita Nakashima Brock, Jun Ha Kim, Kwok Pui Lan, and Seung Ai Yang (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 191.

A key component of Korean Canadian youth religious formation is that they can belong to their ethnic church without being asked where they are really from. Unlike the early immigrants, who were mostly poor and could not speak English, nowadays immigrants and their second generation tend to be highly educated, have sufficient funds, and are relatively fluent in English.[8] However, Asian North American churches still grow and play a vital role in not only the first generation of immigrants but also the latter generations. This phenomenon baffles many scholars: Why do people still choose and establish Asian North American churches in North America, rather than attending one of the existing predominantly "white American" churches?[9] As aforementioned, language does not hinder Korean Canadians from assimilating into existing churches, nor do the churches' theological positions. Depending on one's denomination, Korean Canadians can easily find churches that align with their doctrinal and theological understandings. In addition, immigrants do have access to social agencies, which are more professional than the church in providing immigration information, and they can find social networks outside of the church. However, Korean churches still thrive, as do other churches. Jonathan Y. Tan writes in his book *Introducing Asian American Theology* that it is not the language, theology, or doctrinal positions that keep Asian Americans away from existing American churches, but the racialization. Tan cites Raymond Brady Williams's congregation member's experience of being an Indian American Christian at an existing American church. Although he is a faculty member at a theological seminary, he was always treated as a guest in the predominantly white American church.[10] One of the church members I met at a Korean Canadian church tells a similar story: after switching to this church, she no longer had to answer to the question "Where are you really from?" and did not need to explain her background; her presence at the church was an affirming experience. Experiences of being racialized reveal the inevitable functions of Asian North American churches that predominantly white Canadian churches cannot provide.

First, not only can a church be a place of fellowship and refuge for immigrants by providing social services for church members, but it is also a place where belonging occurs in the form of solidarity. As immigrants face similar hardships, they navigate the glories and challenges of immigrant lives together. It might be plausible to think that the second generation is free from the challenging immigration experiences as they are more involved in Canadian society and are fluent in the language. However, they bond over their uniquely challenging experiences as the second generation and foster solidarity with one another. In the book *People of Jeong (Qing),* lead researcher Nam Soon Song introduces an interviewee's response on the support that can be expected from immigrant churches. Ann speaks,

> For the second generation because we go through so many of the similar things together we can help each other out like I know for us like because there's this generation gap and different cultures growing up, our values are a bit different from our parents, so sometimes that conflicts and it's really hard at home. But, we have youth groups on Friday and there's junior high groups or like um small groups on Fridays, and we would

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[8] Jonathan Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 34.

[9] Ibid., 59.

[10] Ibid., 60.

come together and talk about it and it's really relatable because we all have similar going on like little problems with our families because of different values growing up and it's nice to be able to come and be able to talk to the kids and feel connected and find a solution together…[11]

From Ann's answer, it is clear that church is a safe space where the unique similarities of the second generation can be shared, and they can stay in solidarity with each other despite their minority identity. Youth know where the other person is coming from is coming from.

The church is one of the keepers of their own culture; however, it is not merely about maintenance of the cultural tradition, but also about connecting its members to their roots. Churches provide Korean language programs for second-generation Koreans that celebrate Korean traditional holidays and emphasize Korean Confucian values more strictly than those who are residing in Korea.[12] Even though Korean Canadians live in the west and the youth receive progressive education in school, the congregation proves to be more reflective of a conservative and evangelical affiliation due to the value educations that take place at homes and in churches. Since second and latter generations' upbringing takes place in a Korean household, they are naturally exposed to the Korean elements that influence their mixed identities. Nam Soon Song uses a pastor's word to show that it is almost impossible for a child who was raised by Korean parents to establish a whole new identity.[13] Church boosts the passing on of cultural values, traditions, and Korean identity to the second generation Korean Canadians through language schools provided by the church and conservative faith education.[14] This incorporation of culture and religious resources creates a unique setting as a Korean Canadian church, and that faith becomes integral to the immigrants' ethnic and sociocultural identities. Even the latter generations who are fluent in English and relatively unfamiliar with the Korean language still choose a Korean Canadian church as their home church due to the rootedness and cultural belonging. Ruth, interviewed by Nam Soon Song, says as follows: "I was born and raised in Canada. I have a… love for Korean heritage, but it's definitely tied into church, [be]cause that's the only place where I get my cultural influence from really."[15] For ethnic minorities, faith "provides a framework for addressing life issues, as well as assisting to preserve, negotiate, and perpetuate their distinctive ethnic identities and cultural traditions" in the wider society.[16] Thus, the role that Korean Canadian churches play' in the immigrants lives is not only nurturing their

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[11] Nam Soon Song, Ben C. H Kuo, Dong-Ha Kim, In Kee Kim, and Greer Anne Wenh-In N., *People of Faith, People of Jeong (Qing): The Asian Canadian Churches of Today for Tomorrow* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020), 89.

[12] Edward Y. J. Chung, *Korean Confucianism: Tradition and Modernity* (Gyeonggi-do, South Korea: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2015) 133.

[13] Song et al., *People of Faith, People of Jeong (Qing),* 91.

[14] Chung, *Korean Confucianism*, 136.

[15] Song, et al., *People of Faith, People of Jeong (Qing)*, 91.

[16] Tan, *Introducing Asian American Theology*, 70.

faith, but impacting their lives in a holistic way by helping them maintain transnational ties with their ancestral lands and understand their minority identity.

Unfortunately, even in their ethnic churches, youth experience un-belongingness. Nam Soon Song's research on Asian Canadian shows that no matter how old the English-speaking ministry members are, they are considered equivalent to children and subordinate to the first-generation Korean-speaking congregation.[17] Youth realize that the Korean Canadian church, which was founded by their former generations, lacks the cultural and religious finesse and scope to fully embrace their hybrid identity. Migrant youth is not the same as their former generation, those with whom they reside, or those from their home country. As youth experience cultural clashes and tensions between their identities and navigate the messy middle ground, youth with hybrid identity goes beyond just being their parent generation's kids.

Rebecca Kim, associate professor of sociology and the director of the ethnic studies program at Pepperdine University, indicated in her studies that, "more than 80 percent second generation Korean Americans are estimated to leave their parents' ethnic church. And one complaint that the second generation Korean Americans have against the first generation is that the immigrant church seems more like an ethnic institution than an authentically religious institution."[18] While it is true that ethnic religious organizations provide shelter, their parents' Korean cultural heritage is the main component of the community.

The first generation, who were busy surviving, could not pay much attention to cultivating second-generation leadership. They also neglected the second generation as a whole, viewing them as children despite their ages and their professional involvement in the wider Canadian society. Few members of the second generation were involved in church leadership, and this lack of representation fostered an idea that the church they were attending was their parents' church.   Recently churches have started to support the development of second- and further-generation leadership so that the congregation will become self-sustaining. But despite these efforts, the second-generation congregation members still struggle against the first generation's understanding of the second generation as children, even though they are adults. Since even second-generation adults are fighting to no longer be viewed as children and speaking out for inclusion, spaces for adolescents in Korean immigrant churches are less common.

Unlike some North American mainline churches that appoint youths as elders, Korean Canadian churches mostly do not include youth in the wider congregation. Even after confirmation and baptism, youth are seen but silenced in the church. As aforementioned in the introduction, in Presbyterian churches, most young people receive infant baptism and become confirmed at age 12 or 13; or they become baptized as a mature believer at age 12 or 13. This is a time when youth publicly profess their faith with their own sense of agency and knowledge. It prescribes rights to adolescents to believe at their discretion. Confirmation is not just a ritual held in church, but it also binds the confirmands to the Spirit, giving them agency and hope to move forward. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, it is at the moment of confirmation that we fully

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[17] Ibid., 66.

[18] Rebecca Kim, *God's New Whiz Kids? Korean American Evangelicals on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 9.

realize that the Spirit has been at work.[19] This process reconciles adolescents with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit, giving them the capacity to serve faithfully in the community in light of God's purpose. After this ritual, during which the church congregation has acknowledged and celebrated adolescents' capacity for deciding for themselves in their faith, youth are still almost never invited to decision-making tables.

Many Korean Canadian youth tend to be doubly marginalized from the mainstream society and also from their own immigrant communities due to their hyphenated identities. To the first generation, the subsequent generations are never Korean enough. First-generation Koreans who immigrated to Canada tend to wish that subsequent generations would not abandon their Koreanness. Yet an interviewee from Song et al.'s research captures a different sentiment when she says, "Now we're second generation, you can't expect us to have that same thing because we grew up in a different culture and a different world and different time."[20] Second and subsequent generations come from the between and they belong there. This can be viewed as a negative factor where they are not either this or that. However, this between creates something new. As Homi Bhabha writes about how agents both revere and menace authority—in other words, the oppressive center,[21] youth revere but also yearns for what is their own not what is their upper generations. Bhaba artues that Western nations believed that they should enlighten the colonized by making people adopt their cultural habits, values, and thoughts. However, despite the colonizers' wishes, the result was never reproduction of the colonizers. Rather, Bhabha argues that the result of the colonized mimicking the colonizers was a threat to the colonizers, because in that action of mimicking the originality is lost and fractured.[22] Eventually the end product was something different—"a difference that is almost the same, but not quite"— which reveals a crack in the colonial authority.[23] Insook Lee calls this crack interstitial space, where the colonized and colonizer negotiate, which results in a hybrid subject.[24] In Lee's words, "a hybrid subject that practices both the discipline of civility and disobedience and has both the capacity to be contained and to resist containment, Asian American women become agents who can threaten the dominating power from within."[25] In other words, this hybridity and mimicry create the interstitial space that has the power to contain multiple, yet contradictory ideas and produce ambivalence, which demands that people reconsider their belief.

First generations can be and cannot be oppressors, yet the dynamic between the first and subsequent generations occur in a similar way. Youth also mimic the center yet push back and exercise their agency. Youth are inherently in conflict. They mimic whiteness and normative

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[19] Richard R. Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Geneva, 1996), 186.

[20] Song et al., *People of Faith, People of Jeong (Qing),* 3.

[21] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 123.

[22] Ibid., 122.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Lee, Insook, "Asian American Women's Agency and Postcolonial Theory," *Journal of Pastoral Theology* 24, no. 1 (2014): 2–10, https://doi.org/10.1179/jpt.2014.24.1.002.

[25] Ibid.

adulthood yet refuse and challenge this tradition. As youth becomes more aware of the ambivalence for their situation and their hybridity, they become true to themselves. They become okay with belonging to the between. Youth's internalizing their status leads them to project that neglect onto others, but a youth agent with interstitial integrity knows that it is dehumanizing to build one's agency on neglect of the other. They enter deeply into the oppressive system, yet rather than staying passive in the system, youth can act and transform it. Although youth agency is confrontational, it acknowledges the center's fear that they might lose control when affirming youth agency. Youth as insiders and outsiders of their traditions will be able to construct a new space, a space in which their well-being and voices are considered seriously.

Korean American Youth and Religious Hybridity

In addition to their betwixt belonging to Canadian culture and Korean church community, another key element of Korean Canadian youth religious formation is their religious hybridity. As youth has a hybrid identity, Korean Christian spirituality also is multifaceted and layered with Shamanism[26], Buddhism, and Confucianism. People joke that when people go into the sanctuary, they worship as Christians, then at a church meeting after the worship service, they become Confucians, and in their everyday lives, people live as Buddhists in a multicultural society. Even though, youth call themselves Christians, they inherit a multiplicity of religious expressions. This article only explores the connection between Confucianism and Christianity but recognizing this unique religious hybridity of the Korean Canadian youth is foundational to understanding their religious experiences.

As the virtues are intertwined with the Korean lifestyle, researchers acknowledge that this lifestyle extends even after Koreans move to Western countries. Although many South Korean immigrants living in North America have been influenced by Western values, still the values of their home country are deeply rooted in them. Chung, Professor of Religious Studies and the Asian Studies Director at the University of Prince Edward Island in Canada, shares his observation that "first-generation Koreans managed to maintain Korean identity by transmitting it to their children at home." [27] The moral education was upheld in the home, and Korean heritage language schools and Sunday Bible classes were offered by the church. By sticking together as a family in a foreign land, immigrants' Korean identity and values were maintained. Sociologist Jung Ha Kim observes, "this [Confucian] ideology had a tremendous impact in Korea…and so many of us who are here in [the United States], even though we are not afflicted by the laws of Korea, still have much of the law written in our hearts and it impacts our lives."[28]

Confucian-influenced trait[]s can be found not only in first-generation immigrants but also in the latter generations who immigrated when they were young or were born in Canada.

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[26] Aram Bae, a Korean American pastor writes in her dissertation how shamanism influences how Korean Americans understand the presence of the spirit world. She writes that due to Shamanistic understanding "Koreans believe that the spirit world and the physical world interact fluidly. This way of understanding the world influences ways in which ancestors are respected and venerated even in a post-Enlightenment society." Aram Bae, "The Religious Hybrid Identity of Second Generation Korean American Presbyterian Youth: It's Contours, Challenges, and Contributions," PhD diss. (Union Theological Seminary, 2013), 45

[27] Chung, *Korean Confucianism*, 133.

[28] Jung Ha Kim, *Bridge-Makers and Cross-Bearers: Korean American Women and the Church* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1997), 11.

Chung writes that although the younger Korean Canadians balance between Korean values and Canadian standards, many Confucian traits can be found in Korean Canadians. For instance, there is "a lot of attention to children's higher education, work ethic, and their immense implications for professional career and economic success."[29] Emphasis on other ideals such as personal cultivation also indicates the embedded cultural values in Korean Canadians. Ultimately, what Confucian teaching promotes is continuous human sagehood; thus, Chung interprets that Confucianism helped Koreans in Canada to gain international identity by "preserve[ing] family cohesiveness and cultural heritage and also to manage bicultural social assimilation, thereby linking the East and the West."[30] This Confucian-influenced ethos is also deeply rooted in Korean immigrant churches.

As many other ethnic groups have done, Koreans brought their ethnic heritage into the Christian faith. Paul Clane writes that Christians in Korea are deeply Confucian enough to say that Korean Christians are the Confucians who attend church.[31] Koreans' ethnic Asian culture, which is influenced by Confucianism, affected the way in which Christianity was accepted in Korea. Confucianism has had several impacts on Christianity's settlement in Korea by way of Western missionaries. First, believing in the fate of Confucian heaven made the Christian heavenly God easy to understand and accept. Second, Confucians also cherished their scriptures and found the authority of all life in the scriptures. Confucians also read, recited, and interpreted their texts, an approach that was applied to Koreans' attitude toward the Bible. These characteristics have made the Korean Christians cherish and treasure the Bible. Christianity emphasized reading and studying the Bible, which appealed to those who had a great desire to absorb new knowledge. Third, one of the core ideas of Confucianism, the value of respecting heaven and valuing people, is analogous to the Christian values of love of God and love of your neighbor. Fourth, Confucianism regarded moral well-being as a noble virtue. Thus, when Koreans accepted Christianity, they especially emphasized this tenet and other commandments, and the moral rightness of living. Therefore, Christian biblical commandments became more true in the Korean context than the gospel itself. Joy, hope, and comfort tend to be neglected and legalistic preaching became more proclaimed in pulpits. In this way, Christianity was not in conflict with Confucianism and therefore did not threaten the existing religious structure of Korea.

Korean Canadians brought Confucian values into the West as they immigrated, and those values were passed on to younger generations through moral education at home. This same ethos also extends to the Korean immigrant church and is evident in the leadership structure, church polity, and even theology.

Although Confucianism had positive impacts on Korean Christianity, negative impacts can be found as well. Certain governing understandings of God, such as the image of a patriarchal and authoritarian God, contribute to solidifying hierarchy and marginalizing youth. As in the Confucian culture the father is the model of authority in the family, the father God image gained popularity in Korean Christianity. Thus, despite the egalitarian principles that Christianity upholds, the emphasis on father God imagery created a strict hierarchy between

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[29] Chung, *Korean Confucianism,* 138.

[30] Ibid., 139.

[31] Jong Gyun Jung, *Confucianism and Korean Christianity* (Seoul: PUTS, 1993), 42–51.

human and God and fixed the image of a patriarchal God. With a traditional, patriarchal image of a God who is fearsome, vengeful, and legalistic, challenging God's authority is unacceptable, and this contributes to undergirding the power of authorities in the church. Some argue that the emphasis on the image of a father God is merely a societal tradition that has been passed on and offers no justifiable reason for excluding young people. However, the way in which God is imaged in humans contributes to our notions of human value. The patriarchal image contributes to abuses of power by those at the top, while the marginalized, including young people, tend to be overlooked. Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that the capstone of the patriarchal image is seeing God as a "divine male who created the world as a system of rule of men over women, masters over slaves, and ruler over subjects."[32] This image reinforces the patriarchal reading of Christian scripture on who has the authority in the church congregation. For instance, the male pastors uphold a superior position as a spiritual leader by being placed in parallel with rabbi and Jesus. As in the family system where the seniors take initiative to lead the inferiors, adults lead the church and in turn the younger generations are expected to follow without questioning. The Confucian ethos combines with and reinforces the traditional image of a patriarchal God.

Conclusion

As a third culture kid, I often heard this question: "Where do you come from?" This article started with a yearning to answer this question better. The answer is more complicated than just giving the name of a country or two nations connected with a hyphen, such as I was born in Germany but lived in Korea. Understanding the hyphenated identity experience relates to understanding one's multilayered social and religious location. Korean Canadian youth belong in the messy middle ground and come from there. They are expanding the boundaries of the between as their home. Youth are the children of the inherited past, the multilayered present, and the alternative future.

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[32] Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Sexism and Misogyny in the Christian Tradition: Liberating Alternatives," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 34 (2014): 88.

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Lament, Hospitality, and Living Together with 'Our' Children:
Rethinking Christian Education in Local Churches
with Children Who Have Refugee/IDP Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT: This study explores how Christian Education can access and embrace children with refugee/internally displaced people (IDP) backgrounds to address the issues associated with feelings of loss safely and to contribute to a socially just framework. This study intends to find ways to alleviate the suffering of children due to violence, oppression, and control and pursues a community of mutual respect that honors children's identities and subjective experiences. Through the discourses and practice of lament and hospitality and with the ethics of inter-embracement, this study rethinks the meaning of a sense of social belonging, safety, and restoration.

Children Forcibly Displaced

> *Not everyone has [peace]. Millions of men, women, and children witness wars every day. Their reality is violence, homes destroyed, innocent lives lost.… They are doctors and teachers. Lawyers, journalists, poets, and priests. And children, so many children…The displaced who make up these staggering numbers are human beings with hopes for a better future.*[1]

> *We cannot hide from responsibility or accountability for we are never relieved of the responsibility that we have to our generation and future generations to keep justice, peace, and hope alive and vibrant.*[2]

Forced migration happens all over the world, whether due to war, internal instability, religious persecution, or changes in the ecosystem. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), the term refugee denotes "people whose lives have been torn apart when violence arrives on their doorstep, or when they are persecuted for their religious or political beliefs."[3] Unlike a refugee, however, an internally displaced person is protected by their own government, but they are not protected by international law and are not eligible for many forms of assistance. They do not cross borders but have been forced to flee their homes and wander in search of where they can find safety. In other words, a common challenge for people who experience forced internal or external migration is the loss of their sense of belonging, living as strangers in many ways. Maura Sellars reports that more than half of refugees are under the age of 18, and all of them have experienced atrocities related to their refugee status.[4] Sarah Dryden-Peterson says the number of refugees worldwide is at its highest level since World War II, and ongoing conflicts have left refugee groups

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[1] Malala Yousafzai, *We Are Displaced* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019), xi-x.
[2] Emilie Maureen Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 164.
[3] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Who Is Considered a Refugee?" https://help.unhcr.org/mexico/en/quien-es-una-persona-refugiada/
[4] Maura Sellars, "Power, Politics, People and Pedagogy" in *Educating Students with Refugee and Asylum Seeker Experiences: A Commitment to Humanity*, 1-18 (Leverkusen, DE: Verlag Barbara Budrich, 2020), 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12sdz0r.6.

struggling for decades to stay together and maintain a chance at survival.[5] Millions of forcibly displaced people living in and around camps often try to support themselves and their families with minimal humanitarian assistance while facing active resistance from host country/regional governments and citizens.[6]

The ways in which communities have dealt with forcibly displaced people have varied widely. When more than half a million refugees from Ukraine escaped in four days, Hungary's welcome to Ukrainians differed from its attitude toward recent refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa. In 2015, several countries erected walls to prevent over one million war refugees from entering. The Macedonian government also put more police and troops on the border. This trend was due to the spread of xenophobia in Europe provoked by terrorist attacks, and it gave displaced people a sense of abandonment by the world. More heartbreaking is that not all refugees are afforded the same degree of empathy and consideration, despite drowning children, barbed wire fences, overcrowded camps, deprived rights, and killings. Why have some people received sympathy, and why are others disqualified from being lamented? In this situation, asylum can often act as a remedy, offering tremendous rights and protections, yet difficult to obtain. However, not all asylum programs offer enough to ensure freedom from economic insecurity, social exclusion, racism, etc. Rather, there are cases where asylum does not have the power to effect change. In other words, sovereign states often do not solve the day-to-day problems faced by refugees.

Scholars, including Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., suggest that, if current trends continue, future refugee and forced migration studies will increasingly move to cities rather than isolated refugee camps.[7] By 2012, more than half of refugees were living in urban areas rather than camps.[8] Additionally, the protracted nature of disputes makes it more likely that children will spend their school days in the new community most likely within a host community. The growing need to fund refugee education is becoming increasingly incompatible with donor commitments. Refugee children are vulnerable to alienation, discrimination, and trauma in these new contexts, and Christian education helps to address the humanitarian challenges and sacred responsibilities facing the local church. UNHCR, UNESCO, and other organizations, as well as people working in the field of refugee education, have done a great deal of work on behalf of refugee children, and have made a positive difference. Nevertheless, there are gaps in the socially just response they seek, including negotiations with policymakers, limited policy implementation for practical gains between countries, and the presence of countries and regions that are not aligned with international policy, making it more difficult to create a pathway toward equitable access to education for children of all refugee experiences.[9] In this circumstance, Christian education can serve children with refugee/IDP backgrounds within the local community, including the children in these circumstances who belong to the faith community.

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[5] Sarah Dryden-Peterson, "Refugee Education: The Crossroads of Globalization," *Educational Researche*r 45, no. 9 (2016): 474.

[6] Karen Jacobsen, "Livelihoods and Forced Migration," in *the Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies,* eds. Gil Loescher, Long Katy, Nando Sigona, and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[7] Gil Loescher, Long Katy, Nando Sigona, and Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Introduction: Refugee and Forced Migration Studies in Transition," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, 8.

[8] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "UNHCR Policy on Refugee Protection and Solutions in Urban Areas (2009): 2. Retrieved from http://www.unhcr.org/4ab356ab6.pdf

[9] Joanna McIntyre and Fran Abrams, *Refugee Education: Theorising Practice in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 19.

Judith Butler criticizes those who are not accepting the trial and trials of lives destroyed and people killed as something for which we need to be responsible, and for not recognizing our own roles in this horrific history. Butler says we need to create and maintain "the affective structure" to engage in righteous causes, not to excuse this situation.[10] Emily Towns says that what we do every day shapes us and is where both the hegemonic imagination, and the challenges and hopes to dismantle it are found.[11] This "everydayness" includes listening carefully when people speak or do not speak, talking to people and taking whatever they say as meaningful, being present in people's lives, sharing meals, facing heartbreak and disappointment, and getting up and trying one more time to make life right.[12] It is in this everydayness that "we the people" are formed.[13]

In this regard, this research argues that, regardless of children's diverse circumstances—age, gender, health and disability status, political and economic context, or religious identity—all are 'our' children and the local community can and may reach out to them all. I propose that faith community responses to children with refugee backgrounds can be implemented and improved through discourses of lament and hospitality, and through the practice of living together within the context of broader educational endeavors. Building on the extensive research that has been done in the field of refugees and their forced displacement, this study examines what Christian education can pursue as a result of efforts to understand the needs and circumstances of children with refugee/IDP backgrounds. The position of Christian education clearly has limitations in answering/evaluating urgent policy questions or modeling various theoretical/academic approaches. Nevertheless, rather than setting a clear boundary between public education and Christian education, a faith community may focus on what Christian education can contribute epistemologically and practically.

Intervention Discourses for Education of Refugee Children

I believe that Christian education and communities can play an important role in bridging the space and rigidity between the idealized and actual roles and partnerships of globalized actors such as UNHCR and national governments, including the ways in which they negotiate the age-old tensions between national sovereignty and global responsibility, by complementing and supporting the creation of roles and systems that allow public education to practice in more flexible ways. A child's right to free education, enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, is one of their fundamental rights, but Rebecca Adami argues that the prejudice many children face in education is not addressed in the Convention.[14] This study seeks to address the interventions that Christian education can contribute, not in terms of policy or welfare, but in terms of helping to shape the lives of children who should be respected and cared for as members of the community, rather than being seen merely as refugees.

1. Lack of Human and Material Resources

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was the global agency initially mandated to educate refugees. However, as refugee education remained outside the scope of national education systems, the responsibility was temporarily transferred to

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[10] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 6.
[11] Townes, *Womanist Ethics,* 164.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid., 165.
[14] Rebecca Adami, "Childism—on Adult Resistance to Children's Rights" in *The Rights of the Child Legal, Political and Ethical Challenges*, eds by Rebecca Adami, Anna Kaldal, and Margareta Aspán (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill | Nijhoff, 2023), 128-147.

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the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).[15] Refugee education policy took on an organizational aspect simply because there were no people "on the ground": from 1998 to 2011, UNHCR did not have a single education officer working in refugee host countries.[16] UNHCR outsourced the provision of refugee education to "implementing partners" — national and international NGOs.[17] Also, after World War II, UNHCR's operations became dependent on donor funding, and nation-states limited enforcement mechanisms for refugee education.[18] Despite the fact that refugee education has been constantly changing for the better, with, among other things, the creation of international conventions on refugee education, and the ways in which countries have interpreted and implemented the obligations of those conventions in their own way and in the context of their own societies have left children in a temporary and precarious situation.[19] Refugee children were excluded from education policies, vulnerable to being subject to exclusionary policies and practices determined by immigration and welfare policies, and treated as a potential risk to security or a potential drain on welfare resources.[20] Although education involves not only teaching children knowledge but also responding appropriately to their specific protection needs relative to their particular vulnerabilities, lack of resources or capacity within the community has allowed several types of discrimination to continue.[21]

2. Moving Toward Integrating with Public Education

The UNHCR policy was to align refugee education as closely as possible to education in the child's country of origin, including curriculum and language, to facilitate rapid return and to enable future participation in their country of origin.[22] In addition, the large-scale provision of education to refugees and the isolated location of refugee camps have had the structural consequence of separating schools for refugee children from schools for nationals.[23] However, a more recent UNHCR policy emphasized the "integration of refugee learners within national systems."[24] Such integration reflects the protracted nature of many conflicts and the increasing likelihood that refugee children will spend their entire school career in the host country. This situation shows that children with refugee and internally displaced experiences need no longer to be separate from local communities, but rather are part of the fabric of life for all of us. For children with refugee backgrounds or who have been internally displaced education is a key factor in social integration into a new (host) community, and thus local Christian communities need to consider how they can contribute to reducing tensions between children and local people in new environments, addressing the fear and stresses felt by communities, whether the children's return is possible or they resettle in new communities.

[15] J. G. Ruggie, "The United Nations and Globalization: Patterns and Limits of Institutional Adaptation," *Global Governance* 9, no. 3 (2003): 301–321.

[16] Dryden-Peterson, "Refugee Education," 478.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid. 479-80.

[19] McIntyre and Abrams, *Refugee Education*, 17.

[20] Charles Watters, *Refugee Children* (Abingdon: Oxford University Press, 2008), 133.

[21] Volker Türk and Rebecca Dowd, "Protection Gaps," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, 282.

[22] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Education field guidelines* (Geneva, Switzerland: Author, 2003) https://www.unhcr.org/protection/operations/40586bd34/education-field-guidelines.html

[23] Dryden-Peterson, "Refugee Education," 477.

[24] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, *Education strategy 2012–2016* (Geneva, Switzerland: Author, 2012), 8.

In 2014, 50% of refugees had access to primary school. At the secondary level, 25% of refugees had access to education, compared to 62% globally for non-refugees; 5% of refugees have a secondary education compared to 38% of nationals.[25] Children of pre-school and secondary school age (3-5 years and 15+ years) are often excluded from school integration programs, usually when they are outside the scope of national laws on compulsory education. School capacity, language barriers, psychosocial issues, and restrictions on supplementary classes are among the most common challenges faced by refugee and migrant children in need of education. The "most favorable treatment possible" set forth in Article 22 of the Refugee Convention varies among host countries, and refugees' right to education depends on the laws, policies, and practices implemented in each country's context.[26] In addition, the impact of neoliberalism has meant that students from relatively low socioeconomic backgrounds such as children with refugee/IDP experiences, are forced to attend schools determined by their socioeconomic circumstances, and that choice affects their personal identity.[27]

At the civil society level, social exclusion occurs through anti-immigrant and xenophobic attitudes and behaviors towards refugees — this takes the form of discrimination (exclusion from jobs, services, and social spaces) and harassment, ranging from verbal and emotional abuse to physical harassment.[28] In addition, competition between refugees and host populations for scarce resources can also be a source of instability.[29] Along with finance and healthcare provision, education is one area of social exclusion where organizations and institutions create access rules for refugees.[30]

Based on these discussions, Christian communities and education have a sacred obligation. It is a call to authentic relationships and to live well together. To pursue these goals, this study explores the perceptions and practices of lament, hospitality, and inter-embrace to initiate these authentic relationships and build larger communities beyond faith communities.

Lament in the Paradoxical Reality

> *I don't think most people understand the tangle of emotions that comes with leaving behind everything you know. They are not only fleeing violence—which is why so many are forced to leave, and is what's shown on the news—but they are escaping their countries, their beloved homes. That seems to get lost in the conversation about refugees and internally displaced people. So much focus is on where they are now—not on what they have lost as a result.*[31]

People who have been forced to migrate for survival are grateful for their new lives, but also carry heartbreaking memories of and feelings of the loss for their previous ones.[32] When this experience of loss is negatively internalized, the anger and blame heightened by the loss itself is

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[25] Sarah Dryden-Peterson, "Refugee Education in Countries of First Asylum: Breaking Open the Black Box of Pre-resettlement Experiences*," Theory and Research in Education* 14, no. 2 (2015): 9-10.

[26] Dryden-Peterson, "Refugee Education," 475.

[27] Sellars, "Power, Politics, People and Pedagogy," 4.

[28] Jacobsen, "Livelihoods and Forced Migration," 106.

[29] James Milner, "Protracted Refugee Situations," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, 155.

[30] Ibid., 107.

[31] Yousafzai, *We Are Displaced*, 45.

[32] Ibid., 157.

directed at the children themselves. By allowing this internalization to be expressed externally, lament aims to provide a way for the community to treat the experience of loss with respect and engagement so that it does not harm the children further, but rather seeks to shape their lives in a healthy way and provide a safe place for them to share their experiences within community.

Lament is sustained by the experience of not knowing, triggered by the loss of something completely unfathomable, including what was lost.[33] When losing a person, or being forcibly separated from a place or community, a person also loses who oneself is, because a person does not exist independently, but rather within the context of place and community and thus will lose some elements of their identity.[34] Thus, rather than being privatized, the lament of loss reminds us of the fundamental interdependence and ethical responsibility of community, and of its many inseparable relationships.[35] This tendency clearly shows that communities that have children with refugee/IDP experiences need language and interventions that can truly embrace their pain and loss at a community level as well as demand appropriate political or economic support at a national level.

1. The Experience of a Lost Sense of Belonging

Children with refugee/IDP backgrounds experience social, familial, and institutional upheavals, in situations of both long- and short-term migration.[36] Many children experience the loss of their strongest bonds which means they need spiritual, communal, and social care.[37] With Jason Harts' research that considers mental health related to children who experienced forced displacement, and that includes a broad disciplinary approach encompassing social work, law, and ethnography, I find notable efforts to resolve frustrations, insecurities, and longings. This shows that Christian education on how to live well with refugee children requires a therapeutic mindset.

Jung-A Park reports that children with refugee backgrounds live "a life of liminality, never fully entering and never re-entering" the society into which they have migrated, with anxieties about experiences of family breakdown, stigma, relationship conflict, and a thirst for recognition.[38] In a study of refugee adolescents who came to South Korea, children suffered the effects of trauma related to separation and longing for their loved ones, what they lost as refugees, thoughts of home, and their impoverished status.[39] Children spoke of academic difficulties and experiences of bullying due to their status and culture, feelings of distance from friends, circumstances of homelessness, and a lack of identity and agency.[40] Students with refugee/IDP backgrounds are also more likely than native-born students to be victims of bullying and unfair treatment both by peers and teachers, which contributes to differences in academic achievement and well-being.[41] Most forced migrants start from a position of loss, including a loss of assets, of family and community,

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[33] Butler, *Precarious Life*, 22.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Jason Hart, "Children and Forced Migration," in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, 384.
[37] Watters, *Refugee Children,* 12.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Jung-A Park, "Children Dreaming of the Future While Holding Back: A Phenomenological Study of Refugee Adolescents' Migration Experiences," Ph.D. Dissertation in the Graduate School of General Studies at Pyeongtaek National University (2021), ii.
[40] Ibid.
[41] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Stepping up: Refugee Education in Crisis" (2019): 11. https://www.unhcr.org/steppingup/

and often of emotional and physical health as well.[42] The practice of lament can have an impact by building up a wounded community while actually embracing the tears of refugees and participating interdependently in their suffering.

Hannah Arendt emphasizes "the right to belong to some community," noting that this sense is "much more fundamental than freedom and justice."[43] For example, even if they are sisters, the fact that some get visas and others do not is not only linked to the availability of stable educational environments and support for children to shape their lives the way they want to, but also it is a snapshot of the forced separation and structural difficulties that some families face when it comes to their current and future prospects for survival, where some are chosen and others are not.[44] Refugee and IDP female adolescents are particularly vulnerable to forced early marriage, and girls who marry at a young age are often trapped in a cycle of poverty and destitution, and barred from an education and any other future caused and exacerbated the uncertainty of not knowing when they will leave the camp.[45] Children who have lost existing bonds long for new ones, which in and of itself exposes them to countless life-threatening situations of extreme violence and vulnerability.

2. Need for Lament as Shared Narratives

M. Kristiina Montero argues that while many studies have highlighted the increased risks for children and adolescents with refugee backgrounds of developing mental health problems during the permanent resettlement process, few have considered their specific needs in an educational context.[46] Montero argues that appropriately embracing trauma narratives in the context of classroom instruction can help all educators, especially those serving children and youth from refugee backgrounds, better understand the process of recovering from trauma.[47] Montero's research makes the contribution of Christian education remarkably clear: in order to take a trauma-informed approach in community work (and in Montero's case, in the classroom), educators do not need to be trained therapists; they need the ability (and desire) to be responsive to others who are suffering and to offer support in a humane way.[48] This positive opportunity helps not only children with experiences of loss and trauma, but also societies/communities to heal, survive, and live together. Sharing the narratives of their wounds with the community helps them to describe the situations in which many others may be situated. The children who tell their stories themselves are able to engage in altruistic social movements and capture their experiences by learning to use words such as discrimination, violence, disconnection, and power.[49] Here, lament as a narrative for the exclusion, racism, and suffering of refugees can contribute to being heard and validated in an appropriate way in relation to the issues of refugee survival.

However, children who have experienced various life traumas cannot share detailed descriptions in a community from the beginning. Lament may allow the children to articulate their

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[42] Jacobsen, "Livelihoods and Forced Migration," 99.

[43] Hannah Arendt, *Imperialism: Part Two of The Origins of Totalitarianism* (San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1994 [1951]), 296.

[44] Yousafzai, We Are displaced, 49.

[45] Ibid., 98.

[46] M. Kristiina Montero, "Narratives of Trauma and Self-healing Processes in a Literacy Program for Adolescent Refugee Newcomers," in *Educating Refugee-background Students: Critical Issues and Dynamic Contexts*, eds. Shawna Shapiro, Raichle Farrelly and Mary Jane Curry,92-106 (Bristol, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2018), 92. https://doi.org/10.21832/SHAPIR9979

[47] Montero, "Narratives of Trauma," 92.

[48] Ibid., 93.

[49] Ibid., 100.

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experiences from a place of safety, and to feel that the community is sharing their suffering. Lament is an important way to restore and reveal silenced truths, so that voices that have been intentionally or unintentionally muted are fully heard in the community.[50] Lament is an educational practice, however, that can also be subverted and thus contribute to the dehumanization of refugees and the resentment and hostility experienced by uprooted victims of forced displacement. In addition, lament persistently demands that God's justice and love be made visible in this world, by acknowledging and lamenting the suffering of those who have been forcibly displaced and thus are suffering from political and social oppression, poverty, persecution, and war. The practice of lament is important for personal as well as social change and for nurturing resilience, as it opens the speaker and the community to new understandings and seeks reconciliation to weave an ever more just social fabric.[51] In recounting the experiences of children in particular, despite the fact that the reality of the experience may be conveyed differently in different memories, the community's listening to the stories of suffering is not merely a matter of expanding perspectives, nor is it an act of blaming any particular group or individual, but of bearing witness, confessing and confronting the truth.[52] "Lament recognizes the continuation of unhealed wounds and provides a legitimate place for affirming one's identity in response to the longing for life."[53]

In this sense, using lament in Christian communities and education can counteract presumed vulnerability in a way that discerns the varied experiences of refugee children, because it listens to each child's needs in a mutually respectful way, rather than a way in which providers determine the needs and experiences of their charges. Also, it can contribute to providing a space to speak and realize themselves as a subject of their own lives. The younger children are, the more difficult it is for them to explain the complexity of their experiences through these narratives. However, one way to support children's autonomy is to support their perspectives on memory.[54] In this respect, children's narrative reconstructions of their past may or may not be relevant to issues of justice and welfare, and may not focus on morally relevant events, but at least they may reveal emotional concepts.[55] Through the practice of lament as a narrative, children are able to deal with their own inner guilt and anger and develop their capacity as moral agents to prepare for other instances of violence or tragedy and to connect with the suffering of others. Children are sharing their possibilities as agents in a community, rather than understanding themselves merely as victims of various violence, incapable of taking care of themselves. Thus, local faith communities and education can address the collective sensitivity of community to our children's deep hurts and grief in a way that respects their loss of bonds and reveals and affirms their experience of suffering from violence.

Hospitality as Ethical Sense

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[50] Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Empowering Memory and Movement: Thinking and Working Across Borders* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 530; Mark Charles and Rah Soong-Chan, *Unsettling Truth: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 182.

[51] Flora A. Keshgegian, *Redeeming Memories: A Theology of Healing and Transformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000), 30.

[52] Eliana Ah-Rum Ku, "Lament-Driven preaching for a 戀 (Yeon) community," *Practical Theology* 16, no. 1 (2023): 123-24.

[53] Ibid., 125.

[54] Monisha Pasupathi and Cecilia Wainryb, "Developing Moral Agency through Narrative," *Human Development* 53, no. 2 (2010): 71.

[55] Ibid.

Accepting refugees can itself cause economic, political, and social suffering for a country. That is why some countries deliberately block refugees from entering society—such as Australia's policy to ensure that refugees cannot refuse acceptance into a third country—and others contribute to vulnerability and forced migration. Yet some countries that have witnessed genocide and the emergence of refugees, have provided enormous arms to the field of tragedy. These relationships reveal that the abundance and security of some are inextricably linked to the poverty, vulnerability, and often migration of others. Thus, hospitality is necessary as a pastoral and political call to welcome vulnerable and displaced people who are forced to deal with the calculations of capitalism's political and economic growthism.

Educating children about hospitality in an ethical sense is related to daily interactions within the relationships of a community.[56] Refugees' lives and identities tend to be insecure and vulnerable due to misconceptions and practices of hospitality. Tomas Ranolds presents how to engage with justice and love in the sorrows of refugees. He criticizes the one-sided, top-down approach that arises from generous donations when the host-guest dichotomous relationship is patriarchal.[57] Of the four categories he presents, this study pays attention to the third one: How to share the affluence by reaching out to the underprivileged and inviting others within—but only if the host maintains the initiative and only when the guest follows the host's way, will the guest be included in the invitation. Reynolds regards this case as hermeneutic violence, in which the stranger is already determined by a sovereign subject. Depending on the host's initiative and their ways, the guest (refugees) will exist forever as a guest and remain subordinate to power.

This intentional or unintentional creation of power and subordination is not fully addressed by legal status. It is a matter of perception in everyday life, including physical and emotional issues. For example, legal recognition may not allow refugees' status to escape from precarious working conditions, or to continue education, to find safe housing, or to improve the quality of public services. Rather, even with legal recognition, they may face persistent economic instability, racism, and social exclusion. In this regard, the discourse of hospitality leads us to think about the structures that prevent children's voices from being heard and limit their agency, making them one of the marginalized groups.[58] Children from refugee/IDP contexts are placed in a position of being the recipients of hospitality, regardless of the power to distribute reciprocity or their willingness or ability to respond to invitations of hospitality.[59] In relationships of hospitality, power is not equal for all, especially for children because children have more layers in the development of their own agency.

With the existing subordination of children with experiences of forced migration, it is not ideal for children's continuous survival to depend on the one-sided, somewhat oppressive, and unstable hospitality of a host country. When children are not recognized as sovereign agents, often viewed as inferior to adults, adults become the grantors of rights, creating a power structure that leads to oppression.[60] Behaviors that imply that the voices and interpretations of adults or the country of the settlement are superior can impact children in negative ways. It is difficult to truly connect

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[56] Lisa Isenström, "Children as Growing Rights Subjects – The Significance of Teachers' Actions'," *The International Journal of Children's Rights* 28, no. 2 (2020): 258–287.

[57] Thomas E. Reynolds, "Beyond Hospitality? Unsettling Theology and Migration in Canada," in *Migration and Religion: Negotiating Sites of Hospitality, Resistance, and Vulnerability*, eds. Andrea Bieler et al. (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2019), 115.

[58] Adami, "Childism," 129.

[59] Eliana Ah-Rum Ku, "A Call for Practicing Hospitality Based on Lament in Preaching for a Wounded Community," *Homiletic* 47, no. 2 (2022): 17.

[60] Adami, "Childism," 128.

with refugee children when teaching as an act of care is effectively reduced to a one-sided relationship of care, giving and receiving. Barbara Harrell-Bond argues that refugees are not *a priori* dependent and passive; rather, humanitarian institutions and political structures have created and even demanded the dependence of displaced persons on aid providers and donors.[61] Like mental health scholars interested in resilience, ethnographers view children as social actors who can mediate the negative experience of forced migration for themselves and others.[62]

In this regard, faith community and education with a sense of hospitality can support children to behave in ways that enable them to respect the voices of others, recognize their own voices as valuable, and find space to express their opinions, by modeling reinforcing attitudes and behaviors that enable them to stand up and challenge the disrespectful treatment of themselves or others when they witness it.[63] Rather than forcing Christian culture and Christian traditions on individuals, Christian education needs to support them in preserving their culture and traditions to aid in their healing and settlement, or to support developing new traditions that are do not negate their established traditions.[64] When a dominant education teaches refugee children the values of their 'new' country instead of diversity as strength, whether in the host country culture or religion, it positions them as 'others,' and the grouping of different contexts and situations under the label 'refugee' not only makes them invisible but also deprives them of their right to equal participation in education.[65] Focusing on assumed vulnerabilities in a way that homogenizes the experiences of refugee children can undermine support that is responsive to individual circumstances.[66] In being open to this identity diversity, children can find a state of healing possible and one that can be shared together.[67] By advocating children's individual diversity, which becomes invisible through grouping children under the name of 'refugee,' and by minimizing the concern they may have of depriving them of equal educational participation rights, Christian education can contribute a discourse that perpetuates anti-immigration rhetoric, hate, isolation, and more. This awareness is tied to a deep engagement and practice of reciprocity.[68] Interacting in such a way preserves and promotes the otherness of others while affirming the unique needs in children's otherness.[69] In this regard, employing the concept of hospitality in Christian education may contribute to the discovery of a state of healing potential that can come together in a place open to identity diversity.

Ethics of Care with Inter-Embracement

Although we are concerned that our perception of "our" children creates another exclusivity, we may extend the scope of "our" enough to embrace children who we can meet. "We" means to live together. *Not to exist* together, *but to live* together. This can be manifested through repeated experiences of each other's lives and of beings colliding and of each other's past, present, and

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[61] Barbara E. Harrell-Bond, *Imposing Aid: Emergency Assistance to Refugees* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 5.

[62] Rachel Hinton, "Seen but not Heard: Refugee Children and Models for Intervention," In *Abandoned Children*, eds. Catherine Panter-Brick and Malcolm T. Smith, 199–212 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[63] Isenström, "Children as Growing Rights Subjects," 284.

[64] McIntyre and Abrams, *Refugee Education*, 22.

[65] Ibid., 40.

[66] Ibid., 59.

[67] Ibid., 22.

[68] Letty M. Russell, *Just Hospitality: God's Welcome in a World of Difference* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 15; Hee An Choi, *A Postcolonial Self: Korean Immigrant Theology and Church* (New York: Suny Press, 2015), 140.

[69] Amos Young, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 123-25.

future interaction.[70] Each brings their whole life with them, sometimes broken hearts. It is not easy to live with that and keep it alive. When we recognize the presence of God's abundant love in a being, as in the Song of Songs' declaration, "You are altogether beautiful, my love; there is no flaw in you" (Song of Sg 4:7, NRSV), we are not just facing someone's entire being who embraces God's declaration, but also the God who made that declaration. We are facing an image of God that can never be despised, that can never be marginalized, that can never be ignored, that can never be manipulated or used. There are differences between children, and some with serious hostility due to their hurts, but they remain "our" children, bearing the image of God in us.

Also, the meaning of "our" children can be understood in the concept of an ethical connection that works hand-in-hand with the right to protect the dignity and physical integrity of human life as "shared humanity."[71] The ethical understanding of embracement shows another perspective from the theological understanding, which speaks to the image of God. Acknowledging human imperfection itself empowers us to live out ethical demands. "Accepting oneself as part of the human community then necessitates that we confront the limits of our ability to live up to an ethical demand."[72] Rosine Judith Kelzs draws from Butler's insights to argue that being dependent on others, beyond the boundaries of one's own life form or community, connects us not only to one another but also to the entirety of creation, and that "the ethics of precariousness" encompasses all life as a shared vulnerability, and dependence on others we do not know for our survival.[73] A perception that one's sense of responsibility that does not exclude the unknown other is crucial because if your responsibility stems from an emotional connection to the other, you may care about the well-being of your parents, friends, lover, or the neighborhood or town you live in, but be unmoved by the plight of a refugee who has been denied the right to enter your country. Both the ethical and theological recognition of seemingly opposites contribute to establishing healthy relationships with and for "our" children and to practicing an ethic of care in Christian education and community.

Nel Noddings says that the practice of caring comes from relationships, not specific teachings from the community, and that caring happens in many different ways, including inviting children into the conversation.[74] This conversation responds to different children in different ways, practices care in a non-judgmental way, and does not include expectations or judgment as part of teachers' goals.[75] It seeks to enhance the growth of children but does not threaten children's otherness, and does not define what exactly they should do or be for others.[76] Noddings' recognition of the power of embracing the self and the beings around her lies in the environment itself, which honors children for who they are. It can be understood as the act of affirming the strengths of the other person by working together to help them grow in ways they seek, in ways they value, and in ways that matter.[77] Deogratias M. Rwezaura sees all these initiatives—to help refugees reintegrate into society and feel a sense of normalcy away from home—as a kind of dialogue. People of different nationalities, tribes, genders, creeds and ages come together to

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[70] Hyun-Jong Jung, "A Visitor," in *Island* (Seoul: Munhakpan, 2015), 33.

[71] Rosine Judith Kelz, *The Non-Sovereign Self, Responsibility, and Otherness: Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, and Stanley Cavell on Moral Philosophy and Political Agency* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)*,* 109.

[72] Ibid.*,* 110.

[73] Ibid.*,* 122; Butler, *Precarious Life,* 22-23.

[74] Nel Noddings, *Philosophy of Education* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2012), 131.

[75] Ibid., 132.

[76] Ibid., 135.

[77] Sellars, "Power, Politics, People and Pedagogy." 12.

celebrate life and learn from each other's rich traditions on how to live together at the same time.[78] This dialogue refers to both a dialogue of life and a dialogue of action. A dialogue of life means listening to the joys, sorrows, problems, and concerns of children with refugee/IDP experiences and practicing the spirit of openness and love for self and others that is revealed in living together.[79] A dialogue of action means that faith communities work to promote the full development and liberation of forcibly displaced children.[80]

Conclusion

This study argues that the perceptions and behaviors of children with refugee/IDP experiences within faith communities need to be marked by lament, hospitality, and an inter-embrace within the practices of Christian Education. This pedagogical practice is not about establishing a particular form of pedagogy or curriculum, but also about looking at education in epistemic and relational terms, with the hope that children will be able to recognize their own value and live by advocating for the rights and justice of themselves and others, not only in their faith communities but also in their school or in the many communities they will encounter. A goal of Christian education in the community of children with refugee/IDP experience needs to be a space where they can feel physically and emotionally safe, not to create a Christian religious elite, but to embrace children as they are, with their experiences, thoughts, fears, and wounds, both positive and negative. Confronting the challenges of refugees and forced migration is about understanding and addressing the human tragedies of displacement and deprivation, and the importance of recognizing the heterogeneity and agency of migrants. Local faith communities can and should carefully and constantly examine their links to policy, and continue to critique the nature and meaning of humanitarianism and its regimes in constructive ways.[81] Thus, Christian community and education, especially for refugee/IDP children with limited access to public education, requires a hyper-sensitivity to their circumstances and sufferings, as well as a sense of responsibility to bear witness to and work to combat the injustices experienced by the children through communal level commitment.

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[78] Deogratias M. Rwezaura, "Interreligious Dialogue in a Nomadic Church: The Witness of Jesuit Refugee Service in Eastern Africa," in *Church in an Age of Global Migration*, eds. Susanna Snyder, Joshua Ralston, and Agnes M. Brazal, 227-237 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 231.
[79] Ibid., 232.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Fiddian-Qasmiyeh at al., "Introduction," 1.

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"Engaging Childist Biblical Interpretation to Enhance Children's Bible Lessons"

Abstract

Many children's Bible lessons, even those that are intended to be child-oriented lessons, are consciously or unconsciously designed in ways that serve adult agendas for children rather than granting children full agency. This paper makes the case that by engaging the growing movements of childism and childist interpretation of the Bible (an approach that focuses on the presence and agency of children in biblical texts), religious educators can better facilitate and guide children in Bible lessons that are driven by the children themselves and that connect better to their life contexts, experiences and felt needs. This is illustrated through engagement of three biblical narratives: the binding of Isaac, the enslaved Israelite girl, and the boy with loaves and fishes.

Keywords: Childist biblical interpretation, childism, Bible lessons, religious education, children

Introduction

Religious educators have developed and adopted a number of helpful approaches to Bible study that allow children some measure of freedom and agency as they engage the text. Rather than simply telling children the "proper" (read "adult") interpretation and application of Bible passages, these models and methods allow children to explore the Bible for themselves. Still, many of these children's Bible lessons place limits on the agency of children either by having the adult religious educator pre-determine the theme to be explored in the lesson or by ignoring potential themes in the Bible passage that might relate to the lives and experiences of the children they are teaching. This paper argues that by engaging the emerging fields of childism and childist interpretation of the Bible, religious educators can better facilitate and guide children in Bible study driven and directed by the children themselves.

This paper provides a brief introduction to the concepts of childism and childist interpretation of the Bible. It then draws several implications of these concepts for teaching the Bible to children. Finally, it applies these principles to Bible lessons on the Binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, the enslaved Israelite girl who served Naaman's wife in 2 Kings 5:2-3, and the boy with five barley loaves and two fish in John 6:8-9.

Childism and Childist Interpretation of the Bible

Childism examines and challenges "adultist" thought that leads to the marginalization of children. Instead, it attends to the lived experience and agency of children both historically and in the present. Childism also seeks to empower children by respecting them as fully human by granting them agency and justice.

1

According to The Childism Institute,

> Childism empowers children by transforming norms and structures. It is like feminism but related to children. It recognizes that young people are often disadvantaged compared to adults. And so it strives to change societies in ways that better respond to children's actual lives. Childism therefore seeks children's radical equality. But it does so, not on traditional adult terms, but according to children's own distinctive experiences ("Childism: An Introduction" 2021, 2).

As interdisciplinary philosopher Tanu Biswas notes, "Childism takes children's agency and experiences and uses these as critical lenses for thinking differently about larger societies" (2020). Childism, then, is not simply a concept used when working with children, but one that also calls for the reformation of societies and institutions.

The principles of childism are applied by scholars of many diverse disciplines of academic study today, including Bible scholars. Before the year 2000, only a handful of scholarly books and articles in biblical studies had been published that focused on the presence and the role of children in the Bible. Over the past two decades, however, dozens of scholarly books have been written by leading and emerging Bible scholars related to children and the Bible (Allen 2020).

Childist interpretation of the Bible, sometimes referred to as child-oriented interpretation of the Bible, is a rapidly growing approach to biblical studies. Childist scholars note that biblical texts often give scant attention to the children in their narratives, and traditional biblical commentaries have often given them even less attention. Feminist and womanist biblical scholars approach their readings of the Bible by recognizing the presence of women in the biblical narrative, attending to the role of women in the ancient world, and reflecting on the ways the biblical texts might either highlight the moral agency of women or, alternatively, marginalize or erase women's voices and agency (cf. Gafney 2008, 403). Bible scholars Kathleen Gallagher Elkins and Julie Faith Parker note that, in a similar manner, childist biblical scholars seek to help readers recognize the presence of children in the biblical narrative, attend to the roles of children in the ancient world, and reflect on the ways biblical texts might either shed light on the moral agency of children or, conversely, marginalize their presence and agency (2016, 422, 425). Furthermore, childist biblical scholars highlight the presence of children in the biblical world even when exploring passages that do not explicitly mention or name children. They note that those who first heard and read the stories of gospels, for example, would have known that children were present among the crowds that heard the teachings of Jesus, and this awareness should affect the way readers today envision and understand those narratives (cf. Betsworth 2015, 4; Allen 2019, xiii).

Childist biblical scholars, then, attend to the presence and context of children in the biblical world and at times expand their reflection on children beyond what is explicitly stated in the biblical text. Children's Bibles are perhaps the only other genre of literature that has consistently done this as well. As shall be noted below, however, children's Bibles and children's Bible lesson curricula often retell and expand upon Bible stories of children in ways

that draw very different meaning from the texts than do childist scholars, as they change and appropriate biblical narratives to teach children lessons that serve adult agendas. For many childist and child-oriented biblical scholars, their focus on children in the biblical world is not undertaken solely as a historical academic pursuit, but also because it can inform the ways in which we understand the nature, role, and status of children in our world today. Bible scholar Dana Nolan Fewell, for example, asks, "What would it mean to read the Bible *for the sake of our children*?" (2003, 24).

Implications of Childism and Childist Interpretation of the Bible for Bible Lessons with Children

How, then, might religious educators draw upon childism and childist interpretation of the Bible to enhance Bible lessons with children? One of the primary implications of childism and childist interpretation of the Bible for religious educators is that children should be seen and heard as fully human people of faith and be granted agency in their own religious education.

A number of well-regarded child-oriented models and methods of teaching the Bible to children exist that resonate with aspects of a childism. In their book *The Bible: A Child's Playground*, Roger and Gertrude Gobbel argue that teachers should not attempt to steer children to arrive at adult interpretations of a text, but rather should allow children engage the text in ways that are appropriate for them (1986; cf. Briggs 2017). Likewise, founded upon insights from the Montessori approach to education, Jerome Berryman's *Godly Play* curriculum allows children to choose ways to respond to Bible stories through a number of different activities and media (1991). Building on the work of these and others, several religious education scholars continue to highlighting children's agency in theological reflection and biblical interpretation, honoring the life experiences children bring to the interpretation process (e.g. Campen 2021, Kennamer 2020, and Caldwell 2016).

Tanya Marie Eustace Campen states, "My goal in ministry as a practical theologian is to create space to listen to and learn from children" (2021, 92). Campen and Dana Kennamer have both described how taking on the role of researchers made them focus on listening to children's thoughts rather than preparing to share their own thoughts with children. They both suggest that this process of listening to and hearing children made them better religious educators and that others educators can benefit from doing the same (Campen 2021, 30-31; Kennamer 202, 173).

Another related implication of taking a childist approach to religious education is that it calls on educators to ask children questions that encourage them to "wonder" about religious issues and religious texts. "I wonder" questions are a key component of the Godly Play curriculum (Berryman 1991) that has been highlighted by more recent books as well (Kennamer 2020, 173-184; Campen 2021, 3-9; Caldwell 2016). The content of religious education is peculiar content in that it deals with eternal questions, paradoxes, and deep relationships with undefinable divinity. Religious education can give children the freedom and agency to wonder about these matters and, in the process, develop as theological and spiritual thinkers.

3

Even those religious educators who draw upon these models and methods can enhance their Bible lessons by consciously engaging in childist reflection and childist biblical interpretation as they prepare their lessons. Many Bible lessons for children are *thematic*. That is, the adult curriculum writer or the teacher pre-determines the theme to be explored in the lesson and then draws upon a Bible passage to help the class explore that theme. By engaging in childist thought, religious educators are better able to review Sunday School curriculum or their own lesson designs to see if they are primarily exploring themes that serve adultist agendas. Many curriculum materials for children, whether they are produced by more conservative or more progressive authors and agencies, explore adultist goals by encouraging virtues such as obedience and compliance. Rarely, if ever, do these lesson plans explore issues such as being assertive, resisting prejudice and oppression, questioning the status quo, and standing up for justice for children. Like adults, children may not always be able to understand all the complexities of every social justice issue. Still, it is important for children to learn that concern for social justice is a key aspect of their faith traditions. Too often, matters of social justice become the null curriculum in the religious education of children, but matters related to social justice often speak directly to the experiences and concerns of children today.

Taking the perspective of childism, adult religious educators will grant children the agency to suggest themes and topics of their own. Before developing or adopting a series of lessons, adults can first hold listening sessions with children to better hear children's concerns, their life experiences, and guide them as they suggest their own themes. Listening sessions such as these, at the beginning of a unit of study, allow children an opportunity to share their spiritual concerns freely with a group of their peers and caring adults, which would serve as valuable religious education and spiritual formation in and of itself. Furthermore, by hearing these themes, religious educators would be better able to choose appropriate Bible passages that may illuminate those themes as well.

By exploring childist biblical interpretation, religious educators can also become better prepared to lead *inductive* Bible studies, those Bible lessons in which a passage is explored without a pre-determined interpretation or application in mind. Childist biblical criticism is an approach to biblical scholarship that is undertaken by adults who write or teach other adults. So, one might reasonably ask what relevance such study has for teaching children the Bible. To be clear, the goal of such research is not for the adult religious educator simply to read what childist scholars have written on a passage and then to lecture on those interpretations to the children in their classes! Rather, the goal is for such research to conscientize adult religious educators to themes in the passage that may relate to children's experiences and interests and prepare them to hear those themes in the comments and questions of children. Religious educators who engage this research are less likely to dismiss children's interpretations simply because they do not fit the common adult readings of the passage. Such study can also help the lesson guide provide children with historical and cultural background that traditional commentators overlook, but which might illuminate the place of children in the biblical text and aspects of the text that may speak to children today. For religious educators, the purpose of such study is not necessarily to privilege the canonical text of biblical narratives or a childist interpretation of the text, but rather to help them ask serious questions about their own assumptions about biblical texts and how they are using them with children.

4

The following sections apply these principles to potential lessons on the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, the story of the enslaved Israelite girl in 2 Kings 5:2-3, and the boy with loaves and fishes in John 6:8-9. The paper will contrast the radically different readings of these stories from childist bible scholars with the way these stories are commonly presented in children's Bibles and Sunday School curriculum (cf. Dalton 2015, 7-44).

The Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22)

The story of Abraham's binding of Isaac in Genesis 22 is a story that has troubled and perplexed theologians, philosophers, parents, and children for centuries, and yet it is one of the Bible stories most commonly selected for inclusion in children's Bibles and has often been used in children's Bible lessons as well. According to the story, Abraham "bound his son Isaac and laid him on the altar on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son" (Genesis 22:9-10 NRSV UE).

For religious educators who are sensitive to the emotional well-being and life experiences of children, this story raises the question of whether every Bible story is suitable to be taught to children. For some, this concern has been that the concepts explored in of the Bible are too complex and nuanced for children to understand. John Locke, for example, argued that reading the Bible would only serve to confuse children about religion because its concepts are beyond their understanding (Locke 1693, 187). Others have raised concerns that the Bible's content, which includes stories of sex, violence, and horror, make it inappropriate for children. As religious educator Ronald Goldman wrote, "The Bible is the major source book of Christianity for *adults*. It is written by adults for adults and is plainly not a children's book" (1965, 71).

While most Christian and Jewish religious educators do not avoid the Bible completely in their work with children, many who do advocate teaching the Bible to children still take these concerns quite seriously. They keep them in mind as they choose which Bible stories to explore with children and decide how to engage children with those stories (Goldman 1965, 136-144; Berryman 1991, 136-144; Gobbel and Gobbel 1986, 5-10).

Given these concerns, why is the story of the binding of Isaac in particular chosen so often as a story to share with children? In the 20th century and beyond, the story has been used with children most often to teach them a lesson about obedience and submission to authority. At times, the focus is on Abraham's unquestioning obedience of God's command to kill his son. In many cases, however, the story is retold to children in ways that place the emphasis upon Isaac's unquestioning submission to the will of his father, even after Isaac realizes that Abraham is planning to kill him.

Genesis 22 describes nothing of Isaac's state of mind during the events of the story, but children's Bibles often retell the story from Isaac's point of view and provide their own perspectives on what Isaac was thinking. Many children's Bible authors make the argument from Genesis' silence on the matter that once Isaac realized what was happening he did not cry, argue, complain, make a fuss, or question Abraham in any way. Instead, he was completely obedient of his father, trusting that his father knew best (Comstock 1860, 14; Yonge 1898, 46; Sangster 1905, 70; Smyth 1908, 43-44; Evans 1923, 30; Mulford 1943, 32; Altman 1949, 37; Yonge 1957, 70). Many children's Bibles have explained to their readers that Isaac was a strong young

5

lad and could have easily escaped old Abraham, but Isaac was, as one book title put it, *The Boy Who Obeyed* and he knew that children should obey their fathers, even if they plan to kill you (Willard 1905; see also White and Sanders 1900,1969, 97; Vos 1934, 74; Neff 1947, 121; Maxwell 1953, 173; *Scripture Stories* 1980, 14; Larcombe 1992, 19). In so doing, Isaac becomes a model of unquestioning obedience to his father's will.

The moral of the story of the binding of Isaac, according to these retellings, is that children should be completely obedient and submissive to one's parents and that they should be quiet and not raise a fuss in difficult situation. These are common themes in many children's Bible lessons (cf. Dalton 2014). It is perhaps not surprising that the adults writing these children's Bibles or children's Bible lessons and that teachers who teach them would want to teach children these virtues to make life easier for themselves. From the perspective of childism, however, these virtues can be recognized as adultist themes that primarily serve the needs of adults rather than children.

Child-oriented interpreters who study the passage note that the text itself does not give any attention to Isaac's inner thoughts. Childist scholars might also note that Isaac is treated in the text itself as more of an object than a subject. While some children's Bibles reframe the story to give Isaac some measure of agency by having him choose to lay himself down on the altar, childist scholars would note the canonical biblical text itself seems to grant no agency to Isaac as Abraham binds him and lays him onto the altar.

Childist biblical scholars, as they consider the narrative from a child's point of view, consider the trauma a child would experience if they were subjected to such an event. Fewell notes, "The trauma of Isaac is not even considered in the text's eagerness to tell of Abraham's obedience to God's command to sacrifice his son" (2003, 26). The way the story is often retold in children's Bibles and children's Bible lessons, the events are not presented as being traumatic for Isaac, or at least not traumatic enough for him to raise any fuss. As a matter of fact, in many children's Bibles, Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac is portrayed as a wonderful father-son bonding experience (Cohen 1934, 26; Engstrom 1948, 27; Whempner 1960; Hoth 1978, 52; Beers 1991, 41; Beck 1993, 17). By way of contrast, Hebrew Bible scholar Terrence Fretheim notes that the book of Genesis describes no further interaction between Abraham and Isaac after this incident, perhaps suggesting that Isaac chose not return home after such trauma at the hands of his father (2008, 22-23).

Presenting the story of Abraham and Isaac as a happy story of a loving family is not simply offering one interpretation among many. Making obedience or submission to authority the points of this particular Bible story, and presenting it as the story of a happy family, forestalls any efforts on the part of children to question the actions of the adult towards the child in the story. If the story is taught in this way, and the troubling themes and trauma are not addressed with children, then the lesson could serve to groom children for future abuse by the hands of a trusted adult or any adult with authority over them, teaching them to respond to abuse or threats of abuse with unquestioning obedience and to refrain from complaining to anyone about it. Furthermore, sharing the story without giving children the opportunity to question or process the troubling aspects of the story, such as why God would ever ask Abraham to kill his son, could lead them to fear loving parents and caregivers, especially if those adults are people of faith who

6

talk about being obedient to God themselves. What would happen, the children might wonder, if God asked their parents or caregivers to sacrifice them?

Would this be a story that children themselves would choose to study? Is it a story that child-sensitive adults would choose to explore with children? It is not likely. If children *were* to choose to study the story, what themes in the story would children want to explore? Would they choose to explore themes of unquestioning obedience to authority and how to submit without making a fuss? Perhaps they would instead want to be granted the freedom and agency to wonder along with the religious educator about the frightening situation Isaac faced and whether they believe it was right for him to be placed in that situation.

The Enslaved Israelite Girl (2 Kings 5:1-14)

2 Kings 5 tells the story of the healing of Naaman and the captive Israelite girl who subtly points her master toward Elisha for healing. According to 2 Kings 5:2-4:

> **2** Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. **3** She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his skin disease." **4** So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said (2 Kings 5:2-4 NRSV UE).

The enslaved Israelite girl is only mentioned in these three verses in the Bible.

Children's Bibles in the United States have frequently told the story of Naaman and the Israelite girl, often referring to her as "Naaman's little maid." Many children's Bible authors seem to feel compelled to tell children that Naaman and his wife were very kind to the girl, often depicting the girl as though she were part of their family (e.g. Phillips 1947; Doane 1954, 43-44; Snyder and Trout 1929, 42; Alexander 1997; Kovacs 2016, 141).

Children's Bibles that retell the story note the key role that the "Little Maid" plays in these grand events. Although the girl is only mentioned in three verses, children's Bibles often expand upon her story, at times even creating enough content to form an entire children's book (e.g. *The Little Captive Maid* 1900, Diamond 1959; Harvey 1976; Kovacs 2015). The lessons drawn from her story by the adults who retell them are revealing. Nothing in the canonical text's short mention of the girl indicates whether she was particularly kind, happy, how much she worked, or what kind of work she did. Many children's Bible stories, however, go to lengths to tell their readers how kind and happy she was as a maid and that she was a hard worker who did many difficult chores without complaining (e.g. Strong 1911, 264; Paddock 1956). Some of these stories even describe how, while she missed her home in Israel, she was not unhappy about being captured because her faith taught her to be content in any circumstance and her enslavement ultimately gave her the opportunity to share with Naaman and his wife about the prophet Elisha and by extension the God of Israel (e.g. Phillips 1947; Yates 1951, 59). Based on these versions of the story, the lessons drawn, either explicitly or implicitly, are that children should work hard without complaining, always be happy and grateful whatever one's circumstances in life, and always be ready to share their faith in God.

7

Childist biblical scholars Elkins and Parker (2016) note that many traditional commentaries completely ignore the role of the enslaved Israelite girl in these grand events. They write, "She speaks only ten words in the entire Hebrew Bible: 'If-only my-master would-go-before the-prophet who is-in-Samaria then he-would-cure him of-his-leprosy' (2 Kings 5:3) Nonetheless, these words set the plot in motion" (426). So, like many children's Bibles, Elkins and Parker note the girl's key role in the events. Their takeaway from the story, however, is quite different from those of the children's Bibles mentioned above.

In Parker's analysis, the way in which the enslaved girl frames her comment to Naaman's wife reveals her wisdom. Parker notes that, as a slave, the girl would not want to presume to give advice, which could be taken as a disrespectful act for a slave and therefore might have dangerous consequences. Yet, she would want to curry the favor of her master. Parker writes, "Wisely, the slave girl couches her suggestion as a nonthreatening desire" (2013, 165). Therefore, "She is both strategic and savvy" in the way she makes her suggestion, and thus uses her agency to her own benefit as well as for that of her master (172).

In most American children's Bible versions of the story, "Naaman's little maid" is also praised for using her agency, though that term is not used. In these versions of the story, however, it is made clear that the girl uses that agency not for herself, but selflessly for the sake of her slaveowners (e.g. Barnard 1903, 192; Spalding 1954, 224). Thus, she is commended to modern day children as a role model for being a completely selfless girl.

Parker and Esther M. Menn also reflect on the ways in which the narrative as a whole can be seen as a story that undermines and perhaps even mocks the status quo and challenges preconceptions of who is deemed great and who is deemed little and insignificant. By focusing on the circumstances in which an enslaved girl lives, and attending to her limited agency, Parker and Menn recognize that the rich and powerful in the story are inept and foolish, while those who are little, such as the enslaved girl, are effective and wise (Parker 2013, 169; Menn 2008, 343).

The common children's Bible version of the narrative, however, is not a subversive story that questions the status quo and current power dynamics, as it is for childist scholars. While there are exceptions, in most children's Bibles the enslaved Israelite girl is instead appropriated as a role model for young readers of how they too can selflessly and humbly do their part to support those in power and shore up the status quo. "Naaman's Little Maid" is not a savvy girl who curries favor from her master, but is instead a selfless girl who lives to serve the powerful.

How, then, might religious educators benefit from engaging childist biblical scholarship on this story? Approaching the text from a childist perspective, one of the first things one might recognize is that, as is the case with many women and children in biblical narratives, the girl is not given a name by the text and in the process is diminished in her personhood and significance. Additionally, from the perspective of childism, the practice of giving the enslaved girl the name "Naaman's little maid" is a problematic practice on a number of levels. The name emphasizes the notion that she is a possession of the general Naaman, treating her as an object rather than a subject. The adjective "little" may be taken as a diminutive term. Finally, childist biblical scholars would examine and describe the extremely dangerous plight of enslaved girls in the past and, by extension, the many enslaved girls in the present. Referring to the enslaved girl as a little

8

"maid" obscures the fact that the young girl was violently taken from her home by a raiding army and forced into slavery, which is necessary background if children are to understanding the story fully in its context. Religious educators might then avoid this nickname and invite children to wonder what her name might have been and whether she was allowed to keep her Hebrew name.

Also, once again, religious educators might ask themselves whether the story is appropriate for children or if children themselves would choose to explore it. If children are to be given contextual background to the story, a content note regarding violent child trafficking might be in order. Children today also live in a frightening world, and the horrendous event that opens this narrative is not entirely foreign to stories children might hear about trafficked children today.

2 Kings 5 does not mention that the girl was particularly hard working or kind, so those religious educators who wish to draw upon a Bible story to teach those virtues may wish to choose a different text. If this story is chosen, and given its full background, older children may wish to talk about the girl's frightening and traumatic experience. Religious educators would then not wish to dismiss children's questions and comments on those concerns just to get to the lesson they might prefer children would take from the passage.

Taking a cue from Parker's analysis, religious educators may wish to guide children in wondering how they might be wise and savvy. Like the enslaved Israelite girl, children today often find themselves in difficult situations in which they have limited agency. Children might wonder how they might use their words and actions to help themselves if they ever find themselves in a difficult situation. The passage might also prompt older children to discuss the plight of child slavery and child trafficking today, and what people of faith can do to try to address that tragedy.

Whatever her motives, the girl's words are ones that speak to her desire for Naaman to be healed. Children might wish to wonder together about her generosity or even to discuss or debate whether the girl's words were designed to benefit herself, benefit Naaman, or both.

The Boy with the Loaves and Fishes (The Gospel of John 6:9)

The story of Jesus' miraculous feeding of the 5,000 is told in all four New Testament gospels, but only John's gospel mentions the presence of a boy with loaves and fishes. When Jesus talks to the disciples about the need to feed the crowd, Andrew tells him, "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" (John 6:9).

While the boy only appears in this one verse, as with Israelite enslaved girl, his story is often expanded for children into a whole Bible lesson (cf. Growing in God's Love Curriculum 2020), the full chapter of a children's Bible (e.g. Paddock 1956, n.p.; Caldwell and Wehrheim 2018, 264), or even an entire children's book (e.g. Hill 1967) that retells the story from the boy's point of view.

Commentators and theologians have explored many profound themes in the story of the feeding of the 5,000, but the vast majority of children's Bibles and lessons focus on the boy as a

9

model of the virtue of sharing. In these retellings the boy takes the initiative by making his way through the crowd to give his lunch to Jesus (e.g. Armstrong 1884; Blake 1886, 17; Phillips 1947, n.p.; Hill 1967, n.p). Typical is Cindy Baw and Paul C. Brownlow's chapter on the story which they title, "The Boy with the Loaves and Fish: A Lesson in Sharing." Baw and Brownlow focus their retelling on the boy sharing his meal and conclude the story by telling their readers, "His story is still told today to teach us about sharing even the small things that we have. God can do great things with them" (1984, 79). Baw and Brownlow conclude the story, "When I share it makes me happy. Help me to share with others" (80).

Childist biblical scholars who study the passage make a couple of initial observations about the biblical text that mentions the boy. As John W. Martens notes, John 6:9 "reminds us that children were everywhere in Jesus' ministry, since Matthew 14:21 also mentions and women and children (*paidia*) were present at the scene of Jesus' multiplication of the loaves and fish" (2019, 236). Childist biblical scholars would also note that, as was the case with the Israelite enslaved girl, the text does not provide the boy with a name.

Building on the work of New Testament scholar Gail O'Day (2003, 168), childist biblical scholar Sharon Betsworth writes,

> [S]ome will suggest the boy is an example of selflessness because he offered his lunch. But the text does not say the *boy* offered his food: rather that *Andrew* offers the child's food. Neither does it say how Jesus acquired the food, but just that he "took" the loaves (v. 11) and distributed them among the crowd. He then did the same with the fish. Nothing further is said about the boy, although the meal consists of his food (2015, 139).

Betsworth also notes, as have many other commentators, that the Gospel of John says that the boy's loaves were made of barley and that barley loaves were commonly eaten by those among the lower class in the region (139). If this was the case, losing his lunch may have been a significant loss for the boy.

How might these insights affect the ways in which religious educators present this passage to children? This story has been used for years to teach children a lesson on sharing and that children should be like the boy, who happily gave up his lunch in order to help the adults around him. From a childist biblical interpretation perspective, however, religious educators are able to recognize that nowhere in the passage is the reader told that the boy had any say in the matter and that, given the boy's status as a poor child, he may have had little agency in the situation. While lessons on sharing and generosity are certainly part of the reception history of this passage, after a close reading of the passage religious educators may decide that it would be more appropriate to choose a different Bible passage to explore these virtues.

If this passage is chosen for a children's Bible lesson, and children are allowed the freedom and agency to respond from their own life experiences, some of them might recall times in their own life experiences in which they did not have much say on whether to give away or share something that was theirs, but in which adults pressured them to give it away. This is not an uncommon experience for children. Because of this, children who are exploring this passage may question whether the boy had any power or agency in the situation. Having examined the

passage more carefully, and considered the concerns and agency of children, adult religious educators can better avoid "correcting" a child for offering a reading of the passage that is contrary to their own adultist interpretation of the text or the lesson that they may wish to convey to children. Instead of pressuring children always to share, religious educators could allow children that chance to reflect on how it is not wrong to care for one's own needs and that sticking up for themselves and for other children is a virtuous practice.

Reading this passage as though the boy was compelled to give away his loaves and fishes is a valid reading of the text. However, speculating that the boy may have freely shared his lunch with others out of the generosity of his heart is also valid. The words and historical setting of the passage do not make either interpretation certain. Given this, religious educators may first wish to allow children to wonder freely about the passage and offer their own responses. As the lesson proceeds, religious educators may then wish to share both possible interpretations and invite the children to wonder aloud about both possibilities.

Conclusion

By engaging childism and childist biblical interpretation and then allowing children the freedom and agency to explore the Bible on their own terms, religious educators can enhance children's Bible lessons and make them more faithful to the dynamics of the biblical texts. Through children's Bible lessons of this kind, children are able to recognize that the Bible can speak to their own concerns and life circumstances and not just those of adults.

Helping children engage in biblical interpretation in this way could also lead to new insights and perspectives for adults. If religious educators are given the opportunity to share children's insights on scripture from their lessons with the wider faith community, or if children themselves are given the chance to share their interpretations directly, then congregations can better know and understand the children in their midst and gain new rich perspectives on biblical texts. The childism movement calls upon adults to recognize that children themselves are a marginalized group who may read in ways that help decenter traditional adult Western colonial hermeneutics and may raise issues of intersectional theology and justice as well.

When religious educators approach children's Bible lessons in light of childism and childist interpretation of the Bible, children are given the opportunity to engage the life and circumstances of children in the biblical world through the lenses of the lived experience of children in their own contexts. Thus, by listening to how children engage and respond to these texts, childist interpreters of the Bible themselves may, in turn, find new insights and new dimensions of meaning in biblical texts. When children are allowed to be interpreters of the Bible in their own right, they can offer adults and each other valuable insights and wisdom.

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Innovations in Children's Spiritual Nurture

Abstract
Conventional wisdom and antiquated stage development theories have had a negative effect on children's spirituality. This paper looks at an innovative spiritual practice (Embodied Prayer) that instead promotes children's agency and embodied engagement in multi-layered meaning-making. It traces both the ways in which children respond to higher levels of trust in their ability to reflect on spiritual ideas and experiences, as well as challenges and changes in understanding and practice that adult facilitators experience as they learn new ways to support children's spiritual development.

Introduction
Conventional wisdom and antiquated stage development theories have had a negative effect on children's spirituality. Instead of trusting children to engage in meaningful spiritual practices and reflection from a young age, religious education has focused on 'passing down the faith' in terms of 'age appropriate' bits of knowledge and simplistic models of piety shared with dependents. Scope and Sequence frameworks have set learning benchmarks based on Piagetian and Eriksonian assumptions about children's cognitive and socioemotional competencies that developmental psychologists no longer accept as definitive. Most published Religious Education lessons are designed to promote a 'main point', despite evidence that this approach truncates children's learning (Steiner and Magee, 2019). It is not uncommon for these materials to include a set of 'correct' responses (embedded in activity descriptions) that teachers should expect from children. The implicit curricular message - for both children and teachers - is that children are no more than empty vessels waiting to be filled with a predetermined religious content that will promote conformity to a particular faith tradition.

However, abundant contemporary research on child development and spirituality emphasizes the agency and meaning-making capabilities of even very young children. Paul Bloom's work highlights the early moral judgments of infants and how toddlers and preschoolers perceptively navigate simple moral dilemmas using experience and nascent social constructs (Bloom, 2014). Paul Harris explains the power that questioning plays in shaping children's moral constructs, as well as the value of self-directed exploration for the development of identity and values (Harris, 2015). Susan Engel points to the necessity of curiosity as fuel for learning that 'sticks' with children (Engel, 2018). Lisa Miller describes the neuroscience of spirituality and suggests that children are 'wired' for spiritual exploration (Miller, 2021). Taken together, they provide a new way of imagining children's spiritual nurture that is consistent with the ecological systems theory of Urie Bronfenbrenner (2004) while moving beyond historically reductionist and deficit-focused notions of children, childhood, or spirituality.

This new ecological paradigm privileges the spiritual experiences of children and their agential ability to engage in spiritual practices and reflection alongside nurturing adults. It encourages religious educators to operate with what the Reggio Emilia movement calls a strong 'image of

1

the child' (Malaguzzi, 1994), rather than employing a developmental deficiencies perspective. A strong child image focuses on a child's current skills and abilities, as well as their developmental potential. It reflects a 'glass half full' mentality, where adults celebrate children for who they are rather than who they are not. This positive image then becomes the basis for creating learning experiences that incorporate children's strengths and desire to grow.

To explore how shifting to this new paradigm might affect children and their teachers, the authors devised an innovation experiment: the Embodied Prayer project. The project involved a short group activity in which adults and children prayed together using scripted prayers that reflected four types of spiritual connection (with self, others, the natural world, and the divine) and mostly non-representational movements. Adult facilitators were trained in non-directive teaching and assessment methods. Reflective practice sessions are held with each practitioner individually and also with practice cohorts.

The Embodied Prayer Project
Sample
The Embodied Prayer project ran for six weeks in twelve denominationally diverse Christian settings. We used a sample of convenience recruited through social media networks and word-of-mouth. Participants included three United Methodist churches, three Evangelical Lutheran Church in America congregations, four Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations and one camp, and one Mennonite church. They were located in nine different states: Pennsylvania (3), Minnesota (2), Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, New Jersey, North Carolina, Texas, and Virginia. Leaders facilitated the prayer practice in a variety of learning contexts: as Sunday School openings or closings (6), during Children's Church/Chapel (2), before children's choir rehearsal (1), as part of weekday preschool chapel or in-class activities (2), or in an afterschool program (1). Six groups averaged 6-11 child participants weekly, three averaged 14-19 children, and three averaged 30-38 children, for a total of 196 children per week across sites. Ages ranged from one to twelve years, with the majority three years or older.

Project Design
We provided each site innovator with scripts for each week's prayers, as well as videos demonstrating the various prayers in standing (typical) and sitting (modified) positions. Leaders also participated in a training session that emphasized respect for children's agency and included a reminder that the goal of the practice was for children to use their bodies in prayer, not that they memorize the movements or be able to repeat and explain the meaning of the words. We conducted a check-in with innovators after the first or second week to learn about their early implementation experiences, troubleshoot any complications, and gently remind leaders to follow the directions for the practice and assessment process. We also held cohort virtual meetings midway and at the end of the project, so leaders could reflect with one about their experiences, and meet with each site leader or team individually post-project for final reflections and feedback. The final cohort and individual meetings were recorded and transcribed.

Prayer Development
Since we wanted to emphasize movement as a primary form of prayer, we identified a series of six themes for the prayers and then identified movements that might express those themes. We also employed a simple framework based on an understanding of spirituality as a form of

connectedness with self, others, the natural world, and transcendence (ter Kuile, 2020; Nye, 2009). Once we had several potential movements for each prayer, we repeated those movements multiple times as we reflected on potential words to accompany the movements. The result of this process were six thematic prayers focused sequentially on connection, empowerment, wonder, awareness, empathy, and justice (Appendix A). Each prayer also begins with one of two simple centering breath rituals.

Project Implementation
The initial plan was that all sites would implement the project during the six weeks of the Christian season of Lent. However, various scheduling conflicts, leader illnesses, and other circumstances meant that some sites completed the project on a different timetable. The vagaries of children's church attendance patterns also meant that child participants varied from week to week. (However, participation in the preschool and afterschool settings was mostly stable.) One preschool site withdrew after Week 3 because of a teacher's objection to the activity and the leader's concern that the controversy might negatively affect the children.

Leaders were instructed to review each week's prayer in advance to familiarize themselves with the movements. Just before beginning the prayer, they were asked to say: *Today, we are going to pray with our whole bodies. I will lead, and you can follow me (like 'follow the leader'). We will pray the same way a few times so that we can feel our prayer moving through our bodies.* Then they or another person would read the words while they and the children prayed through the movements. The prayer was repeated three or four times, with the reader repeating all of the words the first two times and then, at the reader's discretion, using just a designated cue word (i.e., you/us, others, earth/world, God) for each section of the prayer the third and fourth times through. We intended the shift to cue words to help children experience the movements as prayer rather than focusing their attention primarily on the words, and several of the groups did experiment with the cue word approach. We also requested that leaders ask children, "How did your body feel while you were praying today?" as a reflection activity after the prayer. Compliance with this aspect of the project was sketchy, except with the older children.

Either during or immediately following the prayer practice, the leader or another person completed a seven-item assessment form asking about the children's expressions and energy level, signs of anticipation or recollection of the prayers, and responses to the reflection question, as well as a quantitative measure of participation. The forms were then scanned or photographed and returned to us weekly.

Findings
Assessors were presented with an array of 13 words and asked to select those that best described the energy level of the children at the end of the prayer time. They could select as many words as they thought applied. With the exception of Week 6, the most commonly selected word was 'calm'. Second choice words were either 'thoughtful' (three weeks) or 'smiling' (two weeks), with 'smiling' also the first choice in Week 6 (and 'calm' tied for second choice that week). 'Quiet' tied with 'thoughtful' in Week 3; 'energized' and 'active' tied with 'calm' in Week 6. 'Calm' garnered the most selections (57) across the six weeks, with 'smiling' (47) second, 'thoughtful' (44) third, and 'quiet' (37) fourth. 'Subdued' (9), 'still' (14), and 'lively' (15) received the lowest number of selections. These numbers may be somewhat skewed by the loss

3

of five assessors connected with the preschool that dropped out of the project after Week 3 (reducing the number of weekly input forms from 20 each in Weeks 1-3 to 15 each in Weeks 4-6).

Table 1: Energy Level Words

Week	Wiggly	Calm	Energized	Active	Quiet	Thoughtful	Relaxed	Concentrating	Still	Smiling	Bouncy	Lively	Subdued
1	5	12	5	3	6	9	8	4	4	7	3	1	2
2	6	9	6	3	7	7	3	4	4	9	1	4	1
3	4	13	3	5	10	10	4	7	1	8	4	2	0
4	3	7	3	5	3	4	3	2	1	6	3	2	3
5	4	9	3	2	7	8	5	5	3	4	4	3	2
6	4	7	7	7	4	6	4	4	1	13	5	3	1
Total	26	57	27	25	37	44	27	26	14	47	20	15	9

Assessors could also write in additional words that described the children's energy level. Respondents in Week 1 added 'silly', 'anticipatory', and 'giggling'. Week 2 included write-ins for 'quietly waiting', 'attentive', 'fidgety, scattered', 'tired/grumpy', and 'sleepy'. The last two submissions included notes that the session occurred on the Sunday that Daylight Savings Time began (and thus children had lost an hour of sleep the preceding night). Week 3 respondents added 'participating' and 'goofy' and Week 4 write-ins were 'giggly', 'happy, giggly', and 'neutral, unengaged'. There were no write-ins for Weeks 5 and 6.

The assessment form also asked respondents to mark the children's energy level at the end of the prayer time on a scale of 1 (very calm) to 10 (very energetic). Both on a weekly scale and overall, respondents as a group placed the children's energy level in the midpoint of the continuum (4.60-6.06), with an average across the six weeks of 5.21. However, individual week responses tended to cluster, with Weeks 1, 4, and 6 having similar markings (4-5 each) at Scale 3 and Scale 7.

Table 2: Energy Level Scale

Week	Scale 1	Scale 2	Scale 3	Scale 4	Scale 5	Scale 6	Scale 7	Scale 8	Scale 9	Scale 10	Average
1	0	1	5	2	3	1	5	2	0	0	5.11
2	0	1	2	1	1	4	4	5	0	0	6.06
3	0	1	5	1	6	4	0	2	0	1	5.05
4	0	0	5	1	2	0	4	2	0	0	5.21
5	0	3	3	2	1	2	3	1	0	0	4.60
6	1	1	4	0	0	3	5	0	1	0	5.13
Total	1	7	24	7	13	14	21	12	1	1	5.21

We noticed a pattern with some assessors early on: they would select words associated with the calmer end of the continuum (e.g., 'calm', 'thoughtful', 'concentrating', 'quiet', 'still') and mark a higher number associated with the 'more energetic' side of the spectrum. One-third of those in Week 1 who selected 'calm' as one of their words marked a '6' or higher on the energy scale, and two-thirds did the same in Week 2. By Week 3, this pattern was no longer evident.

Responses to the question about facial expressions were too inconsistent to be useful. Assessors either did not describe the face(s) they selected as requested (quite common) or they assigned quite different meanings to the faces provided and often modified the existing options or drew their own. We set this data aside as non-productive.

4

We received a much smaller number of responses to the question about recollection of the prayers at other times. Many assessors wrote that they had quite limited interactions with the children apart from the prayer time and thus were unable to report on that topic. A few, however, used the prayer practice at another time and reported that children were able to transfer their knowledge of the prayer to an alternate setting:

- Delta site: "I did an abbreviated version of it during my children's message after they learned it at Sunday School. Those who had learned it in class jumped right in." (Week 1)
- Mu site: "I used the 'breathe in/arms up, breath out/arms down' in Sunday School last Sunday and the kids caught on to what I was doing quickly" (Week 4)

Three sites did provide some feedback on children's unsolicited engagement in the prayer practice:

- Kappa site: "Before church, [child] re-enacted a pose from last week's embodied prayer. He did the 'strength' pose." (Week 2)
- Lambda site: "Some of them kept doing some of the stretches" (Week 3)
- Epsilon site: "I saw 1 child today breathe in & out intentionally as we moved from the prayer to a craft activity" (Week 4)
- Epsilon site: "One child said she does these prayers at home for parents. Finds them peaceful." (Week 5)
- Kappa site: "At home, [child] has been doing embodied prayer movements" (Week 6)

Respondents had more feedback regarding signs that children were anticipating the prayer practice before it began each week. They focused on how well children were learning the routines and movements associated with the practice. They noted that children readily set up the space and moved their bodies into position to begin:

- Beta site: "As soon as I came in, they moved tables & chairs to give us space." (Week 3)
- Zeta site: "Excited to go to the [place] where we do it" (Week 3)
- Epsilon site: "They immediately form a standing semi-circle" (Week 3)
- Mu site: "Tonight they formed the circle more readily, with less cajoling from me" (Week 3)
- Epsilon site: "Jump up from storytime & get into their places – clapping" (Week 6)
- Eta site: "One child asked if she could dim the lights" (Week 6)

Four assessors at three sites observed that the children grew noticeably more comfortable with the practice over time:

- Beta site: "They seemed more comfortable or at least knew what to expect and were more settled into the rhythm of it." (Week 3)
- Beta site: "They settled right in to participating like it was expected…more fully participating with their bodies." (Week 3)
- Delta site: "2 regular kids are looking forward to it" (Week 4)

5

- Gamma site: "They tell me that they are ready to pray again" (Week 6)

Three sites reported that children were learning to recognize certain poses or routines:

- Theta site: "Some are starting to anticipate. They stand up and know the breathe-in and breathe-out part before it starts." (Week 3)
- Gamma site: "When I come in to start, they remember some of the motions from previous prayers and place their hand on their stomach to breathe." (Week 4)
- Gamma site: "When we did the movement for the sun, they remembered that we had 'scanned' our body in another prayer." (Week 5)
- Alpha site: "one child anticipated a move" (Week 6)

Children reported a variety of feelings in their bodies as they prayed. Several gave simple answers, such as "calm", "happy", "warm", "peaceful", or "joy", while others elaborated:

- Eta site: "It was calming but I also felt a burst of energy, kind of fluttery" (Week 2)
- Eta site: "My body wants to fidget" (Week 2)
- Eta site: "I had a hard time slowing my body down" (Week 2)
- Eta site: "The ground feels good on my feet" (Week 4)
- Iota site: "I felt calm like I was connected – I thought of words: peace, joy, hope, and I felt it in my chest" (Week 1)
- Iota site: "I felt calm, happy, and connected" (Week 1)
- Iota site: "peace and love was coursing through my soul" (Week 3)
- Beta site: "commented about gravity catching them when they jumped." (Week 4)
- Iota site: "when we jumped, it felt like I needed it" (Week 4)
- Iota site: "calm, happy, excited – I like moving" (Week 4)
- Iota site: "I liked getting energy out by kicking. It felt like my body needed that" (Week 5)
- Iota site: "calm and it felt good to move, fun" (Week 6)
- Iota site: "connected to myself and others" (Week 6)

Several older children (fourth and fifth graders) at the Iota site, who are used to participating in mindfulness exercises at their local school, shared metaphors and analogies to express how they were feeling:

- "Like everybody else was like my baseball cards – everyone all around me" (Week 1) (repeated similar words in Week 3)
- "Leaves on a tree, all connected even though not touching" (Week 1) (repeated similar words in Week 2)
- "I'm in deep thought - I see grass fields, rain and wind comes and grass gets bent down, grass gets cut but can grow up again" (Week 2)
- "swimming in a river of peace and love" (Week 3)
- "blasting off together with others" (Week 3)
- "fluffy and kind giant polar bear was hugging me" (Week 3)
- "felt like when I go to my grandpa & grandma" (Week 3)

6

- "We are a big bush of roses, all beautiful in our own way. Connected as a big loving family, even if on a different bush, and we are special and sharing our love. Even all over the world, we are connected to each other" (Week 4)
- "We are like overalls. Each person being a stitch. All stitches may be different, but we are all connected." (Week 4)
- "It reminded me of a movie, *Inside/Out*, that is all about feelings" (Week 5)
- "I felt like we were all fish in a river, each fish was representing different feelings. The sun was over all the fish, and helping them all to represent their true feelings." (Week 5)
- "felt like making delicious bread" (Week 6)

Leaders also observed two moments when children embraced the movements and words in fully embodied ways:
- Alpha site: "one child roared at the part about a lion during the prayer" (Week 2)
- Beta site: "one group of 4s reached out & connected their physical bodies while doing the connected to others part" (Week 1)

In individual and cohort conversations about the prayer practice, leaders repeatedly shared that *children gravitated toward big, active movements*, such as outstretched or circling arms, jumping, dancing, stomping, and assuming a modified yoga warrior pose. One site leader summed up her group's preferences as "if there was movement with the feet, they tended to like that" (Interview with Mu, 04/26/2023), and a second remarked that her children "liked jumping and feeling their body" (Interview with Beta, 04/18/2023). Another noted, "The one where they got to stomp on the ground, they really liked that one" (Interview with Zeta, 04/25/2023). A fourth leader recalled that children "like the scanning thing…they said it was like an x-ray. Some of the motions where they were jumping or moving a lot, they loved those….one where we soared like an eagle, too" (Interview with Gamma, 05/01/2023). The Week 6 prayer, which featured jumping, dancing, and twirling, was unanimously the favorite across the project sites. Children also reported a preference for the Week 1 prayer, which included several opportunities to swing their arms out, up, and around. One leader explained, "They really like all the movement, all the dancing and the jumping and stuff, the energy of the last one. I do think the movement and the flow of the first one with the arms flowing and that whole theme around connection, I think they really resonated with that" (Interview with Epsilon, 04/18/2023).

Several themes also emerged that illuminated how adults were engaging and processing the experience. First, *leaders focused primarily on the words as the content of the prayers and expected the movements to represent or illustrate the words*. They therefore wrestled with the lack of one-to-one correspondence between the words and many movements. One way this manifested in practice was a reluctance to switch from reading the full script to using just the cue words. "They don't know this means one thing and this means another thing," said one leader. "They're just following along, so they need the words to indicate what the movement means" (Interview with Cohort C, 05/01/2023). "When the words went away, I felt like they lost the connection to what it was they were praying," said another (Cohort C, interview). A third reflected, "They wouldn't quite understand why we're moving our arms around and such without the words" (Interview with Delta, 05/09/2023). "I kept trying to put the motion with the words and the motion didn't necessarily always go with the words…I would have liked more consistency, I guess," noted a fourth (Epsilon, interview). A fifth leader focused especially on

7

how she felt the movements supported the spoken prayer, saying, "The motions brought more life to the words" (Interview with Iota, 04/12/2023). Another wanted to debrief after the practice by asking children to identify their favorite motion and explain how it "really helped express X, Y, Z" concept in the prayer (Interview with Cohort B, 04/18/2023). The Gamma site leader criticized some words and movements as too advanced conceptually younger children: "Children struggled a little with seeing the second movement in 'us'…lion/eagle were abstract for the 'earth' word" (Week 2). Her concern was echoed by the Mu site leader, who said, "Maybe more literal motions would've helped [children] understand [the Week 3 prayer] better" (Cohort B, interview).

Second, some *leaders struggled with the absence of what they believed should be distinctive prayer form markers*, such as an initial direct address to God (e.g., 'Dear God'), a closing 'amen', or a particular posture. One leader said, "I wonder how the motions or how the practice would feel differently if the words of the prayers were directly addressing God and how kids would respond differently" (Iota, interview). Some, like leaders at the Epsilon site, chose to add 'amen' or return to the opening breathing routine to complete the prayers (Epsilon, interview). The latter idea appealed to several others, both for the end and between repetitions. "Someone said that they added [breathing] onto the end, and I think that would be a good move for future ones to close it out because it did end abruptly every time" (Mu, interview). "Maybe we should put breathing back in there to help with a transition from end to the beginning" (Zeta, interview).

They also reported that some children had trouble recognizing the practice as prayer because the usual markers were missing. "They close their eyes and fold their hands," reported a leader at the Lambda site (Week 3), although those actions did not match the prayer practice instructions. Another noted that a preschool child at the Epsilon site was confused and asked, "That was our prayer?" (Week 4). However, the idea of a different way of praying also appealed to some children. "The older kids, especially, named that they hadn't thought about using their bodies to pray," reported one leader (Beta Interview). And an older child at the Epsilon site remarked that the practice was "better than normal prayer" (Week 4).

Third, many *leaders felt that children should focus on learning the words and movements to individual prayers well so they could share them with others before moving to another prayer*. "If they were doing the same one, three or four weeks in a row, maybe they'd come in and they'd be ready to do their motions," said one leader (Interview with Alpha, 04/26/2023). Another reflected, "I think using some of the prayers in a repeated way would be nice so that the leader isn't learning new things and the kids aren't learning new things every time. So it can be something that they learn and know" (Iota, interview). One leader would quiz the children after the prayer: "I would ask them if they could show me any of the movements that they did just to see if they were retaining the information" (Interview with Kappa, 05/01/2023).

Fourth, *certain words seemed to be 'catch-all' terms for desirable and undesirable feelings and behaviors when children pray*. Leaders frequently described a 'calm' versus 'silly' dynamic, in which they wanted children to act calm during the prayer practice and were unhappy when they acted silly. Reflecting back on the experience, one leader said, "I think the first week, they were really silly after, but then they definitely got more focused…calm, relaxed" (Alpha, interview). Another viewed the prayer practice as a "lead-in to a calmer, quieter time after kids had been in a

8

little bit of a higher energy snack time" (Iota, interview). Her sentiment was echoed by a different leader: "I'd like to think that they seemed a little more focused and ready to sit down" (Delta, interview). A fourth leader remarked, "I did it on Easter…and I thought it might be a nightmare because they were really high energy, but they didn't, it absolutely calmed them down" (Epsilon, interview). Another leader worried about a relationship between higher energy movements and silliness: "On the higher energy ones, the kids enjoyed them, but I think it was a little easier for them to get a little silly" (Iota, interview).

Fifth, several *leaders expressed discomfort with a punching motion included in the Week 4 prayer*. They felt the movement in prayer would lead to hitting and fighting among the children. One said, "I had anxiety over the punching piece…I just thought, 'Oh, no, here we are doing this motion that I try for them to stop doing, because everything is hitting and punching now'" (Epsilon, interview). Another commented, "The hitting, 'we feel like we want to hit each other', that I didn't care for for five-year-olds" (Gamma, interview). A third said that she "felt a little bit of anxiety or whatever about how they would respond" (Iota, interview). "I had two kids who…were obviously not in any way, shape, or form praying in that moment," said the Mu site leader. "They were pretend fighting with one another" (Cohort B, interview). And the Delta site leader reported, "I have probably four five-to-seven-year-old boys. If it's a punching motion then they're trying to touch each other" (Interview with Cohort A, 04/18/2023).

Finally, almost all of the *leaders expressed interest in continuing to use an embodied prayer practice*, and several had already begun to do so. "I share a lot of people's desire to keep going with this in some way, shape, or form," said one leader (Mu, interview). A second said, "We have thought that we might have [the children] lead the congregation in one of the prayers" (Iota, interview). Another reported: "We're going to have our end-of-school-year party coming up in a few weeks and going to go outside and I think reinforcing that movement and embodied prayer can happen when you're outside [is good]" (Delta, interview). "Ever since I finished the six weeks, I have just been repeating them," said a fourth (Kappa, interview). "I actually have done it once since this. We read the wonder one because that was one that stuck out to me as one that they liked. But [after reviewing the original movements], I said, 'If you have different motions that feel good to you, you are welcome to do those,'" reported a fifth (Zeta, interview).

The Gamma site leader created a prayer modeled on the scripts provided to help preschoolers process the death of a classmate between Weeks 5 and 6 of the project. The Delta site leader shared that she "took bits and pieces from different ones and mashed them together" to create a Good Friday embodied prayer (Cohort A, interview). The Beta site leader invited children to name things they were thankful for and then add movements to match. She relayed that "one of the kids was hopping around the room like a kangaroo, but they weren't thankful for kangaroos…one of them was thankful for farmers, and so we pretended we were driving our tractors" (Beta, interview). The Eta site leader reported that their children are now leading the prayers and "both of the kids who have had a chance to lead it decided that they actually didn't want to put word to it at all. They just did a series of slow movements that we all followed along with and it was just silent and ended with saying 'amen'. I'm going to keep going with it" (Interview with Eta, 04/13/2023). This approach intrigued the Alpha site leader, who said "that would be something that would be interesting…maybe even have older kids lead the younger kids" (Alpha, interview). The primary leader at the Epsilon site wondered "how we can continue

9

this in a way that becomes more of a [] spiritual practice that we do regularly, but in a way that has [children] do motions that feel right for their body" (Cohort B, interview).

Discussion

The prominent use of the 'term' calm to describe children's prayer demeanor, regardless of children's reported energy levels or the inclusion of energetic prayer movements, raises interpretative questions. One is whether adult leaders expect prayer to be calming and thus look for evidence to support this assumption. Many traditional prayer and meditative practices emphasize the centering or grounding effects of habitual engagement, which may lead to (or be read as) calmness. Therapeutic understandings of spirituality also tout the calming benefits of spiritual practices. Thus, leaders may have been predisposed to describe children as 'calm' after engaging in what they believe is an inherently calming activity.

Another interpretative concern is whether 'calm' is an umbrella term adults use to describe various ways that children conform to behavioral expectations. There is some warrant for this question, both in the way leaders set up a binary between 'calm' and 'silly' behavior and given how they reported that children were more compliant, ready to sit, and willing to focus on the next activity after the embodied prayer exercise. One site leader, reflecting on why she used the term calm, said, "They were wiggly in the welcome time…and after we did our prayer, they really had gotten some of that wiggle energy out" (Gamma, interview). However, she then spontaneously questioned whether being 'wiggle-free' was an expression of calmness, saying, "I think it was more settled than calm. I think that they felt like they were ready to start the day" (Gamma, interview).

Whether the term 'calm' is the best descriptor of how children were feeling, there is evidence that movement-based exercises help children to focus and attend to subsequent tasks. Physical activity has been shown to increase on-task behavior (Heemskerk et al., 2022), improve attention (Vazou and Mavilidi, 2021), and support academic achievement (Erickson, Hillman, and Kramer, 2015) in classrooms. Thus, adult reports of improved readiness for learning and engagement following embodied prayer could indeed be a result of children's participation in five minutes of movement.

Studies also show that movement supports learning in other ways. Purposeful actions increase short-term recall and long-term retention of knowledge (Fernandes, Wammes, and Meade, 2018; Andra et al., 2020). They motivate children to engage in deeper learning and give them a greater sense of autonomy in the learning process. This is as true for learning spiritual ideas as for general education, and we see evidence of this is the ways the children recall and adapt the embodied prayer practice for their own spiritual purposes. They quickly recognize the prayer routine and surprise adults with their ability to notice similarities among movements and meanings in different prayers. They experience connection in the prayers and talk about it concretely and metaphorically (e.g., the Iota site children's statements). The Theta site leader noted that children deepened their understanding of the events of Holy Week by associating the Week 4 prayer and its statement about wanting to hit others with the different emotions evoked by the events leading up to Easter (Cohort B, interview). And one of the Epsilon site leaders unwittingly referenced this understanding in talking about her reluctance to use the punching

10

motion in the Week 4 prayer when she said, "we were physically doing it, which really impacts them more than the words that went with it" (Epsilon, interview).

While adult leaders gravitated toward one-to-one correspondence between words and movement, children seemed much more comfortable with movement itself as a form of prayer. Choosing to lead embodied prayer without words or – in the case of a child described as having "sensory challenges and ADHD" (Eta, interview) – making up their own movements as they felt led suggests an ability to rest in movement as a form of expression on its own. The Beta site leader even noted that she thought "the younger kids experience everything with their bodies," which meant they were comfortable with prayer as an embodied experience right from the start (Cohort C, interview). She also reflected that "without the verbal, they were more reflective, I think, with God, with themselves, with their body, as opposed to thinking what they were going to say" (Beta, interview).

Most adult leaders also persisted in viewing embodied prayer as primarily a didactic exercise rather than a spiritual practice. Their focus remained on transmitting faith concepts through movement and achieving mastery of those concepts through repetition. This is evident in both the leaders' concern for one-to-one correspondence between words and movements and their expressed desire to focus on each prayer for several weeks before moving to a new one, as well as the reluctance to use just the key words in the third and fourth repetitions of the prayer on the day it was practiced. Yet they also picked up on children's enthusiasm for the practice and explored alternative ways of using it because of its positive reception. Some leaders sensed that embodied prayer might have other spiritual usefulness apart from supporting knowledge about God and faith. As the Alpha site leader stated, "I think for me, I haven't quite gotten there, but the learning piece of trying to identify spiritual growth, spiritual impact, the spirituality of it, where is it that the kids are connecting with it and with God, that I'm still learning. I mean, it's a little hard to quantify. I'm learning to be more observant of that type of thing" (Cohort C, interview).

Conclusion
Learning to privilege children's agency as spiritual practitioners and reflectors is difficult but not impossible for children's ministry leaders. Traditional views of children as blank slates awaiting adult transmission of faith concepts and conventional pedagogies that stress verbal communication over movement-based exploration create high hurdles for change. Yet site leaders in the Embodied Prayer project were intrigued by this alternative approach and surprised by how children embraced the prayer practice and made it their own. Even the site leader who was the most negative about what she perceived as flaws in the practice design, had repurposed it for her Easter children's message and planned to incorporate it into her regular programming moving forward.

Furthermore, children overwhelmingly responded positively to this embodied spiritual practice and wanted to continue using it as well. They would ask to do the prayers more times (Gamma, interview) or answer with a "resounding 'YES'" when asked if they liked the prayers (Epsilon, interview). They made the prayers their own through modifying movements, eliminating words, brainstorming new motions, energetically engaging the practice, and using components in other settings. Their agential sensibilities carried over into their post-practice reflections, where some

11

drew on similar experiences with mindfulness and yoga practices to express what each embodied prayer felt like for them.

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12

Appendix A
Embodied Prayers

View videos of the prayers in Google Drive at [Embodied Prayer Videos](#)

Week 1: Connection
(Remove shoes)
Stand (or sit) with feet firmly on the ground, arms dangling at sides.

Breathe in, *lift arms slowly in an arc (palms up) until they meet above head.*
Breathe out, *lower arms slowly in an arc (palms down) until they touch sides of body. (2X)*

You are amazing *Breathe in, lift arms slowly in an arc (palms up) until they meet above head.*
just the way you are. *Breathe out, lower arms slowly with palms facing head and elbows bent until hands rest together in a small cross below chin.*

You have the power *Swing arms out and wiggle fingers once extended.*
to connect with others. *Sway side-to-side, arms still extended and fingers wiggling*

You have the strength *Bring arms in to center, making fists and holding with elbows out*
to care for the earth. *Move arms with fists diagonally (simultaneously right up & left down, then back to center, then left up & right down, then back to center)*

You are God's child *Slide fisted hands down body to waist, then open hands and circle arms above head.*
held in God's embrace. *Bring arms down and hug self.*

Key words (for flow): **You, others, earth, God**

Week 2 - Empowerment
(Remove shoes)
Stand (or sit) with feet firmly on the ground, one hand on your chest and the other on your belly

Breathe in slowly, and feel the air move into your body.
Breathe out slowly, and feel the air move out of your body. (2X)

Sometimes we feel small and powerless *Bend at waist with face toward knees and arms dangling at your side (yoga ragdoll pose)*
Forgotten and alone. *Cross arms while still leaning over and hug self*

Then we look around us and see others *Raise head slowly and look to the right and then to the left*
who need a helping hand. *Bring arms forward and raise body so your torso is upright and stretch your arms out to either side*

13

We decide to be strong like lions, *Move into a lunge with arms stretched out forward and back at shoulder height (warrior II pose)*
to soar like bald eagles *Twist your body left and then right, keeping arms extended so your arms move in a half circle around your torso*

We ask God to show us how to help. *Bring feet together, tuck elbows into body and hold hands at mid-torso with palms up and crossed*
We are no longer alone! *Sweep arms out and around in a large circle, then cross arms and hug self*

Key words (for flow): **us, others, earth, God**

Week 3 - Wonder
(Remove shoes)
Stand (or sit) with feet firmly on the ground, arms dangling at sides.

Breathe in, *lift arms slowly in an arc (palms up) until they meet above head.*
Breathe out, *lower arms slowly in an arc (palms down) until they touch sides of body. (2X)*

I wonder who I will be today. *Breathe in and out slowly, with hands held in front of body, fingers opening and closing in alternating movements*
I wonder how I will feel today. *Hold hands in front of face and then move them together down body to belly (like scanning), ending with hands overlapping and elbows out at waist.*

I wonder who I will see today. *Shift elbows close to the body so hands are separate and facing outward. Make small circles in front of body with hands, with circles getting larger and larger*
I wonder what we will do together. *Make a very big circle motion with both arms and then bring hands together in a locked grasp a chest height, elbows out*

I wonder what the earth will show me today. *Extend arms out to sides at shoulder height and stand with legs wide apart (star pose)*
I wonder how I will show the earth I care. *Bring legs together and hold palms together at chest with elbows out (modified tree pose)*

I wonder where I will see God today. *Breathe in and out deeply and extend arms upward with palms still together*
I wonder who God wants me to be. *Bring arms down and hold perpendicular to body with fingers opening and closing in alternating movements*

Key words (for flow): **you, others, earth, God**

14

Week 4 - Awareness
(Remove shoes)
Sit on your heels on the ground, arms in lap. (Or, sit in chairs with feet on ground and arms in lap.)

Breathe in slowly, and feel the air move into your body.
Breathe out slowly, and feel the air move out of your body. (2X)

Listen to your breath. *Sit very still, breathing slowly in and out*
Feel your breath on your hands. *Raise hands and cup them in front of mouth*
Catch your warm breath *Exhale into cupped hands, then close them*
and let it go. *Fling arms forward and out, opening hands, then return to lap*

Look around you. *Raise body until torso is straight and turn head and torso to left and then slowly scan right.*
Notice all the people in the room. *Scan back from right to left, slowly rotating torso*
Nod at each person *Scan left to right, nodding head*
and wish them well. *Hold arms straight out at waist level with palms up and move arms out in circle; lift one leg in lunge with other knee still on floor*

Stand up slowly. *Use hands to push up into standing position*
Feel the ground beneath you. *Rock slowly forward on toes and then back on heels*
Jump up and down *Jump, spreading feet wide and raising arms over head, then jump again, bringing feet together and arms back to side (jumping jacks)*
and let it catch you. *Jump, bending knees and land in slight crouch*

Close your eyes. *Stand upright with eyes closed*
Feel God's presence with you. *Move arms around in a big circle and hug self*
Catch God's great love *Reach out with alternating open hands, closing each one as you pull it back to you*
And share some with others. *Hold one hand over heart and extend other hand palm up in a sweeping circle*

Key words (for flow): **you, others, earth, God**

Week 5 - Empathy
(Remove shoes)
Stand (or sit) with feet firmly on the ground, one hand on your chest and the other on your belly

Breathe in slowly, and feel the air move into your body.
Breathe out slowly, and feel the air move out of your body. (2X)

Not every day is a 'feel good' day. *Tense whole body with arms bowed at sides (like a monkey)and fists clenched*
Sometimes we feel mad, *Make a scowling face and hold fists up like ready for a fight*
or confused, *Make a confused face and flutter hands as if searching for something*

15

or scared. *Make a scared face and clutch arms around torso*

We want to hit somebody *Stand with legs apart and punch left, then right with fists*
so they will feel bad too. *Crumple into ragdoll pose (bend at waist with face toward knees and arms dangling at your side)*
But then we remember. *Raise head and torso slowly, bringing hands up to form small cross over heart*
Everyone deserves to feel safe. *Sweep arms out in a large circle and back to hug self.*

We are all warmed by the same sun, *Raise hands above head and bring them downward as if scanning body*
standing on the same ground. *Lift first one foot and then the other, stepping to the side to form an inverted 'V' with legs and hold arms out in a similar inverted 'V'*

God, when we feel like hitting others *Stand with legs apart and punch left, then right with fists*
help us use kind words instead. *Raise hands above head and bring them downward until hands rest crossed over heart*

Key words (for flow): **us, others, earth, God**

Week 6: (Ignite) Justice
(Remove shoes)
Stand (or sit) with feet firmly on the ground, arms dangling at sides.

Breathe in, lift arms slowly in an arc (palms up) until they meet above head.
Breathe out, lower arms slowly in an arc (palms down) until they touch sides of body. (2X)

How do you make a difference in the world? *Rub hands together briskly (fire-starting motion)*
How do you work for justice? *Continue rubbing hands together while rotating torso from side to side*

What happens when people come together? *Extend arms in downward 'V' with hands shaking (jazz hands), then raise arms slowly with hands still shaking until arms in upward 'V'*
What happens when they cooperate? *Shake entire body with arms in upward 'V'*

How will the world be changed? *Jump up and down four times*
How will it respond? *Jump up and down while turning in a circle*

What will God's reaction be? *Dance with arms up*
What will God do? *Twirl around as you continue dancing*

Key words (for flow): **you, others, world, God**

16

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Theologising with Children Who are Victims of Religious Radicalism: A Story from Indonesian Context

Abstract

Some children, particularly members of The Pasundan Christian Church of Dayeuhkolot in West Java, Indonesia, were victims of religious radicalism. Children in this congregation have seen and experienced certain acts of verbal and physical violence that affected their life, particularly their mindset and behavior towards others who are different from them. In this situation, adults often ask the children to accept things that happened and to remain silent. Therefore, there was not enough space for children to express and discuss what they have experienced. Based on this context, the article will specifically look at how children's experiences of intolerance and violence affect their theological understanding of God, humans, and the relationships among human beings. This article argues that by listening carefully to the stories of these children, we (adults) open a space for children to do theology based on their own understandings and personal/communal experiences.

Introduction

Radicalism (in the name of religion) is still happening in Indonesia. Various acts of radicalism in the name of religion have had several impacts on people's lives, particularly children. For example, children ask for the presence and justice of God; they become easily suspicious of friends of different religions; some of them get angry, even hold grudges against the perpetrators and wish bad things to happen to the perpetrators of the violence, while some other children accept violence as what they deserve as Christians. This happens because there are different interpretations of some texts from the Bible, such as Matthew 10:22 and Luke 6:27. The impact of the violence that occurred was not only on the children who saw and experienced the incident first-handedly but also on other children. Some of them showed the feelings of anger, confusion, and sadness as to why the incident happened, as well as a feeling of worry that it will repeat itself and disappointment toward the surrounding community.

One of the children's communities that experienced a significant impact from this act of radicalism was the children at The Pasundan Christian Church of Dayeuhkolot, in the West Java, western part of Indonesia. In this situation, the church as the community of faith cannot remain silent. The church needs to take various actions that can help children to get out of this multifaceted situation. One of the ways is by providing an open space for children to raise their voices and to do theology from their context and experiences. Theologising with children is one of the significant ways because of the tendency of churches in Indonesia to make children as objects, even though in these problematic situations children also ask several theological questions that require a quick response. This paper argues that by providing a space for children to tell their stories, raise their unheard voices, and reflect on their experiences, we invite children to do theology as well as we did for adults. In the process of doing theology with children, they (children) should be placed as subjects and not as objects of adult theology only. The questions that arise about himself or herself, God, and others show how children ask critical and theological questions, and they need space to elaborate their understanding in this very complex situation.

1

Methodology

This study will use the method of literature review and qualitative research. The literature review will help to understand the basic concepts of experts on how to do theology with children. The qualitative research in the form of an interview with children will provide a space to listen to the stories of children who are victims of violence in the name of religion in the context of Indonesia, particularly children of Pasundan Christian Church Dayeuhkolot Congregation.

Background and Context

Closures of church buildings in Indonesia in the last decade have constantly occurred. In fact, not infrequently the closures were accompanied by acts of violence. According to the data from the *Setara Institute*, in 2022, violations against Freedom of Religion and Belief increased compared to previous years. In the report, there were 175 incidents of violations of Freedom of Religion and Belief with 333 acts in Indonesia.[1] Syera Anggraeni Buntara, a researcher at Setara Institute's Freedom of Religion and Belief, said that cases of refusal to establish places of worship showed a significant increase compared to the data for the last three years.[2] Refusal to build houses of worship and prohibition of worship accompanied by acts of violence are sometimes carried out not only against those with different beliefs. Pramono Ubaid Tanthowi, Deputy Chair of the Internal Affairs of the National Human Rights Commission, highlighted that phenomena in the context of violations of Freedom of Religion and Belief in Indonesia do not only occur between religions but also between adherents.[3] Although much seems to have happened in the last two decades, it is undeniable that the moment of President Soeharto ended his regime was marked as the moment of fundamental Islam revival. Ismatul Ropi wrote that violence in the name of religion increased sharply after the overthrown of the New Order Regime in Indonesia in 1998.[4] Meanwhile, based on the results of the research by the Setara Institute, out of 37 provinces in Indonesia, the province of East Java (34 incidents) is in the first position as the province with violations of Freedom of Religion and Belief. This position was followed by West Java (25 incidents), Jakarta (24 incidents), Banten (11 incidents), Central Java (11 incidents), North Sumatra (10 incidents), Nangroe Aceh (7 incidents), West Kalimantan (7 incidents), West Nusa Tenggara (6 incidents), and Riau (5 incidents).[5]

The Pasundan Christian Church (GKP) Dayeuhkolot and Radicalism

The existing data is quite surprising when many acts of violence occur in areas with a high Muslim population. Although it cannot be directly linked between religion and acts of violence, the experience that occurred in GKP has proved this. The perpetrators of acts of violence show a certain religious identity. Supriatno, a GKP pastor who is also an interfaith activist, said, "Real, contextual experience in West Java contains experiences that show the presence of Christianity is

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[1] Detik.com, "Setara: Pelanggaran Kebebasan Beragama 2022 Meningkat" [Setara: Violations of Religious Freedom 2022 Increase], https://news.detik.com/berita/d-6544319/setara-pelanggaran-kebebasan-beragama-2022-meningkat-dibanding-tahun-lalu (accessed on May 26th, 10.33 pm).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia, https://www.komnasham.go.id/index.php/news/2023/3/20/2330/komnas-ham-soroti-peraturan-yang-hambat-kebebasan-beragama-dan-berkeyakinan.html (accessed on May 26th, 10.50 pm).

[4] Ismatul Ropi, *Religion and Regulation* (Jakarta: IAIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2017), 6.

[5] Persekutuan Gereja-gereja di Indonesia, "Laporan Setara Institute 2022: Jawa Timur Peringkat Pertama dengan Kasus Pelanggaran KBB Terbanyak" ["Setara Institute 2022 Report: East Java Ranks First with the Most KBB Violations"], https://pgi.or.id/laporan-setara-institute-2022-jawa-timur-peringkat-pertama-dengan-kasus-pelanggaran-kbb-terbanyak/ (accessed on May 26th, 11.00 pm).

2

often rejected, hostile, suspected."[6] Several congregations of the Pasundan Christian Church (GKP), such as the Katapang congregation, the Cisewu worship post, the Cimuning worship post, and the Dayeuhkolot congregation have experienced violence and intolerance. GKP is one of the churches in Indonesia that is specifically present in three provinces in Indonesia: West Java, Jakarta, and Banten. As a church located in the western part of Java, GKP has often encountered people of different beliefs, in this case, Moslem. According to data published on the website, of the Central Bureau of Statistics, based on religion, these three provinces have the highest number of Muslim populations. Specifically, on 2022 August 24th, in West Java Province, there are 46,923,542 Muslims, 865,328 Christians, 299,850 Catholics, 17,082 Hindus, 98,753 Buddhists, and 12,111 others.[7] Unfortunately, according to data from the Setara Institute, West Java Province is the province with the highest level of violations of Freedom of Religion and Belief acts in Indonesia.

In particular, the GKP Dayeuhkolot Congregation is one of several churches which experienced closure and destruction in 2005 and 2008. GKP Dayeuhkolot Congregation was founded in 1950 when the Christian members of the Indonesian National Armed Forces (TNI) in Battalion *Yonif 330 Dayeuhkolot* gathered to carry out services. This fellowship later joined the GKP Synod in 1963 and officially became the GKP Dayeuhkolot Congregation. However, in 1985 the Battalion moved to the Cicalengka region, and in 1995 the place of worship officially moved to Jalan Sukabirus, Dayeuhkolot sub-district, Bandung Regency. In 2005, acts of intimidation began to be carried out by a group of people. Intimidation accompanied by threats of carrying sharp weapons did not receive enough attention from the local security forces so the priest serving at the GKP of the Dayeuhkolot Congregation at that time had to be evacuated. In 2008, threats were made again and this time accompanied by acts of vandalism. The acts of violence not only damaged the church building and the ornaments in it, such as pews, offering tables, lamps, and crosses, but also made the church members be chased, beaten, and verbally abused. The impact of the closure and destruction of the church building was not only the physical impact/building facilities. This act of violence has an impact on the development of children who saw, felt, and experienced it directly. Children who had to see, hear, and witness acts of intolerance, acts of violence due to religious differences. They heard how they were called names as if they were animals, pots were broken, and houses were thrown with stones and even firecrackers.[8] Since then, they have held services far from where they live, namely at the Reuel Chapel, owned by Imanuel Bandung Hospital which is located on Jl. Kopo Bandung is around 10-15 KM. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit around 2020 the service was held online and the service rooms were only filled by a few officers, no more than 15 people, blessing in disguise, the GKP Dayeuhkolot church building was able to be used again. But unfortunately, this did not last long because around October 2022 the pastor of the GKP Dayeuhkolot congregation was visited by several people who asked that they no longer have services at that location. Based on mutual agreement between government and the church, the return service was held at the Rehuel Chapel. When this was confirmed to the priest, he confirmed that the congregation members had agreed to temporarily return to the Rehuel Chapel to prevent further violence.[9] R, a member of the Congregational Council, whom the writer met, said that the repeated rejection had made several people fearful

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[6] Supriatno, "GKP dan Dialog dalam Masyarakat Plural" [GKP and Dialogue in the Context of Pluralistic Society], in *Teologi Harmoni* [Theology of Harmony], eds. Wahju S. Wibowo, et.al. (Bandung: MS GKP Press, 2016) 287-295.

[7] Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, "Jumlah Penduduk Menurut Agama" [Number of Population by Religion], https://satudata.kemenag.go.id/dataset/detail/jumlah-penduduk-menurut-agama (accessed on May 26th, 10.50 pm).

[8]Obertina Johanis. "A Touch Feeling," in *tepping Beyond The Wound*, eds. Simangunsong dan Supriatno (Bandung: Mission 21 dan Jakatarub, 2020),83.

[9] Interview with Priest A, 2022.

3

and had lost their enthusiasm.[10] Regarding children's activities, they were also diverted to the vicinity of the chapel. It is undeniable that not all children and adults attend the activities that have been diverted.

Stories of Children Who are Victims of Religious Radicalism

In this section, it will be revealed how the impact of acts of violence those children saw and experienced towards God and their relationship with others.

Story of R

R was about 9 years old at the time of the incident. Many times, he said that he could not forget the incident at the time. He explained, "How could I forget it? That morning I was ready to attend Sunday School activities. But when they entered the church, there were already many people carrying sharp weapons and clubs such as bamboo, wood, and other things. The words that they were said very harsh. They call Christian's infidel and animal names while driving us away." Even though R stated that he forgave them, the perpetrators, he honestly said, "I pray that God will repay their evil deeds. When one of the perpetrators gets sick and someone dies, I believe that it is a form of God's revenge. I am grateful for that. I do not know if I am wrong or not but that is how I feel."[11]

R told the story that sticks in his memory, namely the expulsion during the service and the verbal, physical, and mental violence they received. "When we had not used the church building for a long time, one day we went to church again. Other events that are remembered during the service at the beginning of the year. During the service because it was very crowded outside, I then came out and there was a small child who teased me "Huh...you infidel!" Then my mother brought me in but in my heart, I was still protesting, why are they like that? Why is it so difficult to just want a service? I am upset. Offended. Congested. Finally, the service finished faster, I went out with my mother and uncle (members of the Congregational Council) who recorded the event and someone immediately hit him in the head. That event turned out to affect me until I grew up.[12]

Story of V

V, who is older than R at that time, expressed his views on the perpetrator. "They're crazy. Why are they angry with us? What did we do to make them mad like that? What is the point in destroying churches and church items? If it is because of different religions, it is weird. Since childhood, I have been accustomed to religious differences, both in the family and friendships at school and at home. Parents have reminded to respect the differences. So even though their actions were like that, I forgive them." V believes that if there are bad people's actions against Christians it is a part that must be accepted. "God Himself teaches us to accept those bad deeds. So, Christians must carry the cross," my mother said. "Thus, I think we are supposed to be in uncomfortable situation as often as it can be, so we'd get used to how people treat us badly."

One of the Bible Texts cited by V is Matthew 10:22. V also raised a Bible verse to strengthen his statement, "And you will be hated by everyone because of my name; but whoever will endure until the end will be saved" (Matt. 10:22). V emphasized that being a follower of Jesus is not to be happy, not accepting privileges but having to carry the cross. "When I was confirming my faith and then baptized, I already knew the consequences of following Jesus, namely carrying the cross. So, I am not surprised when I and the church experience challenge like this (acts of intolerance)."[13]

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[10] Interview with R, 2022.
[11] Interview with R, 2021.
[12] Interview with R, 2021.
[13] Interview with V, 2021.

Story of S

S (about 12 years old when the incident happened), explained what he felt when he found out that the aunt who was sitting behind him was hit in the back when they ran away from the situation, "I feel confused, sad, angry with their screams. When my mother and my aunt and I ran to the motorbike to go home immediately, I really did not expect them to catch up and someone hit my aunt's back with a piece of wood." Even though the anger was so great, S admitted that the teachings of his parents made him accept and forgive the perpetrators. "My parents and my Sunday School teachers always teach me that God wants us to love and to forgive. It means we must '*let it go*,' let every feeling of hatred towards the perpetrators." Meanwhile, S felt that the perpetrator had the courage to do this because the GKP Congregation of Dayeuhkolot was a small congregation and did not have members who held positions in the government. "There are no officials here. It is possible that if there were government officials in this congregation, this would not have happened."[14]

Based on the story above, it shows us that: (1) Violence and acts of radicalism are realities faced by children; (2) Violence and radicalism have a significant impact on children. On one hand, the child retains tremendous pain from that experience which is still carried over to this day. On the other hand, children are forced to accept this reality without having adequate space to manage all these feelings. As a result, forgiveness and submission to accept that bad situation become an "instant" way out simply because we are Christians and only because the Bible has said such things that we must obey. Statements made by parents that we must accept these situations and conditions, etc., are an indoctrination process that ignores other dimensions in life; (3) In this difficult situation, there is one important element that is forgotten by adults, namely making meaning. If these bad experiences are not processed, told, or reflected on, then they will have a significant impact on children's lives; (4) The children must accept this reality without opening adequate space to reflect on it. The theological process is considered the property of adults only.

Theologising with Children in the Context of Religious Radicalism

Tanya Marie Eustace Campen, in her book entitled *Holy Work with Children: Making Meaning Together*, states that giving full attention to and listening to children opens space for faith communities to experience firsthandedly and claim that God is with us because we allow space for God to speak through children and we allow ourselves to learn from children.[15] Campen's statement wants to emphasize that children are as valuable as adults or other members of the community so that they do not need to receive different treatment which tends to be discriminatory.

In line with Campen's thoughts, Joyce A. Mercer in her book *Welcoming Children*, emphasizes that doing theology with children must begin by following the footsteps of Jesus in the past which shows significantly how God works in the lives of children, choosing children as partners in carrying out works of service and theology (cf. for example Mark 10:13-16; John 6:1-12), as well as carrying out (social) transformations for and with children.[16] For Mercer, small (read: child) does not mean unimportant or even less valuable; conversely small (read: child) is a good place to start the theological process.[17] For David M. Csinos, children not only learn

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[14] Interview with S, 2021.

[15] Tanya Marie Eustace Campen, *Holy Work with Children: Making Meaning Together* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Collection, 2021), 2.

[16] Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2005), 10.

[17] Mercer, *Welcoming Children,* 10.

5

theology, but they also actively and creatively create theology and bring together various aspects of their life/experience to shape their theological understanding.[18]

One among many best ways to do theology with children is by involving children in the process of making meaning. According to Tanya Campen, making meaning is the children's way of doing theology. As a theologian, children's voices need to be heard by members of the community. Doing theology with children means creating a "space" for children to tell divine stories that they have that describe their life/ journey of faith with God and neighbors until they arrive at concrete responses to the various reflections that they do. The space created allows children to wonder various things. This questioning process helps children to shape their theological understanding. Therefore, the child's strong desire to ask questions (perhaps even many times) should be responded positively by adults, and not silenced by adults on the grounds that children are still too young to ask questions like that, or it is not time for children to know things, that usually be claimed as an adult's business. Precisely activities of questioning and answering questions are one of the opening ways for children to do theology.

The process of making meaning is the children's response to their daily experiences that occur in holy conversations with God, their colleagues, and adults who are walking together with them on their journey. According to Csinos in his book entitled *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and the Making of Theological Meaning*, it is stated that the process that the child making meaning can be influenced by the culture in which the child is raised and in the context of churching, the congregational culture has a significant influence on the process of making meaning.[19] In addition, Csinos also emphasizes that the process of making meaning by children is not individual but communal among children.[20]

Furthermore, Campen identified four important stages in the making meaning process, which are engage, recognize, claim, and respond. For us, these four stages which are proposed by Campen, can be used as a way of doing theology with children, particularly those who are victims of radicalism. The following are the explanation. First, *Engage*. It refers to the process when children are invited to connect with God and others in the learning process; this state is marked by the willingness of children to open their hearts and minds to what is being discussed/experienced, including showing their interest, concern, and curiosity.[21] This phase can be seen through the children's statements about their feeling of upset, sadness, anger, and confusion. Take an example when V expresses his feeling of confusion because of the treatment of people who say and act rudely to himself and his family just because of his religion is different from them. V tried to associate what he experienced in the church building with his belief in God.

Second, *Recognize*. It refers to ability of children to identify the presence of God (and others) in various events of their life, for example: "God is with me when I am afraid; God is with me when I am lost and alone; God is with me when I face trials, etc.[22] According to Campen, children can acknowledge these various forms of presence when they are invited to give full attention to the various things they identify with.[23] The biggest problem with churches is the inability to create adequate "space" for this process to occur. R's curiosity regarding what will happen to the perpetrators of this act of violence indicates that he can make connections between what happened and God is there, not standing still. Meanwhile, S chooses to forgive because that is what he remembers, if someone makes a mistake, they must be forgiven.

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[18] David M. Csinos, *Little Theologians: Children, Culture, and The Making of Theological Making* (Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020), 3-4.

[19] Csinos, *Little Theologians,* 201.

[20] Csinos, *Little Theologians,* 200.

[21] Campen, *Holy Work with Children,* 54-56.

[22] Campen, *Holy Work with Children,* 57.

[23] Campen, *Holy Work with Children,* 57.

Third, *Claim.* It refers to how children remember and express the presence of God in their lives; at this stage, the child will remember how, when, and where experience God, and all these experiences begin to be spoken in the religious language of children.[24] Campen emphasized,

> "Practicing and developing religious language helps children begin to articulate and claim their own understanding in response to these questions… As children claim their experiences of God's presence and love they develop a religious language that helps them articulate the meaning made."[25]

This phase can be seen when the children felt the presence of God when in that frightening experience, they were still given peace. When they were moving from the main worship room to the warehouse, they moved without making any sound and at that time they surely believe that God is guiding them. When they are in a safe place, they can pray to God to ask for his help.

Fourth, *Respond*. In this process, children are invited to respond to the various experiences they have experienced.[26] Based on the stories that have been told above, clearly, we can see that children differ in how they respond to the same incident/situation that they have faced: Some pray to ask God to avenge the actions of the perpetrators, while there are also those who firmly forgive since the Bible told them to do so. All forms of response show the child's belief in God's presence in their personal lives and in the community where they are.

Conclusion

This paper has shown how theologizing with children who are victims of religious radicalism, particularly in the context of children who are members of the Pasundan Christian Church Dayeuhkolot did not get enough space to express their feeling and their though toward incidents that they have experienced several years ago. This paper has proposed that by involving children in the process of making meaning, following four stages of making meaning proposed by Campen, we open enough space for children and place them as subjects in the process of doing theology.

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[24] Campen, *Holy Work with Children,* 59-60.

[25] Campen, *Holy Work with Children,* 63.

[26] Campen, *Holy Work with Children,* 64.

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8

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Transformative Spiritual Practices:

Toward Resisting the Commodification of Asian Girls' Bodies in K-Pop

Culture

Abstract: This paper focuses on the commodification and objectification of Asian girls' bodies
within the context of global capitalism, particularly in K-pop culture. Through the lens of
theological and pedagogical understandings of the body, this paper explores the potential of
spiritual practices to transform the narrative surrounding Asian girls' commodified bodies into
sacred places. By engaging in transformative practical practices, Asian girls can reflect critically
on their experiences and gain a deeper understanding of their dignity and agency.

K-pop, a genre of popular music originating from South Korea, has evolved into a global cultural phenomenon. As a Korean living in the United States, I often find myself engaged in discussions about K-pop idols such as BTS, PSY, Black Pink, and NewJeans. Within the context of globalized K-pop culture, I frequently experience a sense of privilege when establishing rapport with fellow enthusiasts. One particular personal encounter stands out during my work as a student advisor for the Youth Theological Initiative at Emory University. Upon realizing my Korean background, a young African American participant in the Praying with Our Feet program expressed her enthusiasm for Black Pink, a popular K-pop girl group comprising Asian members. She effusively praised the group's talent, physical attractiveness, and allure. In that moment, I was gratified by our ability to connect and engage in dialogue, despite our disparate lived experiences. Simultaneously, I recognized the pervasive influence exerted by K-pop female idols, who have come to symbolize Asian femininity, encompassing appearance, body ideals, and behavior, both locally and globally, through various multimedia platforms.

The representation of K-pop female idols in multimedia platforms imposes significant constraints on their appearances, body shapes, and behaviors. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these idols cannot be regarded as representative of the diverse range of body types and experiences among Asian girls. The performances of K-pop female idols, encompassing their physical attributes, body shapes, and behaviors, are meticulously honed and optimized for commercial success within the entertainment industry. Nonetheless, the commodification of these idols often leads to a distorted understanding of body image among Asian girls, influencing a fragmented sense of spirituality.

The perpetuation of an idealized and commodified body image of female K-pop idols through mass media not only sustains but also reinforces the objectification of numerous girls. This includes individuals who undergo training with aspirations to become celebrities in the entertainment industry within the context of global consumer culture, despite their possession of agency in pursuing careers as K-pop idols. Furthermore, the commodification and misrepresentation of the body image of K-pop idol girls through mass media perpetuate their objectification within the broader global consumer culture. This, in turn, influences young girls who aspire to emulate the body shape of K-pop idols, influencing the formation of negative self-identities.

This essay critically analyzes the role of religious education in addressing the pervasive miseducation concerning the commodified body images of Asian girls, which are described as pretty, thin, and sexy within the realm of K-pop culture. It delves into the transformative potential of dance as a pedagogical metaphor, exploring how it can disrupt the commodification of Asian girls' bodies and facilitate their rediscovery of the sacred essence inherent within their corporeal beings. Using traditional Korean Mask play, Talchum, as the pedagogical metaphor, this paper investigates spiritual practices that Asian girls and their communities can employ to resist prevalent commodified body images and embrace their bodies as sacred 'maum.' The study puts forth three spiritual pedagogical strategies, namely critical consciousness, a liberative mask dance, and the unmasked dance with spirit. By subjecting these strategies to rigorous analysis, the paper aims to illuminate the capacity of such practices to empower Asian girls who seek to imitate the physical appearance of K-pop idols, allowing them to reclaim agency over their bodies and foster a profound sense of spiritual interconnectedness.

By creating a safe space for Asian girls to explore their spiritualities, religious education can help them develop a positive relationship with their bodies, resist objectification in global consumer culture, and discover their sacredness. Ultimately, this paper argues that religious

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education has an important role to play in empowering Asian girls to celebrate their bodies and to maintain their integrity in the face of commodified and distorted representations.

Commodified Body Image of K-pop Girls and Its Impact

The widespread popularity of K-pop in South Korea since the 1990s occurred concurrently with a period of significant social transformation characterized by democratic mobilization, the rise of neo-liberal ideologies, and rapid industrial development. During an arduous historical period, K-pop music and dance served as a form of societal expression for the younger generation, providing an outlet for resistance against the restrictions imposed by authoritarian regimes.[1] K-pop culture provided a liberating avenue for the younger generation to showcase their desire for cultural diversity, novel experiences, and freedom from political oppression.[2] With the younger generation emerging as significant influencers in the realm of popular culture, K-pop began to embody the principles of neoliberalism, emphasizing individualism and self-promotion within the context of a global consumer culture along with cultural imperialism of the United States.[3]

The proliferation of K-pop culture and its expansive global fan base can be largely attributed to the forces of global consumerism and cultural imperialism, particularly those originating from the United States. South Korea actively engaged in cultural importation with Japan, which facilitated the subsequent exportation of K-pop culture to other Asian nations, including Taiwan and China, starting in 1998.[4] However, this period coincided with the Korean financial crisis, commonly known as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) crisis, which resulted in the emergence of cultural imperialism through the economic assistance provided by the United States.[5] Consequently, Korean musicians in the entertainment industry began integrating Western pop music and entertainment practices into their artistic repertoire. The cultural and political dominance of the United States, with its neoliberal and consumer values prioritizing materialism, individualism, and even Western beauty standards, became embedded in the K-pop entertainment industry, imposing expectations on Asian girls to conform to ideals of beauty that are defined by being pretty, thin, and white, all in service of the capitalistic pursuit of profit-making.

The entertainment industry is often seen as a source of empowerment for Asian girls seeking to boost their self-esteem and assert their agency through their bodies. For certain Asian girls who aspire to become celebrities like K-pop idols, beauty pageant winners, or supermodels, the training system offers an avenue to assert their agency, enhance their self-esteem, and pursue their ambitions. "The World Before Her," a documentary film directed by Nisha Pahuja, serves as an example by shedding light on how Indian beauty pageants empower Indian girls to transcend cultural limitations and assert their agency through their bodies and self-confidence.[6]

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[1] Suk-Young Kim, *K-Pop Live : Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2018), 51.

[2] Kim, *K-Pop Live : Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance,* 51.

[3] Kim, 53.

[4] Kim, 345.

[5] Arianne Naranjo and Cezar Solomon, "Next Level K-Pop: Heightened Capitalism from US Imperialism," *Institute for Nationalist Studies,* December 31, 2021, https://ins-ph.medium.com/next-level-k-pop-heightened-capitalism-from-us-imperialism-e4221b3f2468

[6] Pahuja. Nisha, *The World Before Her* (Canada: Storyline Entertainment, 2012)

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Nevertheless, the documentary also exposes the pressure on Indian girls to adhere to Western beauty standards characterized by traits such as being white, thin, and sexy, reflecting a preference for Caucasian features.

Critical socialist educator Henry Giroux argues that in beauty pageants, self-esteem refers to embracing, rather than critically challenging, a gender code that rewards little girls for their looks, submissiveness, and sex appeal. Beauty pageants, as sites of representation, identity formation, consumption, and regulation, are important cultural domains that must be understood in relation to how they align and resonate with other cultural sites involved in the production and regulation of youth, the construction of desire, and the sexualized body.[7] Consequently, self-esteem often becomes a euphemism for self-hatred, rigid gender roles, and powerlessness, perpetuating the commodification and objectification of women's bodies.[8]

In this regard, it can be argued that the training system for Asian girls aspiring to become K-pop idols undermines their agency and self-esteem. Within the K-pop entertainment industry, female idols, in particular, are subjected to constant control of their agency in order to fulfill the entrepreneurial objectives of the industry, leading to a state of obedience and subordination. As noted by Suk-Young Kim in "The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop," K-pop idols undergo intensive training to become highly polished products of the K-pop industry:

> The idea of idols as puppets of the industry derives from idols' limited agency, especially in the first three to four years after their debut. They are not simply musicians but also affective laborers who perform "fan service" – that is, verbal, physical, textual, and musical performances that offer pleasure – and work ceaselessly to maintain a close relationship with their fans. For this reason, entertainment companies select idol trainees based on several factors, such as appearance, kki (aura or stage presence, including charisma and sex appeal), talent (singing, dancing, and rapping), inseong (politeness, kindness, and sincerity), and teamwork.[9]

K-pop girls are subjected to enduring and rigorous training designed to cultivate their musical and performance abilities and overall appearance and demeanor. This process entails a strict degree of discipline, placing a strong emphasis on docility and utility.[10] The talents of these young girls become colonized, subordinating their individualities and characters to the commercial goals of the K-pop entertainment industry. In other words, K-pop girls' bodies, spirits, and characters are strictly monitored and controlled to ensure conformity with the expectations of their primarily consumer-based global fan base. The power dynamics of K-pop female idols, K-pop fandom, and the K-pop entertainment industry perpetuate the commodification of these young girls, positioning them as mere objects of consumption rather than as independent and autonomous agents capable of expressing their own identities and desires.

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[7] Henry A. Giroux, *America on the Edge : Henry Giroux on Politics, Education, and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 133.

[8] Giroux, *America on the Edge : Henry Giroux on Politics, Education, and Culture*, 133.

[9] Suk-Young Kim, *The Cambridge Companion to K-Pop* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 141.

[10] Gooyong Kim, "Between Hybridity and Hegemony in K-Pop's Global Popularity: A Case of Girls' Generation's American Debut." *International journal of communication* 11 (2017): 2371.

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K-pop girl groups, positioned as marginalized entities within the entertainment industry, have emerged as prominent symbols of Asian girls' bodies, often characterized by a combination of Caucasian features and patriarchal hierarchical epistemologies deeply ingrained in global consumer culture. Through propagating appealing, cute, thin, white, and sexy images, K-pop girl groups effectively divert the attention of audiences from real-world issues while contributing to the reconstruction and perpetuation of patriarchal gender hierarchies by exploiting male audiences' expectations of sexualized female representations.[11] As Communication and Media Scholar Gooyoung Kim notes, sexualized uniforms in K-pop signify the patriarchal demand for female bodies that are effective, obedient, and corporeal.[12] The body imagery of K-pop girls is commodified in a dominant cultural genre of neoliberal, patriarchal Korea, which constructs the image of Asian girls as docile, obedient, and service-oriented.[13] In the globalized realm of K-pop culture, the ongoing commodification of K-pop girls' encoded appearances as sexual objects become the representative body image ideals of Asian girls, further reinforcing patriarchal gender hierarchy structures as well as fostering miseducation among Asian girls regarding their own body images.

The miseducation of girls' body image understanding is not limited to Asian girls but also extends to girls in the United States. The influence of celebrities' body images, characterized by thinness, whiteness, and sexiness, permeates the daily lives of girls and presents a pervasive issue. According to interviews conducted by Joyce Mercer, body size and weight were frequently identified as problematic by girls.[14] Mercer's research reveals that girls often criticize popular culture, including music artists, TV and film stars, advertising, and internet images, for their impact on their body images. Many girls reported a lifelong dissatisfaction with their bodies, exemplified by Michelle's statement, "I have been trying to change my body since the fourth grade."[15] Additionally, in Emily A. Peck-McClain's interviews with girls, it is emphasized that discussions around body image, clothing, and how appearance is perceived by others are heavily influenced by social media.[16] These two significant studies on girls' body image in the United States demonstrate that the commodified body image portrayed on social media contributes to the miseducation and fragmented spirituality regarding young girls' own bodies.

Similarly, the flawless and youthful appearance of K-pop girls showcased in various media outlets, such as TV and music videos, can have a detrimental impact on the body image of Asian girls, including Korean girls, pushing them to alter their physical characteristics to resemble those of K-pop stars. This desire to emulate idealized media icons often leads to negative body image when the desired bodily ideals are unattainable.[17] Consequently, many

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[11] Gooyong Kim, *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls : Cultural Politics of Developmentalism, Patriarchy, and Neoliberalism in South Korea's Popular Music Industry* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2019) 39.

[12] Kim, *From Factory Girls to K-Pop Idol Girls,* 36.

[13] Kim, 30.

[14] Joyce Mercer, *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls-- and their Parents* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 55.

[15] Mercer, *Girl Talk, God Talk*, 55.

[16] Emily Peck-McClain, *Arm in Arm with Adolescent Girls: Educating into the New Creation* (Pickwick Publications, Eugene, Oregon, 2018), 15-16.

[17] Greenwood, Dara. "Idealized TV Friends and Young Women's Body Concerns." *Body Image* 6, no. 2 (2009): 97–104.

Korean girls undergo cosmetic procedures like double eyelid surgery, nose reshaping, and chin augmentation after high school, seeking to mirror the appearance of K-pop idols who epitomize ideal beauty standards. As a matter of fact, entertainment trainees aspiring to debut as performers often constitute a significant clientele in the Korean cosmetic surgery market, with an estimated 90% of trainees from major entertainment agencies undergoing surgery, despite still being teenagers and their bodies still developing.[18] Notably, K-pop has popularized a unique beauty aesthetic that incorporates elements of Caucasian features without fully replicating them.[19]

This pedagogical phenomenon as cosmetic surgery extends beyond the entertainment industry and infiltrates the everyday lives of Asian girls. The commodification of K-pop idols' bodies within the global consumer culture amplifies their influence in pedagogy, posing a significant challenge to the subjectivity of Asian girls. Market capitalism's influential power fuels the replication of persuasive teaching methods, exacerbating the issue.[20] Understanding how imperial practices within the global K-pop consumer culture impact the religious identity of Asian girls and navigating a path towards spiritual resilience within these practices is essential. In the realm of religious education, a pressing responsibility arises to examine imperial practices, encompassing the political and ideological interests as well as power dynamics at play in shaping the commodified body image of Asian girls. Furthermore, it is vital to comprehend how cultural pedagogical practices are employed to influence the perceptions of Asian girls regarding their body images. Marketing strategies and techniques are utilized in ways that can constrain their imaginative capacities and mold their identities, thereby shaping their sense of possibility.[21] Accordingly, Asian girls can expand their imaginative faculties by recognizing their bodies as sacred spaces where they encounter God, self, and others, thus embracing their unique beauty as the image of God. By acknowledging the intrinsic dignity of their bodies and honoring them accordingly, Asian girls can foster a sense of integrated spirituality, enabling a holistic understanding of their bodies as integral to their spiritual journey of self-discovery and encounters with God and others.

Becoming Sacred Girls' Bodies as *Maum*

The body is essential to human existence, serving as the site of all experiences, emotions, thoughts, and faith. As M. Shawn Copeland notes, "The body is the site and meditation of divine revelation."[22] It undergoes a continuous process of formation and transformation, holding every experience, emotion, thought, and faith until death. As embodied creatures, the formation and transformation of human identity are fundamentally intertwined with the fact that we

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[18] Seung-hyun, Choi and Nara Kim, " Dangerous Dream Idol Trainee [Part 2]: Children Suffering from Body Dysmorphic Disorder," *Chosun Ilbo*, March 3, 2010, https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2010/03/18/2010031800156.html

[19] Zara Stone, "The K-Pop Plastic Surgery Obsession," The Atlantic, May 24, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/05/the-k-pop-plastic-surgery-obsession/276215

[20] Katherine Turpin, "Princess Dreams," *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, ed. Elizabeth Moore and Almeda Wright (Saint Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 49.

[21] Juliet B. Schor, *Born to Buy: The Commercialized Child and the New Consumer Culture* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 63.

[22] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom : Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 8.

communicate and experience through our bodies in a multitude of ways.[23] Asian girls' bodies also are primary spaces for building a relationship with God.

The Western dualistic worldview, which separates the body and spirit, however, has historically undervalued caring for the body. The separation of the body and spirit has prevented the development of a loving and nurturing relationship with one's own body.[24] Connecting the body and soul together in a positive way is unusual in Western Christianity, which tends to negate the body or view it as inherently problematic or even dangerous to a person's spiritual life.[25] The Western dualistic worldview influences the objectification of the body to be orientalized and fetishized. Celebrity girls' bodies, regardless of East and West, are secularized and undervalued, not to be an integral site of divine revelation and wholeness.

The wholeness of the body can be explained through the Korean meaning of maum. Haw-Young Chong, a Korean feminist theologian, developed the principle of the theology of maum. As Chong cites that the Korean term for the body can be translated to "Maum" (몸), which derives from the verb "mau-u-da" meaning "to gather," Chong implies that maum is a space where various thoughts, emotions, memories, and experiences converge and harmonize to form a distinct sense of self.[26] Unlike the body understanding of Western dualism to be susceptible to be profane body, maum is a term that refers to the entirety of our being and becoming, encompassing the ongoing processes of growth, transformation, and decay that occur in our physical body, including our flesh, bones, womb, breasts, heart, spirit, mind, intelligence, sexuality, and soul.[27] Maum can be a sacred and theological place:

> The theology of maum is based on several principles. First, a theology of maum considers all experiences of maum as critical sources of theology. Maum is all that we are, and we understand God with all that happens in our maum. When maum is placed in the center of theology, God-talk can more concretely materialize in our lives. Second, a theology of maum begins with the understanding that all bodies are holy and beautiful. Regardless of color, gender, physical ability, age, fertility, sexual orientation, sexual history, or marital status, there is sacredness and beauty in bodies. Cultures past and present have tended to confine the attractiveness of female bodies to certain physical features such as thinness/roundness, virginity/pregnancy, youthfulness/maturity, a certain color of eyes and hair, or big/small breasts. … A theology of maum affirms the beauty of bodies transcending the cultural standards of any given time.[28]

According to the principles of the theology of maum, the maum can be a sacred and theological place where we can understand God talk in the context of our lives and embrace our body itself, regardless of cultural standards or physical attributes. It also recognizes the divine

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[23] David Brown, *God and Grace of Body: Sacrament in Ordinary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 11.

[24] Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body : a Theology of Embodiment* (New York: Continuum, 1995), xii.

[25] Peck-McClain, *Arm in Arm with Adolescent Girls*, 16.

[26] Hwa-Young Chong, *In Search of God's Power in Broken Bodies: A Theology of Maum* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1.

[27] Chong, *In Search of God's Power in Broken Bodies*, 1.

[28] Chong, 5.

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dwelling in each person's maum and considers all experiences of maum as critical sources of theology. More essentially, our maum can affirm the beauty of bodies regardless of the commodified body images, appearances, and behaviors, overcoming cultures in the past and present to perceive the typical perception of girls' bodies – pretty, thin, and sexy. In this respect, the theology of maum affirms the beauty of all bodies and recognizes the value and worth of each person's maum.

Regardless of the extent to which Asian girls' body shapes and images conform to the prevailing Caucasian standard of beauty, it is imperative to acknowledge the inherent sacredness of all girls' "maums" – the innermost essence wherein the divine essence dwells. Asian girls possess the agency to affirm the inherent beauty of their bodies as sanctified spaces wherein they can encounter the immanent presence of God. The embodiment and acknowledgment of one's maum provide a means for Asian girls to affirm their inherent beauty as divinely created masterpieces. In doing so, they rediscover the intrinsic value and worth of each person's maum.

Transformative Spiritual Practice of Dance

Dance serves as a metaphor for resilient spirituality that enables girls and women to resist toxic social constructions and fragmented spirituality in religious education. Evelyn Parker argues that dance reflects the epistemological and ontological aspects of a girl's spirituality, where her ways of knowing and being in the world are shaped by her beliefs in God and the practice of justice that she embodies.[29] Parker suggests that dancing signifies a spirituality that offers liberative hope to adolescent girls, allowing them to view themselves as agents of God dismantling systems and powers of injustice, moved by the conviction that God is with them in spirit as they act.[30] Maria Harris describes a woman's spirituality as a sequence of movements that nurture the soul, representing her private or inner life. Through dance, the bodily rhythms awaken our existence, nourish us, and allow for personal transformation, all while embodying the indwelling spirit.[31]

In this sense, dance serves as a pedagogical metaphor through which girls can explore the significance of their "maum" as a sacred space wherein their spirit can freely reside. It allows them to express their sense of liberation and freedom while nurturing their spirituality within the realm of K-pop culture, which is characterized by the pervasive influence of extorted body image standards imposed upon K-pop girls. Building on this theoretical and practical understanding of dance as a pedagogical tool, this paper proposes the metaphor of talchum, a Korean traditional mask dance, as a transformative spiritual practice. Talchum can allow them to express their emotions and resist the commodification of their body images by tapping into their cultural heritage and embodying their spiritual practices through dance.

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[29] Evelyn L. Parker, "Nurturing the Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls," *The Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls : Hard Stories of Race, Class, and Gende*r, ed. Evelyn L. Parker (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 163.

[30] Parker, "Nurturing the Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls," 164.

[31] Maria Harris, *Dance of the Spirit : the Seven Steps of Women's Spirituality* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989), xii-xiii.

Pedagogical Metaphor as Talchum[32] Play

Talchum is a traditional Korean art form that combines dance, music, and theater with masks. The word "Talchum" derives from the Korean words "tal," meaning "mask," and "chum," meaning "dance." Talchum has a rich history, starting as a part of shamanic rituals and evolving into a form of communal play. Initially used to purify homes and villages, talchum is now widely performed at village festivals in place of Siberia, Central Asia, and Scandinavia.[33] During performances, masked characters portray people, animals, and supernatural beings, conveying deep emotions that connect with and entertain the spirits. The focus on the breath as a spiritual source of energy from the chest, coupled with grounded feet and linear poses, emphasizes the spiritual aspect of talchum.[34]

In the Joseon dynasty of Korean history, particularly, talchum evolved into a form of liberative communal play that challenged social hierarchies and conveyed a universal quest for equality. Folk dramas depicted the frustrations of ordinary people towards the injustices perpetuated by the noble class and feudal system.[35] By showcasing the lives of everyday individuals and addressing social, political, and religious issues, talchum provided a means to criticize and resist unjust power structures.

I propose that talchum can serve as a pedagogical metaphor for transformative spiritual practice among Asian girls living in K-pop culture, who are influenced by the extorted body image prevalent in that culture. Talchum can enable these girls to understand the sanctity of their bodies and embark on a journey of self-discovery. I will discuss three stages in the process of talchum as a transformative spiritual practice: critical consciousness, a liberative communal mask dance, unmasking dance with spirit. These stages empower girls to explore their spirituality while actively resisting the detrimental impact on their body image and self-perception through subversive methods. It is important to note that this proposal suggests using talchum metaphorically as a transformative spiritual practice, rather than in a literal sense. The three practical stages of talchum that I illuminate provide valuable insights into the spiritual formation of girls as they resist the commodified body image in K-pop culture.

Critical Consciousness

Talchum, as a form of resistance against unjust power structures, possesses the capacity to foster social consciousness among marginalized and oppressed individuals, enabling them to challenge and resist these structures. In essence, talchum serves as a platform for raising awareness and cultivating a critical understanding of the prevalent inequalities and injustices pervasive in society. As mentioned above, the origins of talchum have historically served as a

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[32] *Talchum* was nearly lost during the Japanese occupation in the rest half of the twentieth century. Since the early 1960s, however, practitioners and historians have identified thirteen regional practices of *Talchum* and have built thriving tourist and educational programs designed to celebrate, preserve, and perpetuate the form. *The oxford Handbook of Dance and Theater,* https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199917495.013.38

[33] Mark Pizzato, "Traditional Forms of Asian Theatre," In *Mapping Global Theatre Histories*, (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2019), 88.

[34] Pizzato, "Traditional Forms of Asian Theatre," 89.

[35] "*Talchum, mask dance drama in the Republic of Korea,*" International Mask Arts and Cultural Organization (IMACO), accessed March 30, 2023. https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/talchum-mask-dance-drama-in-the-republic-of-korea-01742

8

form of social critique, highlighting the struggles and aspirations of ordinary people while challenging existing social hierarchies and injustices perpetuated by the upper class. Talchum plays employ genres of humor, such as black comedy, to criticize social injustices, utilizing irony, sarcasm, and wit to examine the unjust aspects of society.

Similarly, it is imperative to promote social consciousness regarding K-pop culture, which reinforces the misrepresentation of commodified Asian girls' body image. Instead of dismissing K-pop culture as frivolous, harmless, or unrelated to spirituality, the religious community should actively engage in critical analysis of the depiction of Asian girls' bodies based on the pervasive Caucasian standards of beauty propagated through social media. This engagement will assist in recognizing the detrimental influence on their spirituality. Critical realization involves the spiritual awareness of girls concerning their own existential realities and those of their immediate and global communities.[36]

Religious communities, parents, and peer groups play a pivotal role in nurturing critical awareness as a means to counteract the detrimental effects of K-pop culture on the perception of Asian girls regarding their bodies as sacred entities and their body images. Within this context, it is imperative to acknowledge the interconnectedness and receptivity inherent in the concept of "maum" as a sacred body. The cultivation of critical consciousness concerning their bodies as sacred maum signifies the initial step towards engaging in a reflective process. This entails not only engaging in discerning examination of their bodies as pivotal sites of interconnectedness with their God, communities, and selves but also interrogating the motivations underlying their daily makeup routines and aspirations to emulate the commodified body image epitomized by K-pop female idols.

The development of critical consciousness serves as a catalyst for Asian girls within the realm of K-pop culture to express their suppressed emotions. This heightened awareness empowers them to harmonize with the rhythmic elements of music, facilitating liberation through unrestrained and unfiltered self-expression. As a result, these individuals surpass the limitations imposed by societal norms and expectations, allowing them to embrace their authenticity and defy the restrictive influences encountered within K-pop culture.

A Liberative Mask Dance
Talchum serves as a communal form of expression, offering individuals a platform to articulate their repressed emotions in response to oppressive circumstances. By integrating dance, music, singing, and storytelling, Talchum performances provide a multifaceted artistic experience that captivates both performers and audience members. Within the realm of Talchum play, masks assume a crucial role in facilitating the transformative essence of the practice. These masks serve as catalysts for performers, collaborating harmoniously to enable the expression and portrayal of emotions during the performance, embodying a diverse range of personalities freely.

The talchum play serves as a transformative and liberative spiritual practice, providing Asian girls with an opportunity to challenge prevailing cultural standards of beauty in K-pop culture by recognizing their bodies as a form of resistance. Furthermore, it extends an invitation to audiences, including parents, peers, and faith communities, to cultivate solidarity in resisting these standards.

The symbolic act of donning a mask in talchum signifies the embodiment of sacred maum and enables Asian girls to express their repressed emotions and feelings. As a pedagogical

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[36] Parker, "Nurturing the Sacred Selves of Adolescent Girls," 166.

metaphor, masks become a medium through which they can freely express themselves, explore their authentic identities, and engage in a dialogue with their bodies and spirituality. By concealing their faces behind masks, adolescent girls can assume diverse roles and transcend the fear of judgment imposed by others or societal expectations influenced by the fetishized portrayal of Asian female bodies, as well as sexism, racism, and other assumptions related to appearance and body image.

The act of donning a mask in talchum represents a challenge to the fetishized body image of Asian girls and encourages the exploration of transformative imagination to nurture confidence both internally and externally. Drawing a parallel to bell hooks' argument, the erasure of the body fosters a perception of information as neutral and detached from the individuals conveying it.[37] While hooks primarily focuses on this phenomenon in the context of education and learning in the classroom, the metaphor of wearing masks, akin to the erasure of the body, implies practicing the dance with spirit to recognize their body as sacred beyond the understanding of prevalent body image, thus subverting the fetishized notions imposed upon them in K-pop culture.

Mirrorless Monday exemplifies a practice that encompasses the fundamental principles of a liberative mask dance. Participants deliberately choose to abstain from utilizing mirrors for a designated day, with the intention of challenging the prevailing societal norms pertaining to appearance and beauty. By temporarily relinquishing their reliance on mirrors, individuals are prompted to engage in introspection, contemplation, and a reevaluation of their self-perception. This practice instigates a shift in attention away from conforming to the pervasive standards of body image based on Caucasian beauty standards prevalent in K-pop culture, fostering the cultivation of a deeper connection with God, self, and others.

Consequently, it contributes to the re-imagination of the body as a sacred maum, serving as the focal point of an individual's relationship with the divine. Through this practice, participants experience a profound sense of liberation and empowerment, enabling them to reclaim agency in shaping their bodily autonomy and deeply engaging the statement that you are more than your appearance. By embodying sacred maum in the liberating mask dance, young girls are able to transcend shame about their body image, express themselves authentically, and extend an invitation to others who have encountered objectification and commodification to embark on a similar journey of self-affirmation and spiritual empowerment.

Furthermore, engaging in a critical process collaboratively, such as through dancing together, becomes essential in discovering their integrated spirituality, which places value on abundant life and the cultivation of healthy identities and solidarity with the sacred communal maum of Christ. Given that girls' perspectives and experiences through their bodies are intertwined with their faith, it becomes imperative for them to tap into their maum for a resilient relationship with their body, God, self, and community.

Unmasked Dance with Spirit

In the aftermath of the liberative talchum mask dance, it holds great significance for Asian girls to unveil their sacred maum, symbolizing a profound moment of heightened self-awareness where individuals recognize their intrinsic beauty as divine creations. In this context, the unmasked dance with spirit becomes an essential stage, serving as a pedagogical metaphor

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[37] Bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress : Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 139.

that emphasizes the importance of embracing their bodies as sacred entities. This transformative experience continues to unfold in their everyday lives as they engage in this unmasked dance, symbolically embracing their inherent divinity as well as rejecting societal constructions that seek to subjugate and commodify their body's image in K-pop culture.

Indeed, the pervasive commodification of body image expectations propagated by K-pop idols, particularly through social media, heavily influenced by Western beauty ideals and the male gaze, continues to exert immense pressure on adolescent girls. These unrealistic standards of acceptability often force them to conform to narrow definitions of beauty on a regular basis. Furthermore, the widespread participation in global consumer culture, coupled with an awareness of its impact on our aesthetic preferences and desires, can often discourage motivation for resistance against these harmful ideals.[38] Consequently, engaging in the unmask dance with spirit becomes a challenging endeavor for Asian girls as they strive to cultivate their spirituality and overcome the constraints imposed by commodified body image ideals.

Nonetheless, the unmasked dance with spirit, which involves embodying their sacred maum through connection with God in and beyond their faith community, becomes a crucial form of resistance against the dominant forces that entice Asian girls to mold their bodies into K-pop female idol standards. This action represents a subversive rejection of a capitalist consumer culture that seeks to exploit and monetize every aspect of Asian girls' lives, including their sacred maum. The unmasked dance with spirit is not a fleeting act; This ongoing conversion, which involves the profound transformation of an individual, encompasses not only a change in awareness and understanding, but also a transformation of our intuitive sense of the world (imagination) and our ability to act in accordance with that sense (agency).[39]

In essence, the unmasked dance with spirit is a powerful act of resistance that allows Asian girls to embrace their beauty as the image of God. This transformative process affirms their agency within their everyday lives, inspiring others who may suffer from stereotypical body image issues or blindly imitate K-pop idols without critical awareness in K-pop culture. Through this courageous journey, Asian girls embrace the risks of embracing their authentic selves, creating a space of freedom, confidence, and empowerment to resist societal pressures. Ultimately, the unmasked dance with spirit serves as an invitation to cultivate a powerful affirmation of the inherent dignity and beauty present in all individuals, transcending the boundaries of commodification, sacrifice, and fetishization of their body images.

Conclusion

In conclusion, on the second day of the trip, the experience of the African American girl student inviting me to dance together was a powerful invitation to engage in a liberative act of solidarity with sisterhood and spirit. While I regret not taking that opportunity, the experience highlights the importance of dancing together without masks as a means of resistance against the objectification, commodification, and fetishization of girls' bodies in global K-pop culture, and discovering bodies as sacred maum. Through engaging in ongoing conversion processes and prophetic spiritual practices, such as playing, dancing, and liberating through Talchum, Asian adolescents can find empowerment, tap into the resources of their faith communities, and learn from historical and current faith exemplars, as Almeda Wright suggested for the African

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[38] Katherine Turpin, *Branded : Adolescents Converting from Consumer Faith* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 2006), 56.
[39] Turpin, *Branded*, 59.

American young adolescents.[40] By doing so, they can seek their integrated spirituality and embrace their bodies as sacred maum, ultimately carving out a space of freedom and empowerment for themselves. It's a never-ending process of transformation until everyone is dancing together. Religious education should throw a dance party to make it happen.

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[40] Almeda Wright, *The Spiritual Lives of Young African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 6.

12

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13

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14

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Religious Education in Encountering Child Marriage

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Abstract

Child marriage is one of social problem. It destroys children's hope and life, example education, health, economic, domestic violence, violence against children, mental health, child identity, wrong parenting style to their children. This article is concerned with the religious education of encounters in child marriage. It is discussed from a preventive and curative perspective. Both were discussed in the scope of children, parent, family, faith community, and society. The theoretical foundation used to discuss this problem is narrative method. Teaching narratively can be held in religious education praxis especially in Sunday school, Bible study, cell community, family worship, regional worship, and Sunday worship. In this context, the narrative of child marriage is presented and tried to be responded to in a preventive and curative manner.

Keywords: children, child marriage, narrative method, praxis, religious education

Introduction

Marriage is usually done at the age of 18 years. What if this was done before the age of 18? This is categorized as child marriage. Those under 18 are still considered incapable because they are still in the transitional stage of sexual reproduction and marriage.[1] Not only it, but child marriage also bring problems of education, health, economic, domestic violence, violence against children, mental health, child identity, wrong parenting style to their children.[2] Child marriage occurs in various regions, example East Asia and Pacific, Europe

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[1]Minh Cong Nguyen and Quentin Wodon, "Global and Regional Trends in Child Marriage," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2015): 6.

[2]Quentin Wodon, "Child Marriage, Family Law, and Religion: An Introduction to the Fall 2015 Issue," *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2015): 1.

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and Central Asia, Latin America and Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa.[3] UNICEF estimates that 140 million girls will marry early in the next decade or nearly 40,000 per day.[4]

Jack L. Seymour states that Christian education (religious education) is a conversation for living, a seeking to use the resources of the faith and cultural traditions to move into an open future of justice and hope.[5] Based on this definition and these conditions of child marriage, what does religious education do? Religious education is certainly expected to contribute to preventing and overcoming child marriage from a curative perspective. Prevention means that religious education builds awareness for children, adolescents, youth, and adults to reject child marriage to save the lives and hopes of children. From a curative perspective, this means that children who have entered and experienced child marriage are guided by adults and are wise to enter the world of marriage and family. This is done in order to minimize the various negative impacts of child marriage.

What is the concrete form of the role of religious education in encountering child marriage? This article offers preventive and curative treatments for encountering child marriage in the scope of children, adolescents, youth, and adults. This discussion is built using the narrative method. Teaching narratively calls forth images of storytelling, simulation gaming, dramatization, and ritual reenactments.[6]

Narrative method is no stranger to religious education.[7] Mary Elizabeth Moore explains that teaching narratively calls forth images of storytelling, simulation gaming, dramatization, and ritual reenactments. Teaching narratively is more than a set of techniques that can be thrown into an eclectic bag of tricks.[8] Moore shows five theoretical reflections on narrative method. First, imagination is being revalued as an important ingredient in education. Second, narrative are an important source of imagination. Third, narrative is a source of human consciousness and social critique. Forth, story is a form of indirect communication that

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[3]Nguyen and Wodon, "Global and Regional Trends in Child Marriage," 8.

[4]UNICEF, *Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects* (New York: UNICEF, 2014).

[5]Jack L. Seymour, "Approaches to Christian Education," in *Mapping Christian Eucation: Approaches to Congregational Learning*, ed. Jack L. Seymour (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 18.

[6]Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching From The Heart: Theology and Educational Method* (Marrisburg, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1998), 132.

[7]Terence Copley, "Young People, Biblical Narrative and 'Theologizing': A UK Perspective," *Religious Education* 100, no. 3 (2005); Ina ter Avest, Cok Bakker, and Siebren Miedema, "Different Schools as Narrative Communities: Identity Narratives in Threefold," *Religious Education* 103, no. 3 (2008); Elizabeth McIsaac Bruce, "Narrative Inquiry: A Spiritual and Liberating Approach to Research," *Religious Education* 103, no. 3 (2008); Dean G. Blevins, "Story Telling or Storied Telling? Media's Pedagogical Ability to Shape Narrative as A Form of 'Knowing,'" *Religious Education* 102, no. 3 (2007).

[8]Moore, *Teaching From The Heart: Theology and Educational Method*, 132.

conveys truths that can not be communicated directly. Fifth, stories have the power to form and transform the world.[9]

Based on Moore's description, a narrative method can be constructed to describe the preventive and curative actions of encountering child marriage. Meanwhile, the narrative raised can be sourced from marriage in the Bible or outside the Bible. Narrative shows that marriage is not done for children, but mature holistically. Child marriage is a phenomenon that needs to be rejected and opposed because it destroys the lives and hopes of children. Of course, this rejection is carried out jointly by children and adults supported by children theirself, parents, family, faith community, and society.

Narrative Method in Encountering Child Marriage

The narrative method can be used as a means of encountering Child Marriage. At least, I offer two narratives that can be discussed in the context of this issue. The following two narrations are presented to enrich children's insight before deciding on child marriage or having the courage to postpone it until they are adults. In other words, the narrative presented is expected to produce awareness and decisions.

The first, experience of child marriage. Women who experience child marriage are vulnerable to disease.[10] This vulnerability is common when they are pregnant. In Bangladesh, there have been attempts to lower the number of child marriage that is proven to be harmful for the health of the mother and child, either through formal and informal education as well as the revision of the law that set the age limit for the minimal age of 19 for marriage in the country.[11]

Indirectly, child marriage can be related to child prostitution. It happens if child marriage is done for economic reasons.[12] Poor parents propose their children be married off to improve the family's economy. They know that their children are not worthy of marriage. In such cases, the girls are constantly seen as a burden to their families or are exchanged in a financial transaction to relieve their economic struggles through bride price, bridewealth, or

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[9]Moore, *Teaching From The Heart: Theology and Educational Method*, 138–143.
[10]Rajeev Seth et al., "Social Determinants of Child Marriage in Rural India," *Ochsner Journal* 18, no. 390–394 (2018): 391.
[11]S.M.M. Kamal, "Decline in Child Marriage and Changes in Its Effect on Reproductive Outcomes in Bangladesh," *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition* 30, no. 3 (2012).
[12]Susanne Louis B. Mikhail, "Child Marriage and Child Prostitution: Two Forms of Sexual Exploitation," *Gender & Development* 10, no. 1 (2010).

3

dowry.[13] For instance, in contexts where a groom or groom's family offered the bride's family assets in exchange for marriage (referred to as a bride price or bridewealth), a child bride was preferred. The younger the bride was, the more money her family received.[14]

In conditions of war, to save girls, adult men often use this as an excuse for child marriage.[15] It is aligned with child marriage is often seen as a way out for the bad stigma that afflicts a girl due to a sexual experience outside of wedlock, victim of rape, and various other forms of sexual abuse.[16] There are the spousal age difference and power imbalance common in child marriages are the significant risk aspects for domestic violence and sexual abuse toward child brides.[17] This is on top of the fact that sexual intercourse in these child marriages is neither based upon the bride's desire, nor their consent, but forced upon them. These sexual relations are strictly regarded as child rapes or bridal rapes and typically recognized as domestic sexual violence.[18]

The practice of child marriage places the young bride under the control of her spouse and in laws, severely limiting her ability to voice her opinions on matters that concern her, or to pursue her plans and desires.[19] Exclusion from participation and decision-making regarding issues in one's own life and those addressing a household, family, or community is directly linked to the lack of voice and agency.[20] Yet again, this is deeply rooted in gender inequality and violates many rights of a child, in particular Article 12 of the UN Convention on the rights of the child.[21]

The second, marriage is for mature people. Marriage is not only done by adults but mature people. Adult only shows the length of life in the world, but maturity shows one's maturity when dealing with various things. One form of this maturity refers to emotions.[22]

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[13]M. Siddiqi and M. E. Greene, "Mapping The Field of Child Marriage: Evidence, Gaps, and Future Directions from A Large-Scale Systematic Scoping Review, 2000-2019," *Journal of Adolescent Health* 70, no. 3 (2022).

[14]S. R. Psaki et al., "What Are The Drivers of Child Marriage? A Conceptual Framework to Guide Policies and Programs," *The Journal of Adolescent Health* 69, no. 6 (2021).

[15]Dyan Mazurana, Anastasia Marshak, and Kinsey Spears, "Child Marriage in Armed Conflict," *International Review of the Red Cross* 101, no. 911 (2019).

[16]Novita Dewi, "Child Marriage in Short Stories from Indonesia and Bangladesh: Victor, Survivor, and Victim," *International Journal of Humanity Studies* 2, no. 1 (2018): 52.

[17]A. U. Sezgin and R.-L. Punamäki, "Impacts of Early Marriage and Adolescent Pregnancy on Mental and SomaticHealth: The Role of Partner Violence," *Archives of Women's Mental Health* 23, no. 2 (2020).

[18]Human Rights Watch, "Child Marriage," last modified 2022, https://www.hrw.org/topic/womens-rights/child-marriage.

[19]D. Wolfe, "Children's Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.," last modified 2021, https://www.worldvision.ca/stories/child-protection/child-rights-convention-on-the-rights-of-the-child.

[20]Human Rights Watch, "Child Marriage."

[21]Wolfe, "Children's Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child."

[22]Rita Rani Talukdar and Joysree Das, "A Study on Emotional Maturity Among Arranged Marriage Couples," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 2, no. 8 (2013).

Emotional maturity brings good impact in marriage.[23] However, marriage does not only talk about beautiful things but also the struggle to maintain family unity amidst various challenges.

Indicators of maturity in marriage are economic independence, sexual awareness, and bodily development and the mastery of tasks.[24] Economic independence shows how married couples are no longer dependent on their parents economically. In other words, they can meet their own economic needs. Sexual awareness leads to knowing their sexual needs and fulfillment that does not contain elements of violence and coercion. Bodily development and the mastery of tasks show that they are fully aware of the biological development of men and women from youth to old age. This includes responding to a decrease in the body's ability to adapt.

Furthermore, indicators of maturity in marriage are early childhood experiences, first sexual encounters, and pregnancy and parenthood.[25] Early childhood experiences shows how couples remember their childhood with their parents and become their provision in educating their children. First sexual encounters show how couples who previously never had sexual intercourse now enter the process of procreation. Not all couples experience this smoothly, and there are times when partners feel afraid because of wrong imaginations or experiences in the past, especially for them as victims of rape and violence. Pregnancy and parenthood are not as easy as one might imagine, especially for couples who decide to go childfree with various economic, mental, career, and environmental considerations.

From a Christian worldview, marriage is indeed an initiative of God. God created Eve as a watchful helper for Adam and led to marriage. Of course, this initiative is carried out with the understanding that everything must be done maturely. Mature here refers to mature people's experiences in responding to God's will and considering all the experiences around them so that humans can become better in the process according to what God wants. God's initiative and maturity here must always be echoed, as is the narrative practised in religious education.

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[23]Zohreh Ghazivakili et al., "Emotional Maturity and Mental Health Among New Couples Referred to Pre-Marriage Health Center in Karaj, Iran," *Shiraz E-Med J* 20, no. 12 (2019).

[24]Elizabeth Anokyewaa Sarfo, Joana Salifu Yendork, and Anthony Vernon Naidoo, "Examining The Intersection Between Marriage, Perceived Maturity And Child Marriage: Perspectives Of Community Elders In The Northern Region Of Ghana," *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* (2020).

[25]Allison Ruark et al., "From First Love To Marriage And Maturity: A Lifecourse Perspective On HIV Risk Among Young Swazi Adults," *Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care* (2016).

5

Religious Education Using Narrative Method in Encountering Child Marriage: Preventive and Currative Aspect

In principle, religious education using narrative method in encountering child marriage talk about preventive and curative. Preventive means that child marriage does not occur for various reasons that make it possible. Curative talked about how child marriage is unstoppable and has already happened, which causes various subsequent problems in life after marriage. Preventive and curative are carried out in collaboration with various parties, namely the children theirself, parents, family, faith community, and society.

From a preventive perspective, children need to understand the two narratives of child marriage as described in the previous section. The experience of child marriage makes them see that child marriage harms them. Understanding marriage is only for mature people makes children dare to realize their existence that they are immature and not worthy to enter into marriage. The role of parents who have been educated about the lousy understanding of child marriage is expected to help children dare to decide to refuse child marriage to save the existence of the children themselves and their maturity before entering a marriage. Families educate parents and children who want to decide on child marriage that children and parents can experience bad things after their children get married because of their children's mental unpreparedness. The faith community's role is to educate parents and children on preventing child marriage through various religious education practices, for example, Sunday school, Bible study, cell community, family worship, regional worship, and Sunday worship. Society is encouraged to present various facts and experiences of child marriage that are not prosperous for the children and their families after they break off child marriage.

From a curative perspective, children need to learn about married life even though it seems sudden because they are already trapped and have entered into married life. This lesson can involve two narratives, as described in the previous section. The most important thing that children who have entered into a child marriage need to know is how they learn to become mature in marriage. The role of parents are to help children mature when facing all the problems that occur in marriage. It can be started with occasional parents still helping with their needs, but slowly the parents make their children independent in facing the reality of child marriage. Families play a role in providing support for children trapped in child marriage so they can slowly progress to maturity. The faith community provides faith support and resilience in undergoing child marriage towards mature marriage with various means and

6

practices of religious education. Society provides social support to children who fall into child marriage by not gossiping about them but by enabling the children to become mature in marriage.

Propaganda Religious Education Using Narrative Method in Encountering Child Marriage

Talking about the propaganda of religious education using narrative method in encountering child marriage, I ask theological reflective questions that can be discussed among children, parents, families, faith communities, and society.

First, what does marriage mean to you? Is this marriage God's will or not? This question is undoubtedly preventive and curative at the same time. Prevention talks about how they can think about it before deciding to marry. Curative talks about how they seek God's will even though they are now in the stage of child marriage. In principle, this question is meaningful. The meaning of helping anyone prepare for marriage wisely both preventively and curatively. The meaning encourages anyone to take an attitude or action on a particular issue.

Second, how to fill a marriage according to God's will? This question is certainly more towards the curative side, although it can be prepared for prevention. The curative side highlighted here refers to how the children hold on to and seek God's will amid the social disasters they experience. God's will in this subject leads to a direction that needs to be headed when they go through marriage. If the direction is not owned, then all the problems and challenges that arise when the marriage cannot be resolved. Does this also apply to child marriage? Even though they are trapped in this problem, God will help them transform from child marriage to mature marriage.

Third, can this marriage still be a blessing for the children, their parents, the family, the faith community, and society? This question must be wrestled with to consider that a strong marriage should be a blessing, not a problem. Even if children are trapped in child marriage, they need to be supported so that this marriage can be transformed into a mature marriage. In this case, the role of parents, family, faith community, and society is a prerequisite that must be seriously considered.

I realize that child marriage is a problem, but children shouldn't be trapped in that problem. They need to understand the preventive and curative sides at the same time.

7

Preventive helps them not to get into child marriage problems. Curative helps them transform from child to mature marriage. Everything is done with the support of the children, parents, family, faith community, and society.

Designing Religious Education Using Narrative Method in Encountering Child Marriage in the Praxis of Religious Education

In this section, I offer the possibility of designing religious education using a narrative method in encountering child marriage in the praxis of Religious Education especially in Sunday school, Bible study, cell community, family worship, regional worship, and Sunday worship.

Sunday school should not only discuss Bible narratives that are irrelevant to children's lives but also consider real issues surrounding children's lives. One of them is child marriage itself. Sunday school can start by looking at child marriage's preventive and curative aspects. Everything is done so that the children are ready and alert in this matter.

It's the same as Sunday school, which discusses Bible narratives. Bible studies that adults might do need to bring together the context around them. One of them is the problem of child marriage. In other words, the Bible study conducted can be contextual and relevant to real struggles.

The cell community does occasionally discuss Bible narratives, but it begins to discuss the real struggles of each member of the cell community. I see this as an entry point to combat child marriage in a preventive and curative way. In the process, the ability of the leader and the maturity of the participants to work together become prerequisites that must be provided before this happens.

The nuclear or extended family usually does family worship. This section should not only discuss Bible narratives and worship but address actual issues that could occur, especially child marriage. In the process, this can be done by considering both preventive and curative so that families are ready and alert when preventing and dealing with child marriage problems.

Several various families usually do regional worship in a particular region. There, they usually study Bible narratives and occasionally discuss real struggles in the region. It is an entry point to look at the problem of child marriage in a preventive and curative way. Thus,

regional worship as part of a faith community can provide concrete support in facing the problem of child marriage.

Sunday worship which is usually carried out in one direction from the minister of the word to the congregation, although there is a possibility of being modified into two directions in a dialogic way, can still be a means of discussing Bible narratives and concrete child marriage. Thus, this step can work communally when encountering child marriage.

Conclusion

Child marriage is a real problem that must be faced preventively and curatively. This step needs to be done in cooperation between the children themselves, parents, families, faith communities, and society. In this regard, the narrative method, accompanied by its propaganda and design in religious education, can add an alternative to encountering child marriage. The discussion is still like a proposal, so it requires testing in further research, especially in the empirical realm.

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9

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11

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Educating Black Girls Enduring Microaggressions in an Oreo World

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to explore reasons why experiences of microaggressions in high school necessitate a re-imagining of the sanctuary as a site for religious education and formation for suburban Black Christian girls. Through an ethnographic study, personal narratives were collected from six suburban Black Christian girls, who all attended the same African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church where I served as the youth minister. These narratives offer insight into ways microaggression encounters in suburban schools can impact the personal identity, racial identity, and spiritual formation of black adolescent girls. The black sanctuary is the context where the girls in the study felt most accepted, represented, and safe. This implies, re-imagining religious education practices with black girls is important if pastors want to cultivate formative spaces that help black youth thrive in an Oreo World.

Introduction

Showing up in the world as a Womanist scholar-practitioner called to curate communal, educational, and ecclesial spaces that center the cultivation of child well-being necessitates observing the world through a lens that elucidates the ways intersectionality helps one examine the nuanced lived experiences of youth. On Sunday's, I was invited by suburban black youth to take part in their lives as their youth minister at an African Methodist Episcopal church in the west suburbs of Chicago. During this time of laughter, play, and dialogue about God's presence in the world, I would glimpse into the world the high schoolers inhabited daily when they shared brief stories about what was happening in their community, schools, social clubs, and even around the church. The stories of the black girls captured my intellectual interest as a scholar while simultaneously breaking my heart as a practitioner. Multiple girls shared they endured microaggression encounters regularly in their community and social club contexts, but most routinely in their school.

Derald Wing Sue, et al. argue, "Racial microaggressions are brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory or negative racial slights and insults toward people of color."[1] Suburban Black Christian girls lived experiences happen at an intersection in which race, age, class, gender, religion, and sexuality converge. It is my contention that Sue, et al.'s definition of racial microaggressions can also describe the experiences of age, class, gender, religion, and sexuality microaggressions. It is important to research microaggressions with a lens that elucidates intersectionality, because microaggressions are acts of oppression that target various aspects of our being and happen routinely, often going unnoticed or unnamed. Microaggressive acts are violent and traumatizing encounters that impact a girl's personal identity and spiritual development. These acts also influence a girl's way of day-to-day living in her inherently harmful social environment. The messages communicated by the microaggressive act can distort

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[1] Sue, et al., Derald Wing, "Racial Micro-aggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," *American Psychologist* 62, no. 4 (May-June 2007): 271.

or de-form who she knows herself to be, ultimately displacing her sense of belonging in her world. What a girl knows about herself influences how she shows up for herself in these moments and how she shows up as herself in the world.

I soon realized my skills and sensibilities as a youth minister were not honed to adequately address the impact microaggressions had on their personal identity, racial identity, and spiritual formation. Meeting the spiritual needs of these suburban black Christian girls required an approach to religious education that I had yet to figure out. What I knew for sure was I hoped to foster a space in the church where the girls felt a sense of well-being, belonging, and affirmation. Therefore, I immersed myself in a research project that in part became my dissertation to find ways to educate black girls enduring microaggressions in an Oreo World. <u>This paper seeks to explore reasons why experiences of microaggressions in high schools necessitate a re-imagining of the sanctuary as a site for religious education and formation for suburban Black Christian girls.</u> This exploration happens in four moves. First, I draw on the works of scholars from an interdisciplinary perspective to look closely at the context of suburban schools. Second, I listen to the lived experiences of Ann[2] to think constructively about the microaggression encounters she endured in school context within her Oreo World. Third, I examine Ann's stories to analyze the impact of microaggression encounters occurring in an educative space. This analysis reveals reasons why experiences of microaggressions in high schools necessitate a re-imagining of the sanctuary as a site for religious education and formation. My fourth move to 1.) Examine the religious education practices I engaged while serving as their youth pastor to determine if the type of religious education experience I curated addressed the issues of race, gender, age, and class the girls navigated in their Oreo World; and 2.) Re-imagine the Black sanctuary as a site for religious education and formation that centers the racialized experiences of youth by engaging spiritual practices.

Suburban Schools in the Oreo World at a Glance

The Oreo World is a concept I ground in my dissertation and continue to explore through my research. "Oreo" is a colloquialism used to describe the disposition of a certain group of black people, who are perceived as black on the outside, but white on the inside. According to Dictionary.com, an Oreo is, "a black person who is regarded as having adopted the attitudes, values, and behaviors thought to be characteristic of middle-class white society, often at the expense of their own heritage."[3] This term is generally used in a derogatory manner when one assumes the black person is approximating toward whiteness to fit into a world that does not equally include their black identity. The reality is, there are black people living in white middle-class neighborhoods, who must find ways to navigate being black inside *and* out in the context of a predominately white environment. Therefore, I subversively use the term Oreo in the concept of Oreo World to center black lived experiences in the contexts of predominately white environments. The four contexts I examine are the suburbs, schools, social clubs, and black sanctuaries.

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[2] Ann is one of the six girls I interviewed for my dissertation research to learn more about the experiences of suburban Black Christian girls enduring microaggressions. I examine only one story in this brief paper to present a deeper, yet succinct analysis of the impact of the microaggression encounters. However, I do generally reference all girls when discussing the two types of suburban schools.

[3] Dictionary.com, s.v. Oreo." https://www.dictionary.com/browse/oreo.

Black families move to the suburbs to create a direct pathway of accessibility to the opportunities offered in higher-quality suburban schools.[4] Ideally, black youth are positioned to experience achievement and advancement in ways that will help them meet or exceed the success of their parents. Escaping to the suburbs is supposed to provide a safer environment where one can live into an archetypal image of a scholarly, sophisticated, and saved black youth. This image stands in opposition to the stereotypical image of an under-educated, unruly, unchurched black youth growing up in less-safe environments. However, this social-capitalistic escape to a land of more opportunity is not as safe as one might hope, particularly for black girls who endure microaggressions.

Schools are the context in which black girls spend most of their time. Lewis-McCoy proposes, "If asked to imagine suburban schools, a well-appointed classroom, engaged teaching with mostly white, well-behaved children come to mind. Suburban education has become regarded as the ideal…"[5] As the landscape of suburbs changed over the last forty years, so did the education structure, political dominance, and social influence of the schools. Suburban schools took on the image of:

> boutiques that were customizable and attentive to the needs of the students who migrated to their catchment areas. In this way, suburban schools held the special responsibility of passing on the rewards of achieving the American Dream to the children of suburbia.[6]

Assumptions that buttress ideas regarding the success of suburban schools are (a) school funding-state and local tax revenues, (b) population homogeneity- the school will reflect the racial and economic homogeneity of the suburb, and (c) neighborhood schools-the school is comprised of students from families living next to one another.[7] Reality is, the racial and economic make-up of the suburb makes the accessibility pathway to receive the rewards of the American Dream and to attain a high-quality education more nuanced for black girls. We see how the dynamics of power, race, and socio-economic class play out on all levels of the hierarchal education structure based on the two types of suburbs the girls in this study live. The most prevalent types of suburban schools are majority-minority schools and exclusive enclaves.

Majority-minority Suburbs and Schools

Majority-minority is a common type of suburb in which the demographics swing from majority white people to majority people of color. One of the girls featured in this study lives in this type of suburb, and consequently attends a majority-minority school. Attending a school where the majority of students are people of color presents some social benefits (e.g., fostering friendships, dating, acceptance among peers); however, the distribution of power and decision-making privileges to the minority stakeholders in education administration hierarchy creates other issues for black girls like Ann.

According to Lewis-McCoy, "these districts are susceptible to a racial and class mismatch between those who govern and those attend school."[8] This stands true in Ann's school

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[4] Lewis-McCoy, "Welcome to Rolling Acres," *Inequality in the Promised Land: Race, Resources and Suburban Schooling,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014) 3.

[5] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 146.

[6] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 148.

[7] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 149.

[8] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 152.

district. Of the nine school board members four are white women, one is a Latino man, and one is a black man. All other board members and the board leaders, including the Superintendent and President are white. A problem that occurs with a lack of diversity at this level is an inattention to the residents' needs, which can lead to "patterns of alienation and educational exploitation in school systems that were formerly regarding as high performing."[9] Some of the issues that occur at the curricular level are explored in the next section.

Exclusive Enclave Suburbs and Schools

The second most common suburb is comprised of largely white populations with a select number of minorities. The remaining five girls in this study live in and attend schools in exclusive enclaves. Lewis-McCoy argues, "the experiences of children in these schools are often considered better due to their exposure to school related resources rooted in strong tax bases, which translate to higher per pupil expenditures and more qualified teachers."[10] Even though the girls in this study live in middle to upper-middle class households, the stratification of wealth among their white peers places them in the racial and economic minority. Similar to the families in Lewis-McCoy's study, "these black families are located in better schools and neighborhoods than their black counterparts whose children often live in high poverty neighborhoods with failing schools, but this still does not mean they receive the same opportunities as their white suburban peers."[11] This difference brings attention to power, race, and socio-economic class differentials within the school among students and teachers. These factors directly impact the culture and climate of the classroom and learning experience in this white space.

Issues of power exist due to age differences and the implementation of non-democratic approaches to classroom dynamics which emphasize a teacher-student model that empowers the teacher. The interplay between power and race is evidenced in the interactions between white teachers and black students. The faculty of the high schools attended by the girls in this study are overwhelmingly white. Assumptions about the socio-economic status of black students rooted in stereotypes are used by white teachers to stigmatize black girls in a myriad of ways. In essence, power, race, and socio-economic class position teachers to cultivate a classroom culture that complexifies the educational experiences of black girls.

"Inside classrooms, culture operates as a resource between teachers and students,"[12] posits Lewis- McCoy. This resource can either be used as a tool or as a weapon. As a tool, culture is an educational resource that has the power to connect teachers and students of different backgrounds when the teacher maintains cultural competence. Contrarily, culture functions as a weapon in a classroom when bias creates a prejudiced, unhealthy distance between the teacher and students. When bias is unchecked, notions of superiority can permeate the class curriculum. For example, "White teachers who have not reflected on their own position of racial dominance may inadvertently transmit their narrow views on race to their student's identity; thereby

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[9] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 152-153.

[10] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 153.

[11] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 153.

[12] Lewis-McCoy, "Culture as a Hidden Classroom Resource," 119.

reproducing in their students the feelings and beliefs that perpetuate racist structures."[13] One racist structure existing in suburban schools is tracking.

According to the National Association of Secondary School Principals website, "The term *tracking* refers to a method used by many secondary schools to group students according to their perceived ability, IQ, or achievement levels."[14] As a result, "gifted and talented programs continue to enroll a disproportionate number of white and Asian students while excluding black and Latino students."[15] There are disparities in referrals for Advance Placement (AP) courses and special education as well. The girls in this study attend exclusive enclave schools that offer AP courses, Honors courses, and International Baccalaureate tracks, but the number of black students in these classes are miniscule. Tracking also creates spatial and social segregations within schools, constructing "multiples schools under one roof."[16] Lewis-McCoy posits, "Given these disparities in class placements and spatial location, being enrolled in advanced placement classes may mean a complete academic and social dislocation of black and Latino children from their racial peers."[17] Issues of race, gender and social class intersect in determining social acceptance and popularity, "allowing black boys to experience more social acceptance while black girls are socially marginalized."[18] Classroom culture and curricular decisions informed by bias determines the climate of the learning environment by reinforcing superior notions of whiteness, gender discrimination and socio-economic class stereotypes. In this study, we witness numerous microaggression encounters in the classroom.

Stories from Suburban Black Christian Girls Enduring Microaggressions at School
The girls in this study experienced microaggressions mostly from peers and teachers in high school spaces, particularly the classroom. The microaggression encounters disrupted their educative processes as well as deformed their concepts of personal and racial identity, ultimately impacting their spiritual formation. Through ethnographic interviews, I elicited stories from six suburban Black Christian girls to listen and learn more about their lived experience of microaggression encounters in their Oreo World. For the purposes of this paper, I highlight the microaggression experiences Ann endured in the classroom.

Ann
School is where Ann felt least safe, particularly in the classroom. Ann endured physical health complications, which had an impact on her ability to perform academically at the same pace of other students. Her physical condition presented brain fog as an ongoing symptom and required numerous doctor's appointments to care for her needs. As a result, her mother

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[13] Modica, Marianne, "Introduction," *Race Among Friends: Exploring Race at a Suburban School* (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015) 10.

[14] National Association of Secondary School Principals, "Tracking and Ability Grouping in Middle Level and High Schools," https://www.nassp.org/tracking-and-ability-grouping-in-middle-level-and-high-schools/

[15] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 153.

[16] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 153.

[17] Lewis-McCoy, "Suburban Black Lives Matter," 154.

[18] Holland, M. M., "Only Here for the Day: The Social Integration of Minority Students at a Majority White High School," *Sociology of Education* 85, no. 2 (2012): 112.

advocated for the school putting a 504 Plan[19] in place to codify the necessary accommodations for Ann. Some accommodations include the ability to turn her screen off when attending class virtually and receiving additional time to complete assignments. Even with the 504 Plan in place, she still experienced academic injustice and emotional hardship in the classroom. Ann stated, "I don't feel like how I'm supposed to feel I guess in school. Like, I've been going through a lot lately, with doctor's appoints and stuff, so I'm to feeling as smart as I'm supposed to. I know I'm smart, but I just don't feel like that all the time. So, school can make me feel bad sometimes."[20]

Ann knows she is smart because her grades proved it. "Certain days it's like, 'I just aced the test. I feel great,'"[21] said Ann. However, some teachers did not recognize her academic astuteness. "Um, several teachers, some of them will think I'm making excuses, or they'll put me in a different class like I'm not really smart enough to be in that specific class, or they'll put me in an extra class. Even though my grade to get in the next class was good enough, they'll put in me another one just in case"[22] explained Ann followed by a deep exhaled and slight chuckle. In both math and English sections, she was placed in an extra class.[23] Even though her grade in the English class which was appropriate for her grade level was higher than all other students, she was placed in a literacy class as well. She even outscored the average student on a standardized test for English by scoring 80 points higher. Yet, her teacher placed her in this additional literacy class as if she was not literate. A similar circumstance happened with math. "Even though I got A's on all of the test and everything up until I had a surgery…. they just put me in this different class because I got one bad grade. But it wasn't like the overall grade. I didn't understand it. And they were just like, 'just in case, let's just keep it.' I don't know why,"[24] Ann explained with tones of confusion and frustration in her voice. Navigating the complexities of chronic health conditions and school absences while learning virtually in a pandemic meant Ann spent more time than desired trying to teach herself the course materials to catch up on the class lesson plan.

> It's just a lot of not feeling able to like teach myself now that we're on Zoom and stuff. I'm not really getting as much teaching as I normally would, and so I just don't understand the lessons a lot of the time. I know I can do it. I know I'm smart. When I'm in class, I can do

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[19] According to the Chicago Public Schools, "Understanding Special Education" webpage a 504 plan is "a plan developed to ensure that a child who has a disability under the law (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973) and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives accommodations and supports that will ensure their academic success and equal access to the learning environment. The disability must substantially limit a major life activity, which includes a child's ability to learn in a general education classroom." https://www.cps.edu/services-and-supports/special-education/understanding-special-education/#:~:text=The%20504%20Plan%20is%20a,equal%20access%20to%20the%20learning Accessed May 13, 2022.

[20] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[21] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[22] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[23] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[24] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

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it, like understand it. But by myself, when I'm missing a lot of school…I'm just not able to do it,[25] Ann expounded.
She did not name any of these experiences in the classroom as microaggression encounters.

Ann experienced two microaggression encounters with her literacy teacher in the classroom. "She made me specifically read like the 'N-word' in one of these old books,"[26] said Ann. In a nonchalant tone, the literacy teacher assured her, "Oh, you can say it…It's just a word"[27] while proceeding to say that word in front of a predominately black and Latino class. Ann laughed boisterously as she continued to tell the story. "And she would just go on in this rant. Just like saying it like 20 times in this rant. And, that was annoying,"[28] scoffed Ann. Even though she wanted to yell at the teacher and "throw her book to the ground,"[29] she told the white teacher, "I'm not comfortable with you using that wd and I'm not comfortable with saying it around you. I don't want to do it."[30] Adamant about proving it was permissible to say this racial slur, the teacher turned to a black boy in the class to say instead. He refused as well.

Additionally, the literacy teacher approached Ann after returning from her surgery with the question, "why didn't you do any of your work during break?" Respectfully, Ann reminded her teacher that she had a surgery. The teacher retorted, "Oh, I thought you were just slacking off or something."[31] This felt racist to Ann. After this verbal conversation, Ann assured the teacher she would send an email to follow-up about making up her work. The teacher was dismissive, so Ann informed her mother, who later reached out to the teacher to garner a professional response to her student's need.

Stories like the ones shared by Ann are not isolated incidents. Unfortunately, microaggression encounters are far too common among the lived experiences of black Christian girls attending suburban public high schools. After listening to Ann's stories and the stories from five additional young women, I asked myself, "What are they *actually* learning in school? Are white teachers aware of the impact their behaviors and comments have on black girls? Do the teachers care? What is happening to the mind, body, and spirit of suburban Black Christian girls enduring microaggressions?" I could not adequately determine if my ministry and education practices were remotely relevant, nor could I re-imagine the sanctuary as a site for religious education and formation without first grappling with the impact microaggressions have on black youth like Ann.

The Impact of Microaggression Encounters

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[25] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[26] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[27] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[28] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[29] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[30] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[31] Ann, interview by author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

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According, to Sue et al., microaggressions are commonplace experiences that have power to create psychological dilemmas within the victim that ultimately has an impact on her personal identity, racial identity, and spiritual formation. The four psychological dilemmas are clash of racial realities, the invisibility of unintentional expressions of bias, perceived minimal harm of racial microaggressions, and the Catch-22 of responding to microaggressions.[32] The psychological dilemmas created by the microaggression encounters place the victims in a precarious and vulnerable position. If they recognize a microaggression has occurred, then they are left to determine the best way to respond in an instant. Making this determination can be challenging, especially when one is experiencing multiple psychological dilemmas at once and in the case of some of the girls, enduring these experiences for the first time. Each girl in this study responded in the ways that felt most appropriate for the setting and felt comfortable to them in the intense microaggressive moment. Even after responding to the perpetrator, the power of the microaggression remains at work causing a spiritual dilemma. I call this spiritual dilemma break down.

Break down is a spiritual dilemma that happens after the microaggression recipient has either chosen to respond or do nothing. The spiritual dilemma spurs even more rhetorical questions. Instead of the victim asking questions about the microaggression encounter, she questions herself and God. The questions are geared toward one or more components of the home. Examples of the questions are: Does my natural hair make me an ugly black girl? Am I as smart as the white kids? Do I look like a criminal? Does my family belong in this predominately white neighborhood? If God is a healer, then why won't God heal my body? Am I black enough? Why did God make me black?

The power lying within the microaggression causing the spiritual dilemma destabilizes what one knows or is learning to be true about what makes her feel safe and secure. Knowing and telling our own truth as black women and girls is a liberative act, because "truth-telling is what the evil bred from the fantastic hegemonic imagination[33] does *not* count on."[34] Emilie Townes suggests our individual and collective freedom is dependent upon our ability to move beyond what Patrick Chamoiseau calls the almost-true, sometimes-true and half-true to re-

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[32] Townes blends together Foucault's understanding of fantasy and imagination with Gramsci's use of hegemony to develop a new concept, the fantastic hegemonic imagination. The imaginary and fantastic are a part of everyday living. The fantastic can be structures of domination and subornation in which people, who comfortably *live in* what seems to be a sinister supernatural realm, do not find these forces unusual. I argue, the microaggression perpetrators in the testimonies live in this realm. On the other hand, microaggression recipients outside the fantastic are keenly aware of the sinister activity, because our realities are constantly challenged by it.[32] Even our awareness does not protect us from the coercive power of hegemony, which secures our consent as participants in the fantastic hegemonic imagination. Townes posits: . . . the imagination that creates the fantastic can control the world in its own image. This imagination conjures up worlds and their social structures that are not based on supernatural events and phantasms, but on the ordinaries of evil. It is the imagination, I argue, that helps to hold systematic, structural evil in place. The fantastic hegemonic imagination conjures up worlds, such as the Oreo World and the social structures that uphold conditions for stereotypes to be used in microaggression encounters. Townes, Emilie, "Growing Like Topsy," *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York, Palgrave McMillan, 2006), 142-143.

[33] Sue et al., "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice," 277.

[34] Townes, Emilie Maureen, "Everydayness," *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 161.

imagine in its fullness the true-true.[35] The true-true is sacred knowledge because these are the messages that affirm who we are in the present while still calling us into who we are becoming. Knowing and learning are spiritual activities, because both function as pathways that connect us to the true-true. The sources that provide this true-true knowledge are God, who knew us before we were formed in our mother's wombs; our village and communities, which nurture us and assist in our flourishing; and our personal lived experiences. When one is in the midst of a spiritual dilemma, they are further drawn into vulnerability. The questions that must ultimately be answered are: Do I believe the true-true (self/communal affirmations, self/communal validations) or the false message inside the microaggression (microinsult, microinvalidation)? Do I believe the dominant narrative or the sacred narrative? A more specific example from this study is: Does Ann believe the words of her church family "you are a bright young girl" or the messages within her teacher's microaggressions "you are so intellectually inept; you need a remedial literacy class to compliment your English class" and "your health condition is a non-factor. You are a slacker."

The fantastic hegemonic imagination has a way of playing tricks on the mind of microaggression recipients by using the dominant narrative's controlling images as stereotypes to implant false racial ideologies about our intelligence and the ways we talk. This is why microaggression encounters have an impact on the mind. The three sub-categories at the center of the microaggressions targeted to break down the mind are black intellectualism, the use of language and stereotype threat. Ann's intellect was targeted by her teacher's microaggressions.

The validity of black intellectualism continues to be questioned from scholarly contributions of black folks in institutions of higher education to the literacy capabilities of a tenth-grade black girl in suburbs of Chicago. Racial discrimination drives these questions and is the driving force behind the microaggressions that seek to insult and invalidate the intelligence of black people, particularly in the school setting. Leath et al. state, "for many black youth, racial discrimination exposures at school are not uncommon, including reported experiences of negative treatment from teachers (e.g., stereotype-based treatment, harsher punishment than other children)."[36] I argue Ann experience stereotype-based treatment from her math teacher who placed her in an extra math class and her English teacher who placed her in a remedial literacy class in addition to her English class.

There are decades worth of studies that focused on the "achievement gap" or "underachievement" of black youth in school and a dearth of research that lifts up the exceptional academic excellence of black youth. This discrepancy in scholarship shapes the curriculum and training of educators. Therefore, Ann's poor performance on one assignment after undergoing a surgery that had a side effect of brain fog or her needing to make up assignments that she missed due to the surgery could easily be stereotyped as underachievement. Her testimony proves it was. When Ann's English teacher asked her why she did not do any work during the break, which Ann had cleared by administration as an excused leave, she reminded the teacher that had surgery. The teacher responded, "Oh, I thought you were just slacking off or something."[37] Ann missing assignments can be stereotyped as academic

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[35] Townes, Emilie Maureen, "Everydayness," 161.

[36] Leath et. al., "Racial Identity, Racial Discrimination, and Classroom Engagement Outcomes Among Black Girls and Boys in Predominantly Black and Predominantly White School Districts," *Sage Journals* 56, no.4 (January 2019), https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218816955.

[37] Anne, interview with author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

9

ambivalence. Ann being asked to say an epithet used to denigrate her ancestors out loud in the same English class she was also navigating how to complete missed assignments compounded the impact of the previous microaggressive actions she experienced.

These microaggression had an impact on Ann in two ways. She was angry and she feared excessive punishment. "I was so mad! I was so annoyed...like the whole class was laughing when I had to say the N-word and that kind of stuff. But was not funny. It was annoying,"[38] Ann exclaimed while explaining how the interactions with her English teacher made her feel. In the moment of this microaggression, Ann chose to use her voice to sternly refuse saying the word. When asked how she wanted to respond, she stated:

> I wanted to yell at my teacher. I wanted to yell at her! I wanted to like, I don't know, throw her book on the ground, and just yell at her. Like, 'You cannot say that word!' or 'Just don't say it like around all these black kids!' Like, mind you my whole class was like black and Hispanic. This literacy class, they would put all the these that *can* read in this class. And, it just felt wrong, so I just wanted to yell at her.[39]

Even in a moment in which expressing her anger is valid, Ann minimizes the microaggression encounter by saying to herself, "Oh, that's not what she meant. That not what really happened."[40] Ann minimizes her feelings and opts for a safer, more rational response. She continues, "I'm really careful of what I say next, because it can make a situation twenty times worse."[41]Ann's fear of excessive punishment is not unfounded. Blake et al. and other scholars researching racial discrimination against urban black girls in schools report black girls are subjected to harsher discipline compared to female peers of other ethnic groups.[42] Edward Morris concludes one reason black girls are subjected to harsher discipline is because they are labeled defiant and disruptive when they behave in ways incongruent with white femininity norms, such as passivity and quietness.[43] My research alludes to a likelihood of this discriminatory behavior happening in suburban educational environments as well. In summary, microaggressions against Ann's black intellectualism had an impact on her mind and spirit.

Some reasons experiences of microaggressions in suburban public high schools necessitate a re-imagining of the black sanctuary as a site for religious education and formation for black girls shine through this analysis. One reason we must re-imagine black sanctuaries as sites for religious education and formation is because the church is a context where Ann and the girls in the study felt most safe and experienced break down the least in their Oreo World. Though black churches, like any church, are marked by complexities such as agism and sexism, racism is least likely to occur in this context. Within black sanctuaries, black girls can experience

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[38] Anne, interview with author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[39] Ann, interview with author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[40] Ann, interview with author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[41] Ann, interview with author, Evanston, May 14, 2021.

[42] Blake, et. al., "Unmasking the Inequitable Discipline Experiences of Urban Black Girls: Implication for Urban Educational Stakeholders," *Urban Revolution* 43, (2010): 92.

[43] Morris, Edward, "'Ladies' or 'Loudies'? Perceptions and Experiences of Black Girls in Classrooms.," *Youth & Society* 38, no. 4 (June 2007): 499.

a sense of belonging and receive affirmation from people who look like them and share similar lived experiences.

A second reason we must re-imagine black sanctuaries as sites for religious education is because negative interpersonal encounters between white teachers and black students in predominately white suburban schools contaminates the learning experience. The negative messages communicated through the microaggressive behaviors and comments made by teachers counter values and virtues that promote spiritual wellness. Behaviors might suggest, "You're not our children, so why should we care," and comments might suggest, "you don't belong here!" Thusly, the church is an educational space where messages rooted in God's love that affirm the mind, body, and spirit of black girls can be taught in imaginative and impactful ways.

Re-imagining the Sanctuary as a Site for Education and Formation of Suburban Black Christian Girls

While serving as the youth minister at the AME church in the western suburbs of Chicago, I had autonomy to decide the program design and content from week to week. The components of the weekly liturgy include an icebreaker or game, welcome, individual check-ins, birthday shoutouts, announcements, prayer, sermon, and sermon talk back. Since the majority of the youth service was dialogue-based and questions were always welcomed, the youth developed a sense of trust among one another and with me. Therefore, during the check-in they felt comfortable enough to practice vulnerability when sharing their experience of microaggression encounters.

I knew check-in was an important element of service, because it was an opportunity for youth to talk about what happened in their life since the previous Sunday and a chance for me to learn more about each young person God entrusted in my care. It was not until I facilitated interviews with six girls in the ministry that I realized how significant asking, "How are you? How was school last week?" was to the students. The in-depth conversations helped me make connections about the lived experiences of black youth living in the suburbs that I had not made before. I knew most of the students in the youth group had few black teachers from elementary school through high school. It did not occur to me that as youth minister, I was also filling the role as a black teacher in their lives. They often asked me about selecting academic courses, participating in extracurricular activities, standardized testing, college applications, etc. as if I worked in k-12 public school education. I did not realize topics like these were brought to me, because they had few teachers they were comfortable talking to about these aspects of their academic life.

The area I was most challenged by was offering concrete advice on how to address and endure microaggressions. Reality is, I held a particular knowledge about what the youth were experiencing in their classrooms, because I endured similar situations as a teenage girl and continue to experience microaggressions as an adult. However, I had processed how I respond to microaggressions, nor had I dealt with the impact microaggressions have on my being. My responses to the youth felt shallow and lacked strength. Even providing the space for youth to share, be heard, and receive encouragement did not feel like it was enough. Some Sundays I felt torn between 1. extending the conversation on microaggression encounters to include candid dialogue about race relations, racial identity, and being a black youth in the suburbs and 2. maintaining the pre-determined youth program for that Sunday, which privileged the sermon and sermon talk back.

Recognizing my own gaps in knowledge, skill, and practice as a youth minister serving in a suburban context, I accepted the fact that the religious education and formation experience I curated for the youth needed refining. To meet the spiritual needs and answer the questions they had about God's presence in the world, I had step into the role of educator to facilitate conversations that wove together topics such as blackness, girlhood, virtues and values of Christian faith, current events, enduring microaggression encounters, black joy, lament, and flourishing. I also needed to implement a different programmatic paradigm that formed an educative space that create space for these discussions. Since black girls are experts on their own lives, I choose to begin re-imagining the sanctuary as a site for religious education and formation with them.

The girls wanted to convene other girls like them in a space where they can collectively discuss their lived experiences, particularly microaggression encounters. The purpose of gathering more suburban Black Christian girls is to expand the small enclave that already exist in their environmental contexts. By expanding the collective of girls growing up as a suburban Black Christian girl in an Oreo world they will have the opportunity to learn their lived experiences are neither isolated nor monolithic. To my surprise, the girls wanted to invite boys into the conversation as well. This moves toward communalism and inclusion in a way that I did not originally consider while imagining spaces for black girls enduring microaggressions. A secondary request is to invite black women representing different generations to participate as well. Several girls affirmed our one-on-one conversation helped them process the microaggression encounter experiences in ways they never thought about before. What was missing from the conversation was my advice as their youth pastor and the advice of their peers. So, they advocated toward a conversation-based paradigm that centers and privileges stories about their lived experience in the Oreo World.

There are many forms a Christian education curricular response that features storytelling as the primary pedagogical method could take. A pedagogical and programmatic approach that resembles my interview method offers new way to facilitate conversations with black youth in the 21st Century. In the collective of youth and invited black women, two people are designated to enter conversation. The conversation curator will center the collective with a mindfulness practice before asking a condensed set of questions selected from my interview protocol. The conversation partner will give their testimony. As outlined in my methodology, there will be intentional moments of pause to re-engage mindfulness practices for the person giving their testimony in which the collective will join. At the end of the testimony the dyadic conversation is opened for further reflection.

This creates an opportunity for educational and formational moments. The educational moment is an opportunity to talk candidly about the operation of microaggressions and how they impact racial identity and personal identity development. The formational moment is an opportunity to intentionally focus on the spiritual dilemma faced by the microaggression recipient and build up the home the microaggression had the power to break down. Engaging a liberating conversation on spirituality has potential for generativity among the collective, because some of the girls realized through our interview that they do not embody their beliefs about who God is and how God wants people to respond while enduring microaggression encounters.

Educating black girls enduring microaggressions in an Oreo World as a Womanist scholar-practitioner called me inward to examine my own lived experience and called me toward thinking futuristically about manifestations of religious education in K-12 public schools and

12

churches. Experiences of microaggressions in high school necessitate a re-imagining of black sanctuaries as sites of religious education and formation for suburban Black Christian girls, because they deserve to feel a sense of wellness, belonging, and affirmation in at least one of the consistent contexts within their Oreo World. Given the ways institutional, instructional, and race-relations dynamics can complexify the educational experience for teenage black girls living in suburban communities, it is imperative they have educational spaces that they can claim as their own.

13

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14

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**Engaging Story-Linking through Conversations Between Mother and Daughter:
Explorations in Matriarchal Biblical Hermeneutics and Christian Religious Education**

Abstract

      This collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry through autoethnography seeks to engage the voices of mothers and daughters, which have often been silenced by the autocracy of patriarchy. Conversations between mothers and daughters are important spaces for hearing about experiences of faith: they provide transformative power not only for women and girls but also for the church and society. This article explores the authors' experiences as mothers in the context of patriarchal culture. In their struggle to be heard and recognized, the authors recount their feeling of God's presence and support in everyday interactions with their daughters that include conversations touching upon different aspects of theology. These conversations engage story-linking through the practice of re-listening and re-telling Christian faith stories in the Bible and inherited within church tradition to promote a life-giving approach in transformative learning. In this process, there are explorations in matriarchal biblical hermeneutics and Christian religious education. By reflecting on these conversations, this study contributes to Christian religious education in the family context and transformation into church and society.

Introduction

      Using our narratives and experiences of conversing with our daughters, the authors of this article will explore more deeply the importance of affirming mother's and daughter's voices in the church and in society. This paper will pose two critical questions: (1) How can God's presence and support be experienced through the ordinary conversations that take place between mothers and daughters? (2) How can engagement with story-linking through conversations between mothers and daughters become transformative for families, churches, and society, especially in settings where patriarchy still prevails? The context for these conversations is in everyday encounters of family life. The study is an attempt to explore through these conversations the concept of story-linking expounded by Anne E. Streaty Wimberly in the Indonesian context. It is an effort to listen to the voices of mothers and daughters in a family setting, where the link between personal stories and Christian faith stories allows the presence of God to be experienced in a tangible conversational way.

      In this study, we use collaborative autobiographical narrative inquiry as a research method. The inquiry is based on our self-reflection as mothers with active and compassionate listening in our relationships with our daughters. Autobiographical narrative inquiry, which includes autobiography and autoethnography, is "an inquiry that takes the researcher himself or herself as the subject of research, using the story of the researcher's self. …[It] helps us travel to the self that illuminates a larger social problem."[1] Our research is more related to

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[1] Jeong-Hee Kim, *Understanding Narrative Inquiry* (California: SAGE, 2016), chapter 4, Kindle.

autoethnography. The term autoethnography is "rooted in anthropological methodology (ethnography) where the fieldwork was the researcher's own life and the lives of others in which the researcher had an active part."[2] We, as researchers, reveal the narrative of our own experience as listeners and conversation partners to help understand the faith journey of our daughters and the impact we have on their religious formation.

Moreover, this research method provides space for including our self-reflections, feelings, decisions, and responses in our relationships with our daughters.[3] It includes analyzing personal experiences in light of biblical and religious educational resources and considering ways others may have shared our experiences, especially in the context of mother-daughter relationships in a patriarchal culture.[4] This method of research is also collaborative because we, as authors, will be comparing and contrasting our personal experiences with each other.[5] To complete this research, we will be referring to related literature that includes insights from biblical/theological and Christian religious educational resources. It is our hope that the study can shed light on how ordinary conversation between mothers and daughters can be spiritually enriching and that it will also contribute to the development of women scholars, especially in the patriarchal context of Indonesia.

Experiencing God's Presence through Conversations with Our Daughters

As the authors of this article, we are all mothers, pastors, leaders, and lecturers. We are now pursuing doctoral studies in different countries, Singapore and the United States, with different areas of expertise (New Testament/Biblical Studies and Christian Religious Education). Our husbands also have work responsibilities, so we must apportion our time as judiciously as possible to fulfill all of our tasks and responsibilities. Balancing the different demands made of our time is certainly not easy, and we always feel the struggle to do more.

In a culture of patriarchal rule, achieving personal goals is challenging for women like us. We must accept that many people will think that we are "too ambitious" to pursue doctoral degrees when our husbands have not done so. We are often exhausted by the expectations of our working and ministerial environment. People sometimes forget that we are not only students and ministers but also mothers. A famous quote expresses our situation well and aptly summarizes the dilemma we face: "Women are supposed to work like they don't have children and raise children as if they don't work." These expectations are exceedingly hard to meet.

We are also the first generation of women from our extended families to pursue international doctoral education. Even though our husbands support our decision to do so, they

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[2] Jeong-Hee Kim, *Understanding Narrative Inquiry*, chapter 4, Kindle.

[3] Considering some characteristics of autoethnography as one of the types of autobiographical narrative inquiry. Jeong-Hee Kim, *Understanding Narrative Inquiry*, chapter 4, Kindle.

[4] In facing the dominance of patriarchal culture and its colonial grand narratives in Indonesia, the authors are interested in exploring themes related to the importance of roles for mothers in the relationship with their children, including daughters. One of the articles that shows the same spirit of struggle is published by one of the writers: Jeniffer Fresy Porielly Wowor, "Weaving Ancestral Wisdom: Communicating the Power of Sumbanese Women's Resistance to the Next Generation through Arts-Based Liberative Pedagogy," *Religious Education* 117, no. 5 (2022): 393. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2022.213803.

[5] The first author would like to thank Harold Horell, a professor from Fordham University who introduces the author to a memorable collaborative research experience.

2

have to face many challenges of their own, not only with respect to added domestic duties. Society sometimes looks down on men when they carry out domestic tasks when their wives are pursuing higher education. The rigidity of a patriarchal society creates a challenge and dilemma for both us and our spouses even though the latter are very supportive of the work and ministry we do.

The multiple roles both we and our spouses occupy reflect the lives of today's young adult families, including the complexities and dilemmas they face. This includes the life of a pastor's family, which often has many challenges in our culture. Many pastors' children often become "difficult children" because the demands on their parents are often a burden to them. Our conversations with each other reveal that we often question God's presence. However, in that very questioning, we also sense God's presence and support in subtle ways. This is also true of our conversations with our daughters, which can rightly be categorized as theological conversations or "God-talk." This kind of God-talk is a treasure that we cherish in the midst of a patriarchal culture. The conversation between a mother and daughter is full of intimacy and hope. We reflect it as sacred and meaningful conversations. In families where parents allow their children to express their feelings openly, and women are not silenced by their husbands, the home provides a safe place for girls and mothers to candidly express their thoughts and feelings about life, religion, and societal expectations, which women in a patriarchal culture can seldom do elsewhere. In this space, God's loving presence and support are often felt. The relationship between a mother and daughter also has a transformative effect that contributes to religious formation and education within the family. This educative aspect can be seen in the two conversations transcribed below:

First Author:
My second daughter is five years old. She is a very active child and likes to tell stories. Once, she asked me, "Mommy, how do I know that God exists? I can't see God!" Then she continued, "Have you ever met God? If you've never met God, I suggest you don't become a pastor anymore!" I just smiled at her words. Honestly, there are times when I can't answer her question directly. A few days later, I was encouraging her to play with her three-year-old brother (my youngest child). It was nighttime, and suddenly the lights went out. My youngest son cried and said he was scared. His sister replied, "Don't be afraid! God will take care of us!" My son replied, "Where is God?" My daughter replied, "God is in our hearts (pointing to her chest)." My son replied, "Where? Where? I can't see God" (while looking at his chest). Again, I smiled. Then I asked my daughter, "You said before that you have never seen God. How do you know God is watching over you and in your heart now?" She replied, "Yes, actually, God was in heaven before, so I couldn't see God yet. But after that, God moved in my heart." I became increasingly interested in the explanation, so I asked again, "How do you know God is in your heart?" She replied, "When I was at school and taking gym class, I was running, and I felt my heart 'dancing' [heartbeat], and then I told my teacher that my heart was 'dancing.' My teacher said if my heart is dancing, it means my heart is beating and I am healthy. If my heart doesn't beat, I could be seriously ill or even die." I was getting more curious now. "I don't understand. What does your heart beating have to do with God, who is in your heart?" My daughter replied, "I know if my heart beats, it must be because God makes it. God is in my heart." "Hmm," I replied. "Why does God do that?" I asked again. She smiled confidently and said, "Because God loves and keeps me

3

healthy" I think this conversation was an insightful inquiry into faith and theology for a 5-year-old. For me, it was inspiring. My daughter reminded me that despite the struggles and challenges of everyday life, God is present even though we don't often sense that presence. My conversation with her made me feel the presence of God.

Second Author:
My eight-year-old daughter is having a difficult time coping with our separation caused by my studying abroad. She has always been more attached to me than her older brother. I remember when I left to study, my daughter had a tough time with our separation. She was physically attached to me, perhaps because of her longer breastfeeding period compared to her brother. She couldn't sleep without being in my arms before I left, which made it even harder for her. Despite our many discussions and deep talks as a family, she still resisted and didn't want me to go. I could tell that she was deeply affected by our separation. Even a day before my departure, she prayed that I would miss my flight so that I couldn't leave. It was a long and emotional goodbye at the airport, with lots of hugging and crying. But after that, we made sure to video call every day so that we could stay connected.

Once we had a before-sleep-video call, and she asked me in tears, "Mommy, why are you leaving me? Is it because you are a pastor? Please stop working as a pastor, be a dentist instead!" I honestly felt like crying and laughing at the same time. I didn't know how she came up with that idea. Trying to be calm, I asked what the problem was with being a pastor. She replied with more tears, "As a pastor, God is your boss, and you cannot refuse God's command to leave me!" Then, I joined her in tears. I have to admit that I could not offer any explanation at that time, so I just said, "I'm sorry for leaving you," and stayed with her until she fell asleep. On another occasion, I asked her again about me being a pastor. This time her response was, "Mom, I don't mind being a pastor's daughter." I asked further why she had changed her mind. She replied, "I know that God is good. God has chosen you and me only because God is good. So, I'm good with that too." This simple yet profound conversation with my daughter reminds me of Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 4:1, where he says that Christian ministry comes from the mercy of God. This conversation also made me realize that the relationship between mothers and daughters is special and enriches us in many ways, including spiritually. This reflection strengthened me when I separated from my family while carrying out my doctoral studies.

These conversations helped us to realize that having conversations with our daughters in a natural setting of love and trust allows us to feel God's presence and support through mutual exploration. Through this process, we can experience the moment of *Emmanuel*, "God with us."[6] Even as mothers and pastors with multiple responsibilities, our faith can be strengthened through the wisdom radiated by our daughters. This realization can also have a positive impact on our families, education, work, and services. We can learn how to be good listeners through our relationships with our daughters.

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[6] Tanya Marie Eustace Campen, *Holy Work with Children: Making Meaning Together* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2021), 2.

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Through conversation, we can also see a spirit of joy in our daughters. They were eager to converse with us about our roles as pastors and students. One daughter said she loves talking with her mother about faith and life: "Mom, when I share a story with you, I feel that I am truly loved and accepted!" When asked why she felt that way, she answered, "Because I know you are very busy, but when you listen patiently to my story when we talk, I am very happy because it means that you love me," She also added, "God is good because God sent people who love me. I can feel it even though the person is very busy!"

Story-Linking: Connecting Everyday Life and Christian Faith Stories through Practices of Re-Listening and Re-Telling

Conversations between mother and child in daily life also influence their relationship with God. Therefore, this kind of conversation can be categorized as a spiritual conversation. According to Luz Marina Díaz, spiritual conversations have an educational aspect. As Díaz has stated, "The importance of highlighting and incorporating spiritual conversation into religious education is grounded on the power of narrative and the sharing of sacred stories. ... Spiritual conversation is essential in providing an educational approach toward wisdom."[7] In the context of family and community life, Díaz's idea is in line with the concept of story-linking. The idea of story-linking comes from Anne S. Wimberly. In the context of African American Christian education, Wimberly sets out four primary phases in the story-linking process: "(1) engaging the everyday story, (2) engaging the Christian faith story in the Bible; (3) engaging Christian faith stories from the African American [or church/local] heritage, and (4) engaging in Christian ethical decision making."[8] Through this process, intergenerational relations within the family are strengthened.

According to Wimberly, story-linking emphasizes the importance of "compassionate listening." In this process, we need to create moments for listening—safe and comfortable spaces that are also nurturing spaces.[9] The authors argue that everyday conversations between mothers and daughters contain rich wisdom and become a place where love can grow. Joyce Ann Mercer states that "the act of listening to another is a spiritual practice."[10] Often, mothers complain about the distance that they experience with their daughters, especially when they enter their teenage years.[11] In the experience of one author who has a pre-adolescent daughter, the quality of a mother-daughter relationship as a child grows older depends on the strength of this relationship in the child's earlier years. A strong relationship will be useful when facing challenges that can occur unexpectedly and fluctuate erratically when the daughter enters adolescence.

Making room for the voices of daughters and mothers to be heard comprises the first phase in Wimberly's model of engaging the everyday story through conversations. The second

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[7] Luz Marina Díaz, "Spiritual Conversation as Religiously Educative," *Religious Education* 112, no. 5 (2017): 489. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2015.1113039.

[8] Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education,* Revised Edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 26, Kindle.

[9] Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories*, 34.

[10] Joyce Ann Mercer, *Girltalk GodTalk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls—and Their Parents* (San Fransisco, CA: Jossey-Bass A Wiley Imprint, 2008), 12.

[11] Joyce Ann Mercer, *Girltalk GodTalk*, 75-76.

phase involves linking the stories that have been heard with faith stories found in the Bible, and the third phase entails linking these stories with those found in the inherited Christian tradition. This process of linking stories involves re-listening and re-telling the stories to gain theological insight from diverse Christian traditions.[12] This process can then become part of the call for liberation through Christian ethical decision making (the fourth phase of story-linking), not only for daughters and mothers but also for the sake of social justice. A spirit of resistance is needed to fight against oppressive patriarchal norms. This process of linking stories and using them in a struggle against injustice can become part of a Christian religious education that begins with the voices of the marginalized (mothers and daughters) in patriarchal society and proceeds to engage in mutual meaning-making and then action.

Further, Christian faith stories of suffering and hope are an important part of Asian-feminist theology because they are based on experiences of everyday life and thus constitute a "bottom-up" approach to theology. In the study of Asian-feminist theology, women's and girls' daily experiences are a valuable resource in interpreting the relationship between God and creation found in the Bible.[13] In relating these experiences, we allow a mutual meaning-making process to take place that permits the voices of women and girls who have been silenced and shackled to be released and heard. The process of listening and telling these stories provides support for women and girls as it allows their uniqueness to be celebrated.[14] In this paper, the perspective of the authors as mothers will be used as the main lens for viewing the second phase of story-linking, which will focus on the story of the Syrophenician woman and her daughter in Mark 7:24-30. This story will also be used to critically examine church traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation (the third phase of story-linking). In the end, the paper will conclude with a concrete proposal for Christian ethical decision-making formulated as part of the fourth phase of story-linking.

Engaging Matriarchal Biblical Hermeneutics: Viewing the Syrophoenician Woman's Story in Mark 7:24-30 through a Mother's Eyes

Viewing a biblical passage through a mother's eyes means examining various aspects of the story as part of matriarchal biblical hermeneutics.[15] This perspective allows us to connect

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[12] The authors is inspired to develop the idea from the practice of re-listening and re-telling presented by Claire E. Wolfteich. Wolfteich conveyed this idea when delivering her study on the importance of maternal voice, especially in the perspective of spirituality and practical theology. The author develops it in the context of claiming voice through the relationship between mother and daughter. Claire E. Wolfteich, *Mothering, Public Leadership, and Women's Life Writing: Explorations in Spirituality Studies and Practical Theology* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2017), 12-13.

[13] Hyun Kyung Chung, *Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women's Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 5.

[14] Dori Grineko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 19.

[15] Matriachal hermeneutic related to the context of the home as the *locus theologicus* where interpretation takes place. This hermeneutic is bottom-up and recognizes the role and voice of women including mothers in relations with family members including daughters. In it, there is an effort to "empower and support the individual roles and expressions within the domestic community." Christie de la Gándara, "Cultivating Habits of Faith: The Power of Latina Stories and Practices to Educate U.S. Catholics in the Faith," (PhD diss., Boston College, 2021), 136-137.

with our experiences, emotions, and insights about being a mother of a daughter. In our opinion, this matricentric hermeneutics is important to the resistance effort our reading of the text intends to support. Our connection with our daughters informs our interpretation of the biblical story, making it relevant to life. Through conversations with our daughters, our eyes have been conditioned by theirs. Thus, our interpretation of the text reflects their understanding as well as our own. Mothers reading Mark 7:24-30 might feel empathy for the Syrophoenician woman's desperation and affliction. A mother's primary priority is the safety and happiness of her child, and she is willing to do whatever it takes to seek help for her child; thus, motherhood is a truly loving and selfless experience. As James Hamilton states in his article "A Biblical Theology of Motherhood," motherhood is vital to God's mandate and mercy. Only through motherhood, could God's mandate to fill, subdue, and rule the earth be fulfilled.[16]

A motherhood story of the Syrophoenician woman stands in contrast to the debate between Jesus and the elite Jewish males (vv. 1-23) that takes place in an earlier passage. As Jesus spoke to these respectable Jewish men, Jesus clarified that the Torah is based on inward morality, purity, motive, and intent rather than external rituals and compliance to customs. According to Jesus, "uncleanness" does not refer to the external state of objects but to one's inner attitudes and the state of one's heart.[17] Following the dispute with the Jewish males, Jesus embarks on an extensive journey to a pagan region, where the inhabitants are typically disparaged for their "uncleanliness." Jesus passes through Tyre (7:24), Sidon (7:31), and the Decapolis (7:31). Jesus feeds the hungry and performs powerful acts of exorcism and healing among the Gentiles in chapters 5:1-20, 7:24-30, as well as 7:31-37 and 8:1-10. Upon arrival in Tyre, Jesus enters a house with the intention of going unnoticed (v. 24). However, this proves to be an impossible feat as the arrival cannot be hidden.

These two scenes are juxtaposed to highlight the contradiction between them. The story of Jewish men with the law immediately precedes the story of a pagan woman without the law. The Syrophoenician mother is a notable figure who demonstrates admirable faith compared to the Pharisees, whom Jesus criticizes for their hypocrisy. What Jesus actually valued was not her faith (πίστις, *pistis*), but the woman's reply (λόγος, *logos*) (7:29). At first glance, however, the woman's conversation with Jesus may appear challenging. She persistently asks Jesus to heal her daughter, despite Jesus' initial response indicating that Jesus prioritizes the people of Israel and calls her (and her daughter) "dogs." However, as a mother who desperately needs help, the Syrophoenician woman demonstrates her faith and humility through her wise reply (λόγος).[18]

From this reply, the Syrophoenician mother appears well aware of the societal and cultural barriers that prevent Jesus from responding to her. Still, she boldly approaches Jesus to seek help for her demon-possessed daughter. She makes a clear request by falling on Jesus' feet and begging to deliver her daughter from her affliction (vv. 25-26). Although the girl's affliction is not explained in detail, the Gospel of Mark has already demonstrated the severity of being possessed by an unclean spirit. The possessed man from Gerasene in chapter 5 pulls apart the

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[16] James M. Hamilton, "A Biblical Theology of Motherhood" *Journal of Discipleship and Family Ministry* JDFM 2, no. 2 (2012): 7.

[17] James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark: The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 232.

[18] At this point, we, as authors, read this text from the perspective of mothers and allow empathy and dialogical imagination to resonate with the passage.

shackles, howls, and bruises himself with stones. In 9:14-29, a boy with a "spirit that has robbed his speech" is mute, falls on the ground, foams at the mouth, grinds his teeth, and has a habit of falling into fire or water. There is a possibility that the girl may be having similar symptoms. Regarding the Syrophoenician's daughter, Sharon Betsworth points out that she has no active role in this story and only appears once at the end of the story; she is not a character in the story so much as its emotional focus. The Syrophoenician woman is the protagonist in the narrative, and her focus is continually on her daughter. Thus, Mark reminds the audience on whose behalf the woman acts.[19]

The Syrophoenician woman's courage to push the boundaries raises the question: "How could she do this?" It is obvious that her social standing and financial status did not provide her with sufficient power, especially amid the patriarchal culture of the times. It is a well-known fact that women have historically been positioned lower than men in the socio-cultural structure of the time, both in Jewish tradition and Greco-Roman culture.[20] She knows well that facing rejection or humiliation was a potential risk. This pagan mother believed in the authority and power of Jesus, even referring to Jesus as 'the Lord'. However, her actions were unlikely to have solely derived from faith in Jesus, as she had never met Jesus. On the contrary, it would appear that her actions were prompted by the fact that she could not bear to see her daughter suffer any longer. This story thus highlights a mother's protective instinct and unyielding love. In this story, the mother is willing to go to any length to alleviate her daughter's suffering. Her bravery and faith thus stem from her relationship with her daughter. Although the passage doesn't give any details about their interactions or conversations, the mother undoubtedly had a profound connection with her daughter. Whether through direct or indirect conversation, she was able to listen to her daughter's voice, and this listening greatly impacted their relationship. We could even say they were joined by an "invisible conversation." This type of conversation is often devalued because patriarchal culture tends to prioritize reason over intuition or emotion, and the "voice" of a sick daughter would be considered insignificant in the culture of that time. However, this "invisible conversation" gives extraordinary power to the mother to act and build a relationship with Jesus for her daughter's healing. The daughter is the source of her mother's courage to push past the prevailing boundaries.

In response to the woman's request, Jesus makes a derogatory remark. He says the bread (ἄρτον, *arton*) of the children (τὰ τέκνα, *ta tekna*) should not be thrown to the dogs (κυναρίοις, *kunariois*) (v. 27). In v. 28, the woman responds by cleverly changing the insult from "bread" to "crumbs" (ψιχίων, *psichiōn*) and from "children" to "little children" (παιδίων, *paidiōn*). Betsworth claims, "While Jesus uses (τέκνων, *teknon*) to refer to the children of Israel, the woman uses (παιδίον, *paidion*) to point out that her daughter is a child too and deserves bread as well, if only of crumbs."[21] The woman's response indicates that she comprehends and acknowledges Israel's advantage and has a better grasp on the role of the Messiah than Israel and the disciples. It is ironic that Jesus taught the disciples many times, but they still did not fully understand his teachings. However, a pagan woman could grasp Jesus' mission and articulate it

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[19] Sharon Betsworth, *The Reign of God Is Such as These: A Socio-Literary Analysis of Daughters in the Gospel of Mark, Library of New Testament Studies* 422 (London, New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 130.

[20] Rena Sesaria Yudhita, "Gadis, Istri, atau Janda? Pendapat Paulus tentang Seksualitas Perempuan dalam 1 Korintus 7" in *GEMA TEOLOGIKA: Jurnal Teologi Kontekstual dan Filsafat Keilahian* 7, no. 2 (2022): 176. https://doi.org/10.21460/gema.2022.72.872.

[21] Sharon Betsworth, *The Reign of God*, 131.

8

in just one sentence. After praising her statement (λόγος), Jesus sends her home and assures her that her daughter has been healed (vv. 29-30).

Reading this passage from a mother's perspective highlights several aspects that are noteworthy for Christian religious education and family ministry. The daughter's healing is strongly related to the pagan mother's persistent faith and ability to hear and respond to her daughter. The relationship between the mother and her daughter also transforms Jesus' mission. The dogmatic rigidity that Jesus displayed stemmed from the exclusivity of the Jewish community at that time. The loving relationship and conversation between a mother and her daughter, however, breaks down religious barriers that cannot be dismantled in any other way. It opens up a space to hear and respond to others, a space where God's healing power can be experienced.

While one of the authors of this paper was reading the story of the Syrophoenician woman with her daughter, the girl remarked, "This girl is great, Mom! Even though she doesn't have a name and is sick, in my opinion, she is a star! Without her, this great story wouldn't have happened!" This novel insight moves the sick daughter and her mother from the margins of society to the center of communal life. That is where they belong because the mother's relationship with the daughter is able to transform Jesus' mission and relationship with non-Jewish people. It follows that the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter (who are both nameless in this story) not only play an important role in the private space but also the public space within the community.[22]

Engaging Voices of the Voiceless: Setting an Open Table for All[23]

The third phase of the story-linking process seeks to engage Christian faith stories from the Asian heritage, including their implementation in the Indonesian context. In the Asian context, Hope Antone, a religious educator from the Philippines, has expressed the importance of meal table sharing/conversation in the context of Asian societies where the diversity of religions and beliefs is an essential component of Asian pluralism. Her religious educational methodology can be described as in-depth, honest, open, participatory, and dialogic with an invitational emphasis.[24] As Antone writes, the process of mutual enrichment, whereby two people "feed each other," exists without the shadow of conversion or proselytism in Asian culture. The hospitality at the dinner table opens a meeting space to share life stories, religious experiences, concerns, and aspirations.[25]

Antone's idea inspired the authors of this paper to reflect more deeply on the relationality that emerges from eating and drinking together in the church through the sacrament of Holy

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[22] Based on Jerome W. Berryman's discussion of Joyce Ann Mercer's theological thought about children. JeromeW. Berryman, *Children and the Theologians: Clearing the Way of Grace* (New York, Harrisburg, Denver: Morehouse Publishing, 2009), 178.

[23] Some of the studies in this section are the fruit of ideas from Rachelle Green, a professor from the first author at Fordham University in the religious and educational development of children class. The exploration also the results of conversations with Tabita Kartika Christiani, a colleague at Duta Wacana Christian University who first introduced this topic to the first author.

[24] Hope Antone, *Pendidikan Kristiani Kontekstual: Mempertimbangkan Realitas Kemajemukan dalam Pendidikan Agama*, trans. Rev. Maryam Sutanto (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2010), 131.

[25] Hope Antone, *Pendidikan Kristiani Kontekstual*, 133.

9

Communion. This sacrament is supposed to be a symbol of table hospitality, which involves greetings, conversation, eating, and drinking together. However, several church synods in Indonesia still do not allow children to take part. "Why do we go to church together, but when there is a Sacrament of Holy Communion, how come I'm not allowed to join you and Dad? Am I not 'holy'? We're family!" That was the question of the daughter (8 years old) of one author, four years ago.[26] Holy Communion, which should have been full of joy, made her mother feel uncomfortable both as a mother and a pastor, and her daughter's statement continues to sound in the author's ears to this day. The daughter also remembers the event. Her question reflects not only the sensitive feelings of a child but also an uncomfortable assumption that seems all too validated by reality: as a child, the daughter is "forbidden" and "separated."

The practice of Holy Communion does not allow the involvement of children because of the standard church dogma that has been passed down from generation to generation. Due to constraints of space, the authors will not explain in detail the background and history of the churches in Indonesia. However, it will suffice to say that the broader Christian tradition provides a space for children's involvement in Holy Communion. Even conversations with children play an important role in this tradition. In the Synoptic Gospels, the Sacrament of Holy Communion is observed during the feast of Unleavened Bread. Thus, the meal referred to in the text is a meal to commemorate the Jewish Passover (*seder*). In its Jewish context, this meal was familial in that relatives were invited. The dish was served with the best of cutlery. The head of the family, wearing a white robe (*kittel*), led the *seder*. During the *mah nishtanah,* one part of the evening meal, several questions were asked, usually by young children: Why are we eating only with *matzah/matzo*[27] tonight? Why are we eating only bitter vegetables tonight? Why do we dip our food twice tonight, and why are we not sitting straight as usual tonight but "sideways"?[28] All these questions were answered by the father or another adult present at the time. Thus, children were not only present at the *seder*, but they also had a dialogue with adults in that moment.

Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, a theologian from Indonesia, has commented, Jesus' supper with His disciples was a Jewish tradition that was given new meaning by Jesus, a meaning that related the tradition to Jesus' self.[29] It was a banquet of love (*eranos),* comparable to a modern potluck dinner, that is, a dinner in which everyone contributed, which was a general social practice in Greco-Roman culture at that time.[30] It is thus possible that children also attended the simple

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[26] Jeniffer F. P. Wowor, "Menerima Anak dalam Perjamuan Kudus? Studi Teologi bagi Pelaksanaan Perjamuan Kudus untuk Anak dan Sumbangsihnya bagi Gereja Protestan di Indonesia bagian Barat," in *Setelah 70 Tahun: Menuai Benih-benih Pemikiran Emmanuel Gerrit Singgih*, ed. Jozef M. N. Hehanussa (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 2019), 79.

[27] Unleavened bread made from just flour and water and baked before it has a chance to rise. Chabad.org, "What Is Matzah (Matzo)?," Passover 2023, accessed May 5, 2023, https://www.chabad.org/holidays/passover/pesach_cdo/aid/661092/jewish/What-Is-Matzah-Matzo.htm.

[28] Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Korban dan Pendamaian: Studi Lintas Ilmu, Lintas Budaya, dan Lintas Agama mengenai Upaya Manusia Menghadapi Tantangan terhadap Kehidupan di Luar Kendalinya* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2017), 174.

[29] Emanuel Gerrit Singgih, *Korban dan Pendamaian*, 174.

[30] Binsar J. Pakpahan, *Allah Mengingat: Teologi Ingatan sebagai Dasar Rekonsiliasi dalam Konflik Komunal* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2017), 176.

10

banquet that Jesus held with the disciples. The possibility of the presence of children will also be greater because Jesus had a high regard for children. Jesus' community did not consist only of twelve disciples but also those who were marginalized and despised (such as tax collectors), as well as the women who followed Jesus from Galilee (cf. Luke 23:49). If there were women present, there is also a high probability that the children were involved because mothers did not typically leave their children behind.[31] The last supper was a symbol of "the Kin-dom of God," and the Sacrament of Holy Communion also exhibits characteristics of this Kin-dom.[32] It follows that this sacrament has a strong connection with children.

Further evidence of this assertion is found in Mark 10:13-16, where the children are brought to Jesus. Jesus is angry with the disciples who rejected them, saying "Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the King[n-]dom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the King[n-]dom of God like a little child will never enter it." Children not only belong to the Kin-dom of God but they are also made a model of the Kin-dom by Jesus, who says that anyone who wants to enter it must become like them.[33] This statement was extraordinary in Jesus' time considering how low a child's position was in society, and Jesus certainly risked strong opposition in uttering it.[34] The same understanding was stated by Jerome W. Berryman who used the structure of Holy Communion in the pattern of Godly play experience with children because there is an important aspect of experience in it, namely "the relationship with God in community."[35]

Engaging Hope, Wisdom, and Grace in Transformative Learning

In her book, Wimberly emphasizes hope and wisdom for a transformed Christian education in the context of family life. Based on our conversations with our daughters, we feel amazed at God's presence and support in these interactions. We can see God's grace in the growing faith of our children. Through these conversations, we are also able to re-listen and re-tell the biblical stories and church-inherited traditions. We feel the presence of God as one who shares our task of childcare. The conversations also have a positive impact on our ministry as pastors and our duties as doctoral students. We learn from the wisdom that radiates within our daughters. "Children can touch us and teach us," as Bonnie Miller-McLemore has written, and

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[31] Tabita Kartika Christiani, "Keikutsertaan Anak dalam Perjamuan Kudus," (Studi Pembinaan Warga Gereja, Lembaga Pembinaan dan Pengaderan Sinode GKJ dan GKI SW Jawa Tengah, 22 Maret 2013), 3.

[32] This term, "kin-dom of God" comes from Isasi-Díaz. Ada Maria Isasi-Díaz, "Solidarity: Love of the Neighbor in 1980s," in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (1990): 31-40, quoted in HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Interdependence: A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2018), 68.

[33] Jeniffer F. P. Pelupessy-Wowor, "Anak-anak dan Gereja: Sebuah Sumbangan Pemikiran Teologis bagi Pelayanan Anak di Gereja Protestan di Indonesia bagian Barat," in *Seri Studi Alkitab Tematis: Membina Jemaat Merespons Tantangan*, eds. Jurike Mamesah and Ruth Yuni T. I. Salomo (Yogyakarta: Cakrawala Sketsa Mandiri, 2019), 114.

[34] Jeniffer F. P. Pelupessy-Wowor, "Anak-anak dan Gereja," 111-115.

[35] Jerome W. Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991), 45.

this teaching role becomes apparent in our interactions.[36] When one of the authors struggled with a child who was critically sick in the hospital, her daughter said, "Don't worry, Mom! God is right here in your heart. I told you before, remember?" After she thanked her for the words of encouragement, the daughter continued, "Honestly, I'm really sad too, Mom, but I just prayed, and I know my little brother will be okay!"

From these experiences, we conclude that a child's spiritual development is strongly influenced by their relationship of care with their mother. According to Carol Gilligan, this is the power of the different voices of women in an inseparable connection between relationship and responsibility through the truth of an ethic of care.[37] This relationship is built through conversations where mutual meaning-making takes place. Apart from learning from children, we also recognize the importance of the role of parents in educating their children in faith in the context of family traditions. For example, our children learn to pray by regularly praying together with us before bed. At first, we led the prayer, and after a while, they volunteered to pray. Faith that emerges through interactions among family members, including ongoing conversations in various forms (intergenerational interactions), has an impact on one's relationship with God. Spirituality is focused on relationships, the relationship one has with oneself, God, and others. A child's concept of God is related to their experiences of interacting with adults, most of which take place in everyday relationships at home.[38] A home is thus an invaluable place for faith development.[39] In it, faith is born and nurtured, and this faith can even have positive effects on a child's overall development, including their creativity.[40]

Churches thus need to provide space for family empowerment so that faith can grow and strengthen relationships between children and their parents, including mothers and daughters, can be developed.[41] Family ministry is thus crucial. Spaces for collaborative interactions among women themselves are also important so that they can encourage each other. These collaborations might include mothers meeting to discuss their concerns and frustrations, women mentoring women, and other small groups. Motherhood and womanhood have profound spiritual implications. Thus, Patricia T. Lipperini, in her study on the role of the church in mentoring

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[36] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 155.

[37] Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Reprint Edition (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 173.

[38] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 116, Kindle.

[39] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "'Let the Children Come' Revisited: Contemporary Feminist Theologians on Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia J. Bunge (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 454.

[40] Jerome W. Berryman, *Stories of God at Home: A Godly Play Approach* (New York: Church Publishing, 2018), 144.

[41] In its development, related to certain contexts, attention to the mother can also be directed at "other parenting adults whose practices of parental care can support girls' lives of faith." Joyce Ann Mercer, *Girltalk GodTalk*, xix.

young mothers, writes that "Our faith communities have the responsibility … to help all women perceive the religious dimension of their motherhood."[42]

Through this process, wisdom emerges not only in encounters with the Bible and the Christian tradition but also through children. As stated by Miller-McLemore, "Connections with children are a means of grace, a vehicle through which God makes God's self known."[43] The same thought has been expressed by Margaret Hebblethwaite, who argued not only that God can give meaning to our experiences, but that these experiences "can bring meaning to God."[44] As Kathy Coffey says, "Our first, most precious learning about God can come only at home."[45] For this reason, it is important to pay attention to Christian religious education for children, especially in the family, through informal interactions. According to bell hooks, the family is the first learning community before the wider community. A crisis in the family will thus contribute to an educational crisis,[46] and the impact will also be felt by the church and society.

It follows that the church needs to pay greater attention to the importance of religious formation and education in the context of the family. The purpose is to strengthen informal relations among family members in a way that also allows for space between them, space that is needed for faith to grow. Healthy interactions require time together, but also time spent apart, and achieving the right balance is critical. Rituals or family practices need to be established, such as family prayer time and Bible story reading before bed, and time must be made for daily conversations that are intergenerational and involve even the youngest member. As Miller-Mclemore reminds us, "Seeing God in the face of the child opens the eyes to the face of God in those around us."[47] The hope for the transformation of families and churches depends on this inclusivity, which must also extend to the sacrament of the Holy Communion so that it can continue to be life-giving for all people: adults and children, as well as those who have been marginalized by society.

This process of including children and the marginalized in church and family practices is the only hope for realizing justice and equality in the context of a society that is dominated by a patriarchal culture. Jennie S. Knight calls this process "transformative listening."[48] The process of listening in daily conversations with children and young people can build relationships that are the basis for them to feel that they are heard, valued, and able to voice their concerns without fear of being rejected. Transformative listening is the safe space in conversations that leads to

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[42] Patricia T. Lipperini, "Young Adult Women and the Pilgrimage of Motherhood," *Religious Education* 111, no. 5 (2016): 535. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2016.1185766.

[43] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 125, Kindle.

[44] Margaret Hebblethwaite, *Motherhood and God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1984), 1.

[45] Kathy Coffey, *Experiencing God with Your Children* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1997), 14.

[46] bell hooks, *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 177.

[47] Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother*, 158.

[48] Jennie S. Knight, "Transformative Listening," in *Children, Youth, and Spirituality in a Troubling World*, eds. Mary Elizabeth Moore and Almeda M. Wright (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2008), 226.

13

action in authentic relationships.[49] In this listening, people can begin "to engage their faith in relation to larger social issues. They are able to say 'no!' to social forces of sexism, racism, consumerism, classism, and other forms of oppression, trusting that God says 'no!' alongside them."[50]

Conclusion

Our experiences as women who work, serve in a ministerial setting, study, and raise children are often difficult, especially due to the patriarchal culture. The autoethnographic collaborative study that the authors conducted in this article was aimed at showing that conversations with our daughters are spiritually life-giving. They help us to feel God's presence and support. When we give space to our daughters to hear and respond to their voices in conversation, we are empowered to critically re-listen and re-tell Christian faith stories in the Bible and inherited within church tradition through the story-linking process. This process not only has an impact on our families, but it also contributes to the transformation of church and society.

Re-listening and re-telling Christian faith stories for the transformation of churches and society is important in implementing Wimberly's story-linking ideas in the context of family ministry in Indonesia. Ordinary conversations that take place through daily interactions between mothers and daughters can also be used to critically review biblical interpretations and Christian traditions that are not in favor of children and women but that silence them in accordance with the patriarchal culture. We hope that through this process of story-linking, "invisible conversations" can become more "visible" as a safe space is provided for them. A greater space for faith to develop through informal relationships is also an aspiration of this study. Finally, we wish that the voices of more mothers and daughters will be heard within the church and society and that more mothers will feel empowered to take on multi-role responsibilities and become stronger in their relationships with their children.

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[49] Jennie S. Knight, "Transformative Listening," 240.

[50] Jennie S. Knight, "Transformative Listening," 240.

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Crossed Wires: Misunderstandings from Christian families and faith leaders regarding the spiritual needs and desires of the contemporary family

Heather Ingersoll, Cheryl Minor, and Hannah Sutton-Adams

Abstract

What do church-affiliated and unaffiliated Christian families need for their spiritual well-being? What are the central concerns of caregivers regarding life and spirituality? This exploratory study sought to answer these questions by surveying and holding focus groups with caregivers and congregational leaders. In general, we discovered a significant disconnect between what congregational leaders think is happening with these families and what the families are experiencing and thinking. Our data revealed that congregational leaders perceive the lack of engagement from families as a lack of interest at best and, at worst, a devaluing of spirituality and faith over and against other pursuits. However, our conversations with caregivers revealed that they deeply value spirituality and issues of faith. More than anything, they want their children to know their inherent worth and that they are loved.

Introduction

As Christian religious institutions of all sizes and kinds emerge from the shutdowns enforced by the Covid-19 pandemic, many ask, "Where are the young families?" Even before the pandemic, most Christian faith communities experienced a decline in attendance across demographics, but the absence of families with young children was particularly noticeable. For example, a recent Pew Research Center report (2022) notes that if Christian trends of disaffiliation continue, less than half of the U.S. population will identify as Christian within a few decades.

Christian faith leaders ask, "What can we do to get them back? Why are they choosing not to come? What are we doing wrong?" This study explores caregivers' experiences regarding spirituality and participation in religious communities to help guide a path forward. What are the central concerns of caregivers and families regarding life and spirituality? How do faith communities and clergy perceive and engage with the contemporary family?

This qualitative study sought to answer these questions by surveying and holding focus groups with caregivers and congregational leaders from Christian communities across the United States and Canada. In general, we discovered a disconnect between congregational leaders' perceptions of families and the lived experiences of contemporary families.

The data from our research highlights the contrasting and sometimes competing ways caregivers and congregational leaders understand their commitment or perceived lack of commitment to

their children's spirituality. Congregational leaders expressed exhaustion and frustration that their programming efforts failed to draw families back to traditional church involvement. They perceive the lack of engagement from families as disinterest at best and, at worst, a devaluing of spirituality and faith over and against other pursuits. The caregivers shared something different. Instead of ambivalence or disinterest, the surveys, coupled with our conversations, revealed that caregivers deeply value spirituality and issues of faith. Work, school, and other commitments pull families in many directions, but the caregivers expressed a yearning to nurture their own spiritual lives and the spiritual lives of their children. When asked about their hopes for their children's spiritual lives, caregivers expressed a desire for their children to know their inherent worth and belovedness.

Literature Review

Caregivers as crucial figures in faith formation

Faith leaders' concerns about families' perceived lack of attention to spirituality are not unfounded. Decades of research highlight the primary caregiver as the most powerful and influential factor in the religious and spiritual lives of children, adolescents, and young adults. (Smith et al., 2019). In the *Science of Children's Religious and Spiritual Development* (2021), Mahoney summarizes fundamental research regarding children's religious and spiritual development. She confirms, "Research with U.S. caregivers of adolescents and young adults indicates that caregivers play a powerful role in whether youth adopt R.S. as part of their own identity" (Mahoney 2021, 49). However, this influence can yield positive and negative results in transmitting faith.

Mahoney's (2021) review indicates that only about a third of U.S. caregivers perceive their child's spiritual development as a caregiving priority. However, Smith et al.'s research in *Religious Parenting* (2019) offers a more complex picture. Their conversations with caregivers reveal that U.S. religious caregivers feel "responsible for preparing their children for the challenging journey of life, during which they will hopefully become their best possible selves and live happy, good lives" (Smith et al. 2019, 10). From the caregiver's perspective in Smith's study, religion provides moral values and helps children become good people.

As for the role of faith communities, Smith et al. (2019) found that caregivers perceive religious institutions as "secondary and primarily supportive. Religious congregations should reinforce what caregivers teach at home, not determine it" (Smith et al. 2019, 168). Caregivers understand nurturing children's faith by offering practices and opportunities that invite children to choose a religious identity for themselves (Smith et al. 2019).

The changing religious landscape of the United States may explain why some faith leaders perceive caregivers as uninterested in their children's spirituality. Caregivers "are providing religious socialization and religious transmission in declining numbers," including religious practices in the home (Roberto 2016, 29). Trends suggest a steady decline in attendance in Christian religious institutions in the United States and other Western countries among Baptists and Protestants (Packard and Ferguson 2019; Fowler, Musgrave, and Musgrave 2020; Wilkins-Laflamme 2021).

However, as Roberto (2016) notes, religion and spirituality may be important for families in the U.S., but this importance is not expressed through participation in ecclesial communities. This may explain why Millennials and Gen X still highly value "religious faith, helping others, being well-mannered, independence, empathy, obedience, persistence, creativity, tolerance, and curiosity" (Roberto 2016, 29).

Overall, research indicates that the American religious landscape is changing. Contemporary families in the United States may choose to express and explore spirituality outside of institutionalized religion for several reasons, including adverse religious experiences, interest in social justice, and social changes (Packard and Ferguson 2019). In this shifting religious landscape, lack of affiliation or attendance in Christian communities is not an accurate measurement of caregivers' interest in and value of familial spirituality.

Furthermore, contemporary families endure many stressors that may impede their ecclesial involvement. They are busier than others of any previous generation with packed schedules and demands. Families face financial challenges as about fifteen million children live below the poverty level (Roberto 2016). These families also endure stress related to safety. Caregivers expressed concerns about their children's well-being and safety. Common concerns include bullying, mental health, gun violence, sexual promiscuity, and legal troubles (Roberto 2016, 28). Roos et al. (2021) found the pandemic created difficulties for caregivers to manage their mental health, access support, and negotiate long periods of unstructured time, all of which impacted their caregiving abilities.

Contrasting visions

As hinted at by the literature, there seems to be conflicting evidence regarding the caregiver's relationship to their child/ren's faith and spirituality. Do they feel it is essential? Is it a priority? Our research explores some of these ambiguities. For caregivers whose children's spirituality is a priority, why does participation in faith communities continue to decline? How do leaders in faith communities reconcile and make sense of this reality? What does this mean for the future ministry with children, youth, and families?

Research Method

Data was collected via two online surveys, one for caregivers and one for religious leaders (lay and ordained), five family listening-learning sessions across the United States using semi-structured interviews, and four leader focus groups nationwide.

Caregiver Survey

Caregiver surveys were sent via multiple networks asking questions about spirituality and family life (*n*=61). Most respondents were biological parents, two were grandparents, and two were foster parents—over half (56%) reported attending religious services or celebrations once a week or more. The responses to religious affiliation included Mennonite, Catholic, ELCA, PCUSA, UCC, Episcopal, Eastern Orthodox, and Jewish.   Questions asked included:

- What does spirituality mean to you?
- What are your hopes and dreams for the spiritual lives of your child(ren)?
- What challenges do you face when it comes to supporting the spiritual lives of your child(ren)?

Congregational Leader Surveys

Researchers developed a survey to begin finding out about the work of congregational leaders with caregivers/caregivers, what resources they currently use, and what resources they wish they had. One hundred fourteen individuals responded to the survey. Over half (55%) were Christian Formation Directors (lay and ordained, paid and volunteers). Just 10% who responded were lead senior pastors, and the rest were youth ministers or held some sort of position at the church. Urban, suburban, and small-town congregations were represented. Communities ranged in size from 50 or less to 200 or larger. 97% of those who responded said their congregation was primarily white, and the majority reported that English was the language spoken in worship. 25% percent of those who responded came from Episcopal congregations. Other denominations represented included Baptist, ELCA, Nazarene, PCUSA, United Methodist, Interdenominational, and the Church of England.

Listening and learning sessions for families

Researchers hosted five family listening sessions across the United States using Godly Play stories and wondering to explore caregiver perceptions, concerns, and hopes related to their children's spirituality. Thirty-six children and twenty-six adults participated. The adult-only sessions were recorded and transcribed so a thematic analysis could be conducted. Post-listening learning session surveys were sent out to all the adult participants.

Ninety-eight percent of participants identified as white or Caucasian. All but one participant lives in a two-caregiver household. Just over 50% reported attending religious services about once or several times a week. Participants were from the Episcopalian, Lutheran, Nazarene, United Methodist, Presbyterian Church USA, UCC, Catholic, and Mennonite denominations.

Listening and learning sessions took place both in-person and online. They all had three main components. The first was an opening adult-only session where caregivers answered questions about their hopes for their children's spirituality. They heard and responded to an interactive presentation on the spirituality of the child. Then, caregivers and children gathered to participate in a full Godly Play session. Finally, the adult caregivers met only to debrief the session, share how the session impacted their ideas about children's spirituality, and explore and share what support they need going forward.

Congregational Leader Focus Groups

Researchers hosted four leader focus groups to gain insight into the perceptions, frustrations, and goals of their ministries with families. These sessions were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Twenty-five leaders participated, including six ordained pastors and 19 lay leaders. These sessions were hosted on Zoom, so they drew from all over the United States and Canada. Leaders from California, Canada, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Mississippi, Missouri, Tennessee, Vermont, Washington State, West Virginia, and Texas participated. Denominations represented included Lutheran, Baptist, Episcopal, United Church in Canada, Non-denominational, and Methodist. The leader focus group included time to get to know each other, some learning about best practices for nurturing a child's spiritual life (Nye, 2009), and a time for discussion. Questions asked were:

- How do you integrate families into the life of the church?
- What are the obstacles/difficulties that interfere with your goals?
- What resources do you wish you had as you do this work?
- What are the pastoral issues that cause caregivers/parents to seek you out for help? What is it they need during those times?"
- What do you think caregivers/grandparents/parents need most?
- What would feed you as you do this ministry?

Data Analysis

Researchers conducted a qualitative thematic analysis of transcribed recordings from five family listening sessions [26 adults], four congregational leader focus groups [26 participants], 168 responses to online caregiver surveys, and 114 responses to online congregational leader surveys.

All transcribed interviews and survey responses were uploaded to the coding program, Delve. The research team used thematic analysis to code the data inductively. After coding, researchers indexed the data and sorted it into recurring themes. Outside scholars were invited to review data and codes to test for validity.

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Findings

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Congregational leaders

Most survey responses and focus groups with congregational leaders touched on the lack of attendance and participation among families. For instance, a congregational leader wrote "ATTENDANCE" in all capital letters to emphasize this concern in a survey.

The Impact of Covid-19 on Families

Congregational leaders identified how the COVID-19 pandemic and other contemporary concerns impact the lives of families and, subsequently, their churches. One congregational leader noted that they and families that attend their church lack the bandwidth to participate as they once did before Covid. She said, "My families and myself are just tapped out from covid. We don't have a lot to give right now." Similarly, another congregational leader discussed the difficulties of returning to a pre-pandemic state. She wrote, "We are struggling post-pandemic. Had a thriving children's community. Down to the bare few volunteers and attendees."

Another leader noted the mental health challenges from the pandemic as an issue for caregivers and children. They said,

> I think anxiety is a big piece of this for the kids that manifest in a lot of different ways. They're struggling in school, they're struggling making friends again. The social impacts of COVID have been really hard on the kids. And I think that it's hard on the caregivers too.

Similarly, one congregational leader observed that caregivers' lack of connectivity is of concern. She said,

> I was just looking at so many of our caregivers who just in this world of, you know, hyperconnectivity are just still so lonely and feel isolated and feel like they're doing this all on their own.

Families are over-scheduled

Overall, congregational leaders quickly noted the challenges families face concerning church and ministries. However, they also seem to hold the reality of hardship in tension with the perception

that families lack the time or dedication to attend church-related activities. One congregational leader's survey response illustrates this tension. They wrote, "Families feel too busy, caregivers are deconstructing their faith, families in crisis." In this small sentence, this congregational leader simultaneously acknowledges family difficulties alongside a busy culture preventing families from attending church. Another stated that families do not have time to attend faith activities as their schedules are filling back up after the lockdowns.

Families do not prioritize church

Others noted a lack of interest or prioritization of faith-based activities. One respondent wrote there is "less interest from families in participating in these [church] activities," and another said, "It's just a seeming lack of interest from our families in participating in the life of the Church." One congregational leader stated a challenge to their ministry is "caregivers having other priorities rather than church attendance." Another congregational leader shared this sentiment as they wrote about a "lack of time (real or perceived) to dedicate to faith formation" amongst families.

Some lamented the lack of family engagement and expressed feeling confused about how to reach families with responses like, "I don't know what to offer caregivers, and caregivers aren't taking the time," and "connecting to families at home is really hard." When asked about the needs of congregational leaders, one expressed concern about "how to make caregivers see the importance of bringing children to church." One congregational leader noted,

> The attention of children and youth is pulled in many different directions, and church is often not a priority. I can't force church attendance. The old model of weekly Sunday school on Sunday mornings may not work well anymore. But what can replace it?

Lack of societal support for religious activities

Congregational leaders also noted social and cultural factors impacting attendance and church participation. For example, one congregational leader wrote that there is a "lack of societal support for religious activities, especially in this part of the country." Another cited "secular culture overload/screentime" as the culprit. Several congregational leaders pointed to other activities families can attend on a Sunday morning besides church. They listed "competing Sunday morning activities," young families as "too busy with other events on Sunday mornings to attend," and "secular society (too much happening on a Sunday morning in family life competing for attendance on Sunday mornings)" as explanations for lack of familial ecclesial participation.

Lack of institutional support for ministry with families

Despite the congregational leader's desire for greater family involvement, they readily admitted that minimal volunteer attendance and lack of institutional support limit their ministries. Some noted a "lack of adults willing to teach" and a shortage of obtaining and retaining trained volunteers as limiting factors.

Exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout

The leaders also expressed exhaustion and stress related to their work. Church leaders felt competition for the time and attention of families. Leaders strive to offer enticing programs and engaging resources to maintain and increase family engagement. Many are starting to provide intergenerational activities in response to declining family engagement. As a result of this significant effort (and, in some cases, pressure from church leadership) to try new programs, develop engaging resources, and provide more enthusiastic leadership to attract families, congregational leaders described themselves as exhausted and discouraged. Unsurprisingly, the leaders reported longing for more support and participation from clergy, lay leadership, and congregations in shifting their ministry approach to meet families' needs.

Caregivers

Key themes from the data with caregivers indicated overall struggles and stress related to family life, including quality time with children, healing past traumas, financial stress, mental health, faith shifts, and exhaustion. We also identified two salient forms of isolation: Social/ideological isolation related to a deep desire for a safe/similarly valued community, spiritual isolation due to religious trauma in their past, and fear of exposing one's children to similar trauma or dogma incongruent with family spiritual understanding.

Struggle for work-life balance

Caregivers in surveys and focus groups named numerous challenges that impede their quality of life and ability to nurture their children's spirituality. For some, this challenge is simply an inability to keep pace with their family's busy schedule, as summarized by one caregiver's comment that they struggle with "Balancing life and multiple children's schedule." When asked about their needs concerning supporting their children's spirituality, caregivers cited the difficulties of finding time to spend with their children while working. Several caregivers noted a desire to have more time with their children. They wrote a need to "Finding more time to be with them- we both work full time and have some other commitments. Being able to spend quality time with each of my three kids, so they feel seen and valued individually." Another said, " Finding more time to be with them- we both work full time and have some other commitments."

These sentiments are perhaps best summarized in a phrase that appeared multiple times- the struggle for caregivers and caregivers to maintain a "work-life balance."

Feelings of isolation

In addition to a lack of time, caregivers reported feeling isolated and lacking support in caring for their children. A caregiver noted one of their challenges is "Raising (and homeschooling) 7 children with little physical and emotional support." Other caregivers echoed this concern citing "lack of family and other support and practical help nearby" as an obstacle to their flourishing.

Personal struggles that impact their ability to nurture their children's spirituality

In addition to busyness and lack of support, caregivers noted that their own spiritual concerns impact their ability to nurture their children spiritually. This could partly explain why congregational leaders cite a lack of attendance while caregivers express a craving for a faith community. Still, their own spiritual and mental health concerns prevent it. For instance, caregivers discussed needing to heal their "past traumas" as they try "not to pass any anxieties and insecurities down, breaking the cycle." Childhood trauma, depression, economic worry, and the Covid pandemic were also named as challenges.

Still, other caregivers reported their spiritualities impact how they nurture those of their children with statements like, "I don't feel very spiritual myself, and don't know how to talk about God with them other than demonstrating gratitude every now and then," "Don't know how to teach her [the child] to be right about things," and fear of "having answers to their [the children's] big questions, re: where is God, heaven, when our souls leave our bodies, etc."

Another noted how shifts in their faith impact the formation they feel equipped to offer to their children. They wrote a challenge is "trying to impart knowledge or answering questions when I am going through my own faith shifts."

Longing to provide a spiritually nurturing home

At the same time, these caregivers expressed a longing to provide a spiritually nurturing home. Their desires for their children's spirituality fall into two main categories: feelings of worth and value as children of God and a sense of connectedness. The following are direct quotes from the listening sessions and surveys. The first quote is an example of the many times caregivers expressed a desire for their children to understand God's love for them; the second is an illustration of caregivers' hopes for their children to experience a sense of deep connectedness with God and belonging in the world.

To feel loved for who they are, for them to think deeply and ask questions to make sense of the world they live in, their place in it, and their relationship to God, for them to understand God's love for them and for others and for them to have a desire to participate in this without guilt and fear motivating them.

That my child knows himself as treasured, loved, deeply known, and safe. That he is encouraged to live in the mystery and wonder of God, the world and himself. That he experiences integrity of spirituality and faith from those around him.

Lack of support and resources

Many caregivers expressed feeling bereft of resources and unsure of their own spiritual grounding, leaving them overwhelmed in thinking about their role in their child's religious lives and longing for support on that journey.

What families really need

Finally, when asked what resources caregivers wanted to help them in this journey, they named several options in two categories. First, they asked for both virtual and physical short, simple, and easy-to-access resources that they can easily embed into their day-to-day lives. Podcasts, storytelling videos, short video interviews, simply written resources, and an app were among the most named virtual resources. The requests for physical resources included children's books, storytelling materials (some mentioned as a subscription box), and adult resources for reflection. Beyond virtual and physical resources, caregivers and caregivers requested opportunities to develop connections with caregivers and caregivers, including online message boards and small group gatherings of caregivers and caregivers interested in cultivating their children's spirituality.

Limitations

The Godly Play Foundation employs all authors of this article. This may have impacted the way the interviewers asked their questions as well as the analyses of the texts. Potential bias was mitigated by a team approach, working together to examine the collected data honestly.

In addition, we acknowledge that this study's sample size was limited and predominantly Protestant and/or Episcopalian. Follow-up studies with a more extensive and diverse group of caregivers and congregational leaders are needed to confirm these findings. However, research examining the phenomena of church attendance or lack thereof, as noted in the literature review, confirms what we heard from our sample.

Additionally, it is important to note the specific context of the data collection concerning the COVID pandemic. The data was collected in June and July of 2022 when mask mandates were still in effect throughout much of the United States, and children under five were just beginning to be vaccinated. The full impact of the Covid-19 restrictions on family life is yet to be fully understood and could have impacted the data collected for this study.

Discussion and Implications

Attendance

Concerning attendance and participation, caregivers and congregational leaders agree that stresses and pressures, such as economic challenges, the Covid pandemic, and family dynamics, impinge upon participation in the faith community. For congregational leaders, this is felt most acutely in the diminished attendance of families and a perceived lack of support for faith programming in the form of a volunteer shortage. However, while congregational leaders acknowledge the stress of contemporary families, they reason that this lack of participation and institutional buy-in correlates with their lack of concern for their children's spiritual development or the general sense that society is becoming more and more secularized. This was contradicted in the data collected from our sample of caregivers, who voiced a deep longing to nurture their children's spiritual lives.

Resources

The caregivers voiced a desire for more resources to help them meet the spiritual needs of their children. Meanwhile, congregational leaders pour great energy into providing high-quality programming for families. This divide is exacerbated by the fact that caregivers often spoke of a distrust of the kinds of programming offered by religious institutions. Current caregivers are the children of yesterday's church whose experiences were less than positive and sometimes even hurtful. Today, these caregivers feel a need to do something different for their children. As a result, they are not disinterested in spirituality. However, they remain unconvinced that institutionalized forms of instruction and formation would benefit their children. This trend is not particularly new, as suggested by Joyce Ann Mercer in her book, "Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood" (2005). Dr. Mercer writes:

> …many caregivers continue to question whether the church is a safe place for children (physically and emotionally). Wrestling with their own childhood experiences of being silenced or stifled, many adults bear memories and associations that connect church with some dehumanizing experience of being disregarded, disrespected, or otherwise made to feel "wrong." (Mercer, 2005, 125)

It is important to note that this is not because our sample was made up of caregivers currently associated with a fundamentalist tradition, but instead were from what most think of as traditions that are considered more socially and theologically progressive. Work with children in parishes can often be invisible, delivered by well-meaning but untrained volunteers using outdated resources and methods. While many churches believe they have become a more open and affirming institution, the formation models are often stuck in some of the more transactional and moralistic forms of education experienced by some of these caregivers.

Where to go from here

Church leaders are desperately seeking solutions, driven by their fear that the church itself is losing ground and their jobs in jeopardy. Instead, the data indicate that quick, programmatic fixes, no matter how creative, are not what is needed. Instead, caregivers are most in need of connection and/or community. This is unsurprising considering the recent U.S. Surgeon General's advisory report (2023) on the public health crises of loneliness and isolation. The report confirms that persons with fewer social connections and significant relationships are more prone to disease and premature death.

Although faith leaders provide opportunities for connecting through extensive programming, these events do not seem to facilitate or offer the types of support and relationships caregivers feel they need. Our data does not explicitly state why a programmatic approach fails to meet the needs of caregivers. However, there are some potential insights. Among these are the feelings of concern and adverse past religious experiences voiced by caregivers. The first step is acknowledging the caregivers' experiences, including past traumatic religious experiences that we, as church leaders continue to perpetuate in our approaches to family ministry.

Prescribing a programmatic fix to this situation ignores the voice of the caregivers in this data. They are asking for resources, yes, but more than that, they are indicating a need for a different kind of community than the church currently offers. They are longing for a community in which to wrestle with their deep spiritual questions so that they can more confidently come alongside their children as they do the same. To care for the spiritual lives of children, caring for caregivers' spiritual needs must be a priority. It is not about teaching parents how to be religious educators but helping them move into a place where answers are unnecessary and offering opportunities to explore integrating spirituality into their daily lives.

Conclusion

As we consider the implications of this research, what seems most important is the way it helps to re-frame the question, "Where are the families?" Many are still out there seeking spiritual nourishment, but religious institutions have let them down in the past, and it will take a lot for

them to begin to trust that they can find hope and healing inside the church. Suppose religious leaders shift their energy away from coming up with new ideas every week to "attract" families. In that case, they will hopefully have more time to offer caregivers understanding and patience and support their journey. In general, this research highlights the need for deep listening on the part of religious leaders coupled with empathy for the pressures caregivers are currently feeling. If we start there, perhaps a new way forward can be found that really meets the needs of all.

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