

InFo
Vol. 11, No. 2
October 2008
pp. 21-37

FEATURE

Young People's Concepts of Personal Spirituality

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Abstract: This qualitative study seeks to understand spirituality from the point of view of young people, and to portray their personal spiritual life and experiences. This study was done in Asia with eleven young people (ages 15-20) who were born into Adventist homes. The respondents shared their experiences and perceptions about spirituality, including worship services, their participating during family worships, their personal devotional times, and their feelings about God. Results showed that adult teenagers were more mature in terms of understanding of spirituality than early teenagers. To a certain extent, this study found that young females tended to be more spiritual than young males, and that young people favorably respond to church and home worship services, especially when there is variety and opportunity for personal participation.

Young people are the ones who will someday lead the church and take the responsibility to fulfill the great commission of Christ. But often we feel discouraged and unhappy when we see them at the back of the church, talking with their friends instead of listening to the message. Many of them have negative attitudes toward worship at home and church. Because of this gap between what we desire and what we often sense, this study was designed around conversations with the youth about their lives, and hearing from them in their own words about their personal spiritual life and experiences.

Spirituality is a complex and very personal phenomenon. Developing spirituality is one of the most important goals in Adventist institutions. One of the major goals of Adventist education is to help young people to grow in Christ. Still, rarely do Adventists study spirituality specifically. Many people are afraid to research about spirituality for lack of appropriate instruments, issues of personal privacy, and the challenges in judging other people's character. There is even a biblical mandate against evaluating someone else's

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spirituality when the evaluator is not perfect (Matthew 7:1). But the time has come for parents and leaders to listen to the teenagers, and to learn from their perspective.

The intention of this study is to help parents, teachers, and religious leaders understand the aspects of spirituality that young people are struggling with, and which will give us some preliminary ideas as to how to help them. The current study is not only designed to contribute to research in the area of young people's spirituality but also to explore more deeply the spiritual lives of young people. Specifically, while listening to the young people I was seeking to find out what possible experiences, feelings, ideas or concepts, beliefs, relationships and events seemed significant to them for their own spiritual lives.

Related Literature

Although the terms religiosity and spirituality are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction between these two concepts. Not everything that is spiritual is religious; one can be spiritual without being religious or vice versa (Ostow, 2007; Benson, Wagener, King & Roehlkepartain, 2005; Vyhmeister, 2006). Religion is often seen as institutionally oriented, whereas spirituality is viewed as more personally oriented, but both are integrated with each other (Hill & Hood, 1999; Hyde, 1990). It is often thought that a spiritual person tends to spend more personal time with God. Spirituality is a way of experiencing life and looks deep inside ourselves (Murchu, 1997). Fuller states that young people consider themselves to be spiritual but not religious (as cited in Benson, Wagener, King, Roehlkepartain, 2005). The research reported in this article is about spirituality more than religiosity, and thus the literature review focuses on the purpose of spirituality, meaning of prayer, perceptions of God, home and church worship service and personal spirituality.

Spirituality helps us to explore the meaningfulness of our lives and our relationships to ourselves, to others, to nature, and to a higher power (God) that is considered the essence of spirituality (Hamilton & Jackson, 1998; Groeschel, 1995). Danesh (2001) asserts that when individuals study spirituality, it provides an opportunity to connect to a larger source of energy and power to realize who we are.

Prayer is one way to communicate with God, and helps us to grow spiritually. Prayer and spirituality are interconnected; Meraviglia (1999) asserts that "prayer is an indicator of the defining attribute of connectedness with God, and meaning in life is an outcome of spirituality" (p. 18). In simple terms, one can not have a spiritual life without a prayerful life, and a prayer-less life is meaningless (White, 1952).

Worship can be both an internal and individual experience as well as a corporate action which should be done frequently in our lives, regardless of the place or situation (John 4:21). The church is the sanctuary for congregational worship, so there should be rules in regard to the time, the place, and the manner of worshiping (White, 1954). Our churches need to be educated to "greater respect and reverence for the sacred service of God" (White, 1946, p. 314).

Home worship should be the best way to develop spirituality in our children. It should be short and lively, and should be the most interesting and enjoyable exercise of the home life (White, 1954).

Personal spirituality is how we relate to God in our daily lives. It is a function of how we view Christ (Murchu, 1997). Spirituality is not indoctrination, but it is a very personal and individual thing. We need to be educated in spiritual things so that we may form characters after the similitude of the character of Christ (White, 1900).

Research on Spirituality

Miesse (2005) investigated religion and spirituality in a community-based sample of African American children by using both qualitative and quantitative methods. This study found that church attendance was not an accurate measure of what children perceived and believed. It was the ability to sing and hear stories of sacrifice from the Bible that help these children to understand more about being religious, spiritual, and African American. Furthermore, this study also found that children are able to define and describe religion, spirituality and ethnic identity.

Vyhmeister (2006) conducted a quantitative study of teenagers' perceptions of their own spirituality in an Adventist school. The result showed that most of the teens were generally positive about wanting to know God better and also they regularly spent time alone with God. Only a few of them said they were not interested in spiritual things.

Birkholz (1997) did a qualitative study in a Christian higher educational institution, finding that most students felt that they had grown spiritually in a significant way throughout their Christian college experience. Dudley (1994) compared a group of Adventist youth attending denominational high schools and denominational colleges with Adventist young people attending public high schools and public colleges. Those in the denominational institutions obtained significantly higher scores on the Thayer Long-Form Faith-Maturity Scale (Thayer, 1993) than those attending public institutions. Serow and Dreyden (1990) found that spiritual/religious values were positively correlated with frequency of involvement in community service.

A study was conducted about the meaning and function of prayer for children in a multicultural Australian community. All participants indicated that prayer was an important element in their lives. All participants perceived prayer to function as an aid in life and it was used at significant moments (Mountain, 2005).

Several researchers have reported that spirituality is one of the major coping strategies for physical and mental health. (Walsh, 2005; Tuck, McCain, Elswick, 2001; Dadich, 2007; Cotton, Rosenthal, Tsevat, 2003). When a person has a physical or mental illness, he/she tends to become more spiritual than before (Miller, & Thoresen, 2003). The American Academy of the Family (2001) claims that religious commitment is helpful in the prevention of illness (including depression, substance abuse and physical illness), and in coping with illness and recovery from illness. The majority of Americans believe in the power of prayer to improve illness (Benson, Wagener, King, Roehlkepartain, 2005).

Most young adults feel that religion and spirituality are vital aspects in their lives (The American Academy of the Family, 2001; Dadich, 2007). Nonetheless, though most teens view religion as positive, they do not feel it is as important as other aspects of life (including friends, TV, school, etc.) (Hughes, 2007). If the future of the young people and the church are considered, then young people's spirituality must be given attention. Many of today's youth experience a sense of meaninglessness, but I believe that it is our responsibility as Christian adults to know their personal world in order to lead them better.

Methodology

A qualitative phenomenological approach was chosen for this study in order to get insights into young people's spiritual thinking process and to understand their personal spiritual experiences. Phenomenology focuses on "lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview" (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p.112).

The study was done in an Asian context on 15- to 20-year-old young people who were born into Adventist families and attend church regularly. The study was limited to early teenagers (ages 15-17) and adult teenagers (ages 18-20) because this is a common time when young people encounter spiritual battles (Benson, Wagener, King, Roehlkepartain, 2005) as they take over from their parents the responsibility for making decisions about their own spirituality.

Since I was particularly interested to hear from young people personally and individually, the eleven young people of my sample were chosen from an Adventist institution in Asia. An interview guide was constructed with open-ended questions to get the depth and richness of details and to find out the

personal experiences behind the young people's concepts. Patton (1997) asserts that "the purpose of interviewing . . . is to allow us to enter the other person's perspective" (p.109). An interview guide was used to ensure that all eleven respondents were asked the same basic set of questions in order to reduce interviewer bias and increase comparability of responses. The average duration of the interviews was 20-30 minutes but a few of them took a little longer.

The interviewees were chosen using purposive sampling procedures to select individuals who were able to communicate in English, and representing the countries of Indonesia, Korea and the Philippines. My participants were categorized in the following way: Indonesian males (2), females (2); Korean male (1), females (2), and Filipino males (2), females (2). The proportion of male and female participants was almost equal: six females, and five males between the ages of 15 and 20. The selected interviewees were all baptized members of the SDA church. Six of them had parents who were educators, and five of them were pastors' children. All eleven of them attended an SDA church almost every Sabbath.

Confidentiality was maintained at all times. Participants were contacted personally for voluntary participation and written notes were given to their parents requesting their consent. During the initial contact, the purpose of the study was explained. The participants were invited to meet at a particular time and place to set the time for interviews, which were audio taped with their permission.

Analysis of Data

The data and analysis focused on students' views and perspectives. All tapes were transcribed and written notes were carefully used to analysis the data. Fourteen open questions were asked to 11 participants giving a total number of 154 answers to be processed. Some of the answers were very brief; some of them were quite extensive. Some interviewees were reluctant and monotonous; some of them were not sure of the answers; and others were extremely happy to share their personal spiritual experiences with the researcher. During the interview the interviewer attempted to remain as neutral as possible, but sometimes it was tempting to share personal feelings and opinions with the interviewee. Many times the interviewer encouraged the participants by nodding her head, saying "uh-huh," etc. Overall, it was a positive experience for both interviewer and interviewees.

During the process of data gathering, analyzing and interpreting of information, the researcher experienced the complexity and uncertainty of interview research. As the data were transcribed, minor grammatical errors were corrected for ease of comprehension. These are noted in this document

with my additions in brackets []. The interviewees who were early teenagers (ages 15-17) are denoted in the data analysis by their gender and nationality, and by the number *two*: (Indonesian female-2). Adult teenagers (ages 18-20) are denoted by the number *one*: (Indonesian female-1).

Six significant themes emerged from the content analysis: (a) The importance of spirituality, (b) A picture of God, (c) The meaning of prayer, (d) The church worship experience, (e) The home worship experience, and (f) Personal spiritual experience.

The Importance of Spirituality

All eleven of the informants pointed to their personal relationship with God as one of the most relevant and important factors in spirituality. Four male early teenagers felt that their relationship with God was important but admitted that many times worldly things catch their attention. Interestingly, two adult female teenagers said that their relationship with God was not only important, but that without it, their lives would become empty vessels:

I think without God, my life is meaningless (Indonesian female-1).

I think without spirituality, my life is dead (Filipino female-1).

Most of the adult teenagers believed that worldly things could not give them real peace or happiness but only spiritual things could do that. Their first priority was to put God in first place before worldly things. But some of the early teenagers experienced some fear of what their friends would say about them being too spiritual:

Spirituality is not my hobby--it's boring kind of things to me (Korean female-2).

I do not like to be spiritual because my friends say 'oh you are too spiritual. We do not like you' (Filipino male-2).

Most adult teenagers stated that their spirituality plays an important role in their lives.

They explained to me that their whole life revolves around spirituality. Two of this group shared their inner feelings:

My goal, my vision and my future is based on the spirituality (Filipino male-1).

Spirituality is something that I can not give logic, but something within me. I can feel His presence within me (Indonesian female-1).

There was no difference between early teenagers and adult teenagers in addressing problems in their lives and spirituality. All these young people spend more time with God when they encounter life challenges and difficulties.

I spend more time with Him, when I feel lonely, unhappy (Filipino female-2).

I spend almost whole day when I have problems and difficulties (Indonesian male-1).

I spend more time [With Him] when I'm in trouble or in problems (Korean male-2).

Picture of God

Almost all the early teenagers mentioned that God was their friend. Interestingly, five adult teenagers saw God as their real friend, who understands their lives better than anybody else. They share all their personal things with God because they trust Him.

I trust God and I share everything with Him (Filipino female-1).

I feel God is my real friend, with whom I can share everything (Indonesian female-1).

God is my real friend because He died for me (Korean female-1).

In some cases, adult male teenagers mentioned their fear of God. They are scared when they do not do what they are supposed to do. In certain cases, they experienced doubt, or feelings that God might not protect them or rescue them anymore.

I need to be careful because I know God will punish us me someday (Filipino male-1).

If we are not doing our job well then God is going to discipline us (Indonesian male-1).

These adult male teenagers see God as a Supreme Being who has all power to judge and to punish them. In contrast, many of the younger interviewees saw God as their big Dad who always guides them and directs their lives, no matter how sinful they are. But several young people stated that the heavenly father is more fair to everyone compared to their earthly fathers:

My father loves my younger brother more than me [but my] heavenly father loves us all equally (Filipino female-2).

My heavenly father is treat everyone same but my earthly father can not do that (Indonesian male-2).

My earthly father treats us different than heavenly father (Korean male-2).

The early teenagers' perceive God as a holy angel, the savior, and the almighty one who created this wonderful world. They see God as being in control:

God has power to control everything (Korean female-2).

God created this world and [is] present everywhere (Indonesian female-2).

One early teenager maintained that there is no God because he can not see God. Many times he asked God to help him but he didn't see any result so his belief about God is that:

My God is dead. He never loves me (Filipino male-2).

Most of the adult teenagers' feelings of God are positive in nature, and interestingly, they are also the sons and daughters of parents who are educators. They shared with me that their parents had taught them about God from their childhood on.

The Meaning of Prayer

It was interesting to explore the similarities between the adult teenagers' prayer life and my understanding of the prayer life of older adults. For example, many times we adults feel that our communication with God is important both in private and in public. But the early teenagers feel much more comfortable praying in private rather than publicly. The reasons are:

I feel shy to pray [in public] because my friend [would] say something or smile at me (Korean female-2).

I feel scared to pray in public because my English is not good (Indonesian male-2).

I do not like to pray in public because I do not know what to say and how to pray (Filipino male-2).

In public I won't mention my personal things or problems (Indonesian female-2).

I can express myself better [in private] and tell everything to Him (Korean male-2).

Most of the young people pointed out that prayer means a lot to them, especially when they are having problems and feel depressed. A few early teenagers said that the only time they pray and have deep communication with God is when they face life challenges or difficulties. However, two adult females had different perceptions than others.

I think my life would be incomplete without deep communication with Him (Filipino female-1).

My whole life revolves with prayer (Indonesian female-1).

The time and place also appears to be a relevant factor in this study. Most early teenagers pray at specific times and places. They do not feel comfortable praying anywhere except in their room or in church. Interestingly, almost all adult teenagers mentioned that the time or place was not a major factor because they believe that God is omnipresent.

I know God listens [to] my prayer when I am inside the bus, classroom, and playground (Indonesian, female-1).

I pray when I am in [the] playground or on the way to going home (Filipino, male-1).

I know God listens [to] my prayer from anywhere (Korean female-1).

Church Worship Experience

Almost all the early teenagers said that they attend church regularly because their parents are Adventists. Three of them gave reasons relating to their parents or their friends, rather than their own perspective:

Every Sabbath I attend [church] because my father is a pastor (Korean male-2).

I go to church because my parents want me to go to church (Filipino male-2).

I go to church because I want to meet with my friends (Korean female-2).

But most adult teenagers answered they go to church because they love God and want to learn more about God. They also believe that their faith needs to be strengthened in the same way as we eat food every day for nourishment. Furthermore, they attend church not because of their parents or friends but because of their intrinsic motivation.

I attend church because I love God (Korean female-1).

I go to church to strengthen my faith (Filipino female-1).

I go to church because I want to hear God's message (Indonesian male-1).

When I asked young people what kind of activities they find meaningful at AIAS church which help them to grow spiritually and why, some of their responses were:

My heart goes into the Sabbath school discussion because we all can share our ideas and thoughts and get feedback from friends (Indonesian male-2).

Preaching is boring for me because pastors preach the same topic over and over (Korean female-2).

The message doesn't catch my attention because we young people like to hear more meaningful songs, nice music and interesting activities (Filipino male-2).

I like the youth program and pathfinders because [there are] different activities and new [things] that helps me to understand more about God and the Bible (Indonesian male-1).

I think the Bible study [is] important because we read the Bible in different ways and share ideas [with each other] and it really helps me to grow spiritually (Filipino female-2).

Many times we as adults have a similar concept about worship. We do not like to go to church because we want to learn something new and are easily bored with monotonous things. The biggest problem I personally have observed is that the pastors are preachers but not teachers. They know the content very well but they do not know strategies for delivering the message. White (1948) asserts that a pastor should have a correct understanding of the word and ability to deliver the message to the congregation.

Home Worship Experience

All eleven interviewees said that they have family worship every morning and evening. Most of the early teenagers said that it appears to them more like a routine with the songs and activities always being repetitive. These early teenagers are looking for interesting activities that can motivate them and protect them from worldly things.

I do not see any change of our worship. When I was child I used to sing this same songs and same way of [reading] the Bible (Filipino male-2).

I do not like the way we worship because there is nothing interesting that can catch my attention (Korean female-2).

You know this world is busy and we sometime do not like to cut off our time from [watching] TV, computer and other programs (Korean male-2).

Most teens were critical, but particularly two adult teenagers said that they do not like the way their family does family worship. Sometimes their parents are in a hurry while doing worship. They want their parents to set times for worship and give their full attention to God.

We gather to gather every morning and evening but you know it's kind of rush and I do not like it (Indonesian male-1).

I think my parents should set a time [for] worship (Filipino female-1).

One of the major things I found is that young people do not like to sit and listen to the message, but they want to be involved in discussions. In the Asian context I have noticed that most parents do things in a traditional way. They will read the Bible and share the ideas, and the kids will just listen. But as educated parents we should understand that kids also have great ideas and valuable thoughts to share. Our part is to guide them in their thinking and to be a good role model.

Personal Spiritual Experience

Almost all eleven young people realized that spirituality is an important element in their personal lives. But peer pressure and worldly things distract their spiritual attention. Surprisingly, one early teenager said that he does not try to improve or expect to become spiritual for his whole lifetime:

Maybe [the] time will come, I will stop praying and I will be very far from God and my family because [if] the spiritual aspect catches me it is really from my family (Filipino male-2).

It is really important for us to be aware of young people like this in our community. Unless we ask them specifically, we may never know how they are feeling, and they may slip through the cracks in our carefully planned system, and quietly leave the church.

All the young people mentioned reading the Bible and spending time with God as being important, but many of them fail to do it. Most of them said they read the Bible three or four times a week. They told me that they only read the Bible when they have problems and difficulties in their lives. Specially, two early teenagers admitted not reading the Bible at all because it is too hard for them to understand:

Reading [the Bible is] boring to me, when I read I do not understand the meaning because my parents didn't teach me in early age (Filipino male-2).

It is not very interesting book and hard to understand the meaning (Korean female-2).

When I asked young people how they could be more spiritual than before, all eleven of them simply said it was by reading the Bible and praying every day. I noticed that most of the young people have a positive attitude towards changing their personal spirituality.

I like to be more spiritual than before (Korean female-1).

I [can be more] spiritual if I read Bible and pray every day (Filipino male-2).

I can be closer with God, by reading Bible and pray all the time
(Indonesian female-2).

Some young people understand that their spirituality is a growing process and it takes time to develop. They believe that age and environment play an important role in developing their spirituality.

I think I am still too young but when I will be adult my relationship with God can be deeper and deeper (Korean female-2).

I think both environment and my age are important in order to develop my spirituality (Indonesian male-1).

It was so impressive when one adult teenager told me that her relationship with God is deeper and more important than any other secular activities:

I said everything is based on my spiritual life even in secular things because I believe that my spiritual life dominate all over all my life (Indonesian female-1).

I was shocked when two early teenagers expressed that their relationship with God was not deep because they could not see God's leading hand in their lives. Even in some instances they said that they do not like to talk with God because they can not hear God's voice.

My relationship is not deeper because I do not find God yet.
(Korean female-2).

God doesn't talk with me so I do not talk with Him (Filipino male-2).

When I asked the interviewees who they think is a spiritual person and how they know that they are a spiritual, most of the males said that their mother was more spiritual than their father and most of the women said that their father was more spiritual than their mother. But interestingly, four of them answered:

I say my Dad because he always helps me to do the right things and treats people with kindness (Filipino male-1).

My cousin, she is very kind to everyone. I want to follow her characteristics--she [is] just like an angel (Korean female-1).

My father, he reads Bible and pray[s] and respect[s] others
(Korean male-2).

My mom is spiritual because when we have problems she always reads [the] Bible and prays to God (Korean female-2).

Conclusions and Recommendations

It was a great experience for me to hear from young people and to get to know their insights. Usually they do not like to talk about spiritual things but once we show interest in them, they really love to talk.

As mentioned in the start, spirituality is a complex thing. An attempt to determine its extent in a person's life may prove difficult. This study can give us only glimpses into the spiritual world of young people. The sample I selected for this study is not generalizable to the entire population of young people in the Asian setting. However, certain conclusions can be drawn regarding the way spirituality is conceptualized and experienced by young people.

From this study it is noted that most early teenagers indicated that they have a closer relationship with friends rather than with God but most adult teenagers said that they have a deeper communication with God rather than with their friends. The adult teenagers felt that they need to go to church not because of their friends or parents but they really love God and because of their instinct motivation.

Regarding family worship, the young people do not like just to sit and listen their parents but they like to get involved and look for the opportunities to express their ideas and thoughts. They like to share their spiritual experiences and like to get positive feedback from their parents. They want their parents to listen and to be given the chance to talk about their spiritual life.

Regarding church worship, it was clear that young people sometimes feel bored sitting in church. They would like to see more interesting activities, which could motivate them to go to church and draw them closer to God. They do not like to hear the same sermon, or the same ideas over and over. They like to see more young people preaching, especially those who have a good voice and an interesting way of delivering the message. They would like to listen to more music and meaningful lyrics.

Young people have a strong sense of God's presence, especially during prayer, Bible reading and overall personal communication and relationship with God. Most of the adult teenagers have a good personal relationship with their Creator and a clearer understanding about God compared to younger teenagers. Several of the younger ones explained that their relationship with God would grow as they grew up. It is also noted that young females had a stronger relationship with God than young males. The reason behind this might be that females spend more time at home and spend more time with God to build a good relationship; whereas males tend to be out most of the time and busy with worldly stuff and friends. According to Engerbretson (2004) women are typically more involved with religion than men. He suggests that the difference may be that women are still carrying out the role of primary caregiver for children--the mother takes a family role and the father, an economic one. Another reason could be the developmental stage: girls are generally more mature than boys of the same age (Benson, Wagener, King, Roehlkepartain, 2005). According to research, girls tend to be closer to God and more committed

in their lives than boys do (Tamminen, 1991; Hyde, 1990). Nevertheless, many adult young people have a very good spiritual foundation that can lead them to become good leaders in future.

From this study some recommendations can be made. Parents should realize that they are responsible for their children from an early age on. Parents should reserve quality time for their children, especially teaching their children how to read the Bible and pray. Parents should understand and guide their children. According to White (1952) we should train and educate our children to practice obedience, courtesy, and Christian sympathy.

As parents we should help our children to develop their self-esteem. We should allow our children to talk and share their ideas and thoughts with us during worship time. We should not feel that our children are empty vessels and we are the pitcher to fill them. But we should involve them and allow them to share their spiritual experience with us so that we can guide them to grow in Jesus Christ every day.

In addition, the church should give young people an opportunity to participate in its programs and activities. Let them feel the warmth of fellowship and treat them just like we treat adults, giving them the attention they need. Sermon delivery in the church must be carefully planned with different interesting activities and programs. A significant number of students struggled with the content of the services, saying that church was boring, repetitive and old fashioned. According to White (1948) church meetings should be lively and interesting.

In all areas of spiritual life we need the full engagement of the child: engagement of the mind, the emotions, and action (Ostow, 2007). The young people must have both head and heart knowledge of God that will motivate them not to depart from the Lord but to involve themselves more in His work. No one can guarantee that by doing everything possible as parents that children will definitely mature in their spirituality. It has to come from within. We must do our part and our children need to do their part, and we need to entrust the rest to God. Only then we can hope for good things to happen. Luntungan (2006) asserts that it is a journey that parents and children should take together. Along that "journey the family can be an agent of faith integration to the world" (p. 52).

I believe that both churches and parents need to understand young people in order to help them to become biblically wise adults. It is our responsibility and opportunity to love and influence our young people toward Christ.

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