

InFo
Vol. 7, No. 1
April 2004
pp. 31 - 58

FEATURE

A Child's Spiritual World: A Qualitative Study

Leni T. Casimiro

Abstract - *Though much has been written about adolescent spirituality and how adults should deal with it, far less has been written by adolescents themselves, or by adults from the adolescent perspective. This study of four twelve-year-old girls takes the adolescent's position, and tries to understand spirituality in their own terms, and from their point of view. The four girls chosen from this study are all students in Seventh-day Adventist schools, but their home lives are each different. This study seeks to explore the effects of those influences on the lives of each of these girls, but more importantly, their conceptions of God, religion, and spirituality. These conceptions are qualitatively analyzed for each girl, as well as across the four cases.*

Results showed that family influence is stronger than church or school influence, but that the relationship is not necessarily simple. Schools do not (at least in these cases) have much effect on the development of an adolescent's devotional life, for example. Church seems to have even less effect on their lives. At this point, the girls respond strongly to friends, members who relate to them, and whether the service is interesting or not. Recommendations are that schools could do more to develop spirituality, that parents need to be aware that they are strong role models, and that a longitudinal study could give more stable results.

Introduction

In many conversations in churches, schools, or even family circles, comparisons of the spiritual life of parents and their respective children are often heard. Many times, people are perplexed at how a son of a devout pastor turns out to be a "black sheep" and is seldom or never seen in church. Parents, likewise, lament their children's seeming lack of interest in religion, despite having spent all their student life in Christian schools. On the other hand, people wonder how a young boy, who comes from a poor, not-so-solid family, turns out to be an inspiring church leader. New parents therefore ask, "How can I be sure that my child will

April 2004, Vol. 7, No. 1

grow to be a spiritually strong person?"

Although spirituality is different from religiosity, it is usually associated with or incorporated with religious thinking or understanding and faith development. While spiritual development is broad, as it encompasses an individual's broad search for meaning as he relates with a Transcendent being called God, Christians assume that a spiritually mature individual must have a connection to a "true" religion (Thompson & Brandy, 1999). Parents tend to believe that spiritual growth happens when their children become active in their religious practices.

Review of Literature

The dilemma of the spiritual development of children has caught the interest of many: theologians, religious educators, curriculum developers, psychologists, and researchers. In a literature review of early research, Hyde (1990) found that the development of religious thought was frequently studied in accordance with Piaget's (1969) stages of cognitive development, although Piaget himself did not deal directly with religion. Religious cognition was believed to be related to increasing levels of cognitive ability. Based on this theory, spirituality is "a late achievement, arriving between eleven and twelve years, when children develop the ability to think logically and abstractly" (Dillon, 2002, para. 5). A leading researcher in children's spirituality in the sixties and seventies, Ronald Goldman (1964), called the adolescent stage a "sub-religious period." During this period, children begin to question the things which they had previously assumed. According to Heller (1986), adolescents tend to be more inquisitive about their faith and have gained more knowledge about God and spiritual things than their younger counterparts. Whereas before they possessed an egocentric view of God, now their God-concept becomes more other centered, although less concrete.

Other educational theorists have criticized the Piagetian conception of development due to its over-emphasis on age (Shaw, 1970; Hoge & Petrillo, 1978). They found that children from devout homes who had received a greater amount of formal religious education had more religious color in their ideas. These studies brought religious experiences to the fore of succeeding studies on children. The terms "propositional" (head) and "experiential" (heart) knowledge of God were studied and differentiated (Psychology and Christianity Project, 2001b). While taking into account varying experiences from different religious affiliations, these studies focused on the differences in children's religious thinking across age levels (Donahue & Benson, 1995; Ozorak, 1989).

Later studies focused on other variables such as intelligence and linguistic ability, which they thought might influence religious thinking. Degelman (1986) shows the development of religious thinking through a series of inter-religious comparisons. Protestants were compared to Catholics and Jews, as well as among

themselves. Harris (1998) contends that it is not the parents' influence but that of the peer group that shapes the behavior of the child and modifies the characteristics they were born with, hence determining the sort of people they will be when they grow up. Ratcliffe (1999) analyzed curricular influences on children's spirituality through students' conversations in the school hallway.

Stephens (1996), one of the current child theorists, gives a comprehensive view of spiritual growth by extending its foundation to include three more theories. He identified four dimensions of spiritual growth: (1) faith development, based on James Fowler's (1981) Stages of Faith Development; (2) personality (emotional) development, based on Erickson's Psychosocial Theory of Development; (3) cognitive (mental) development, based on Piaget's Stages of Cognitive Development; and (4) moral development, based on Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development. These dimensions merely reflect the idea that spiritual growth is indeed a complex process; an interplay of mental, social, emotional, moral, and even physical aspects of the person; a reflection of Jesus' model of development as recorded in Luke 2:52: "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man"(KJV).

The realization of the growing complexity of spiritual development has caused fresh interest in research on children's spirituality. Childhood spirituality is now understood to be both the source of understanding and of motivation for more mature faith (Psychology and Christianity Project, 2001a). More research is needed to examine all the possible influences on the spiritual development of children, regardless of age or religious affiliation, but it will take time. The first international conference on children's spirituality was not held until July, 2000, in Britain (Ratcliffe, 1999).

Dillon (2002) suggests that the difficulty posed by research on child spirituality can be explained by the fact that until recently, the methodologies used to reach conclusions were identical to those used with adults, despite children's less-developed linguistic and higher-order thinking skills. With this methodological limitation, current researchers have found that children are able to express symbolically much more than they can express in speech or writing. These discoveries in the area of children's expression through symbols and stories have led to the development of new methodologies.

Nye (1998) did not use the standard interview; rather she showed the children pictures designed to generate reflective conversation. Children were invited to tell stories about what they thought was going on in the picture. According to Nye, a developmental psychologist at the University of Cambridge in London and co-author of *The Spirit of the Child* (Hay & Nye, 1998), "the children's stories revealed a spiritual awareness, sensitivity to meaning, and curiosity about life's mysteries." She found out that children are "fully capable, possibly more so than

adults, of a personal sense of the divine and will strive to create meaning from experiences that point them to a reality that is greater than themselves and their immediate context or understanding” (para. 2).

On the other hand, Nye also found that:

The spirituality of children who have regular contact with Christian faith education and who are therefore relatively ‘fluent’ in ‘Christian’ language, is particularly prone to being conquered. They learn to imitate Christian spiritual life of adults best, rather than build on strong foundations of their own. Too often, much of the ‘content’ of faith is forgotten or critically re-examined and rejected as the child develops and the ‘feel’ or process of faith as a personal investment and resource has been eroded. (para. 4)

Findings such as these make research on child spirituality really necessary. If the future of the child as well as the church is to be considered, then child spirituality must be given attention. As Nye puts it: “there is a real need to address the presentation of Christian story and language to children in ways that resonate with their spiritual capacities, so that Christian understanding and the deepest roots of personal growth can be united in one process ‘right from the start’” (Nye 2002, para. 4).

It can be observed that more recent research on child spirituality is becoming more qualitative in nature. Because spirituality is an abstract concept and hence is very difficult to measure quantitatively, an attempt to understand the spiritual life of a person must involve deeper exploration through that person’s own narratives. This is the reason for the design of this current research.

The Present Study

This study is conceived not only to contribute to research in the area of children’s spirituality but also (and more importantly) to explore more deeply the spiritual lives of children. Specifically, I tried to look through a child’s eyes in order to see what possible experiences, beliefs, feelings, relationships, events, and institutions in their lives are significant to their spiritual life. After considering the spiritual world of a child, parents, teachers, and religious leaders can perhaps better determine what environment is best in order to nurture children spiritually.

Methodology

Case studies were done on four twelve-year-old children who appeared to have similar levels of intellectual ability. I limited this study to early adolescence because this is the time of life when the child displays beginning stages of abstract thinking.

Since I was particularly interested in the possible role of Adventist education and the Adventist home, three of my sample population were chosen from among Adventist children: one studying in a Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) school, whose parents attend church; one also studying in an SDA school, whose parents do not attend church; and another who never attended an SDA school. The fourth child came from a non-Adventist home but is studying in an SDA school. The interviewees studying in an SDA school receive the same religious instruction; they were all taken from the same class in the same SDA school.

The sample was purposely taken from the same gender—girls. This was done to avoid possible gender differences in spirituality. According to research, girls tend to perceive God to be closer than boys do (Tamminen, 1991) and girls tend to be more committed in their faith (Hyde, 1990).

Interview Protocol and Procedure

In-depth personal interviews were conducted with each child, as well as with key informants, such as their parents and teachers. An interview guide was constructed with open-ended questions to give the child freedom to answer without unnecessary limits. The interview process was a mixture of conversation and guided interview. To determine their spiritual reflections on certain events, the children were also asked to interpret pictures that could elicit religious thinking. The interviews were taped and transcribed by the researcher. Since the children were from Metro Manila, the language of the interviews was Tagalog. Quotations from the conversations used in this study are translations by the researcher. The interviewees' identity was protected by giving the girls fictitious names.

Each case was analyzed separately (within-case analysis), supported by descriptive narratives in each of the four case studies, in order to see the "big picture" of each child's spiritual life. After the individual case studies were completed, a thorough cross-case analysis was carried out. This analysis addressed similarities and differences across the four cases and sought to organize the recurring themes or categories in them. According to Yin (1994), if this step is omitted or poorly performed, case studies, no matter how detailed, often yield limited value. A systematic cross-case analysis provides greater confidence in the recommendations by showing how generalizable they are and the particular conditions under which the recommendations can be expected to apply.

Data Analysis

I. Within-case Analysis

Each of the case studies conducted in this research is a miniature spiritual world of its own. Comparing the cases without

understanding their backgrounds may lead to misleading conclusions. Thought processes can only be interpreted accurately when studied in their contexts. As Stephens (1996) argues, spirituality is a function of both cognitive knowledge and experience.

Case 1: Jenny

Jenny is the youngest in her family, and the only girl of four children. It is easy to surmise that she must be spoiled, but her mother is quick to say “she is always disciplined by her father.” Conversations with her mother bring out two of Jenny’s weaknesses:

That is what I don’t like in her, whenever she likes something she will insist until you give in to her desires, no matter how much it will cost you. Another thing: she always loves to stay outdoors with friends until late at night. She is extremely opposite to her brothers. Her brothers, especially my eldest, are all disciplined.

It was surprising to note that when the mother talked about Jenny, negative traits surfaced. Most of the time she would manage to steer the discussion to her sons, praising their good behavior. Her parents’ seeming preference for the boys and the eight-year gap between her and her next brother has left Jenny almost without a playmate in the family. This has caused her to look for friends, who eventually have become her constant companions.

Whenever I have problems, the first thing I do is to go to my friends for counsel. Then I pray. Sometimes I also ask help from my parents.

Her parents have been Seventh-day Adventists since before they were married. Because her father was earning fairly well, all three brothers were able to finish at least a secondary education in Adventist schools. An accident caused her father to resign his job and eventually led to difficulties in sending Jenny to an Adventist school. She was able to continue her studies only because her mother engaged in business to augment the family’s meager income. Her

parents are determined to have her finish her schooling in an Adventist school because she is at the top of her class.

Jenny's family comes to church only on Sabbath morning. Their preoccupation with finances prevents them from attending church services on weekdays. They do participate actively, however, when given parts in church programs. Family worships usually happen once a week. For her devotional life, Jenny says

Of course I always pray at every meal, opening and closing prayers in school, sometimes during family worships . . . I seldom read the Bible . . . Anyway, we're studying it every day in school.

Case 2: Susie

Susie is the only daughter of a rich couple. Because of family business, her parents are usually away from home from early morning until late at night. Susie is left in the care of her maternal grandmother, who is a devout Adventist. Old age prevents her from supervising everything Susie does. A nanny has been hired to oversee her activities outside the house.

As a student, Susie is above average in her class. She loves mingling with friends, being the only child in the family. Her parents make sure everything she needs is given her. She enjoys a life without much friction because

My parents give me all my needs . . . and . . . ummm . . . they seldom punish me because they never know. They're always away. I'm a good girl, anyway (giggles).

With regards to the family's spiritual life, Susie says:

My grandma leads our family worship. But when I have plenty of assignments, I cannot join her. My Mom and Dad seldom go to church. I know why. . . maybe because they arrive in the house too late on Friday nights. I think Mom goes to church but she goes with her friends in Marikina (a distant place). (She bows

low; wiggles her legs. The smile disappears from her face).

Case 3: Hazel

The eldest of two children, Hazel comes from a poor family, who moved to Manila seven months ago from a fishing town in southern Philippines. Her parents are both vendors. From early childhood, she has been exposed to extreme poverty.

One time, we didn't have money. Nothing . . . nothing at all . . . even to buy rice. Since we lived near the sea, I tried to ask for some catch from some fishermen. I exchanged some for rice, took some for our food, and decided to sell the rest. My problem was that I didn't know how to sell. It was just my first time. I prayed that God would send somebody to teach me. Then I saw a friend who had been too shy to let others know that she was selling fish. I told her "Why will you be ashamed? I'm not ashamed. It's better to do this than to steal. Please teach me how to do it." I don't want to be a burden to my parents. I'm always helping them.

Hazel's parents are not of the same religion. Her father is a Roman Catholic, while her mother is a Seventh-day Adventist. Her mother's dedication to God inculcated in Helen a total dependence on God's providence:

Mama keeps on repeating: "If you have problems, always pray. Ask anything from Him and He will give you." That's why I always [pray] . . . every day . . . Once, I think when I was seven, we wanted to go to church. The problem was that we didn't have money for transportation and the church was very far. Mama suggested that we just walk. We do it whenever we don't have money. It's verrrry, very far . . . two hours' walk, imagine. Sometimes, my Mama's sandals get broken. (Laughs). You know, if not for Mama's guidance, maybe I would already be a bad girl. Maybe I wouldn't have God . . .

Because Hazel's parents do not have permanent jobs yet and

hence cannot rent a house, they live with a relative in Manila. Family living to Hazel is, therefore, a function of two families and this has affected their devotional life.

Whenever we start our worship, . . . we sit in a circle like this (she demonstrates) . . . My uncle plays the guitar nicely. Of course we want to have guitar when we sing. I'm sure Jesus will be happier. Then his friends will come and say "Let's drink now." He will leave us. My other cousins also join him in drinking beer. . . Then, when drunk, he will say, "Don't follow us. This is bad." I'm afraid my younger brother might do the same when he grows up.

Hazel studies in a public school. As a student, she cannot be ignored.

I'm usually chosen as a contestant to represent our school in district and provincial contests. . . I only slept in class when I was in first grade. I still remember our teacher told us "Study hard because if you receive a ribbon your parents will be very happy. Maybe that could be the happiest moment in their lives." Then, I tried, though sometimes I still felt lazy. I received third honor! Mama was very happy. (giggles).

As a daughter,

Sometimes I'm grumpy and cranky . . . and I don't want to obey. Then I think, why am I like this? May be God is already angry with me because I don't obey my parents. . . . Sometimes I run away when they ask me to do something. (Chuckles).

Case 4: Cecilia

Cecilia is the eldest of three children. Her father is a contract worker in Israel, while her mother engages in a small-scale family business to augment the family income. In conversations focusing on Cecilia, her mother is quick to say,

I don't have any problem with her studies. She is very diligent, . . . to the point of not eating enough just to be able to study. She will just close her bedroom door and there concentrate on her studies. I don't have to tell her to study hard. She has been receiving medals. The only problem I have with her is that she doesn't care much about her siblings. She is used to always having a helper in the house. When she sees something that needs to be done, she'd rather give commands than do it herself. All that is important for her is her studies.

Her siblings should never touch her things, or else. . . . But she is teachable. She may sometimes be irritable but she never gets into trouble with other children.

Much of my information about Cecilia came from her mother, because Cecilia responded to most of my inquiries in one-word answers. She is obviously an introvert and a silent type of person.

Cecilia's parents are Roman Catholic. The family has a simple way of professing religion. In the words of Cecilia:

We do not pray novenas in the house. We only go to church every Sunday morning. That's all.

II. Cross-Case Analysis

All four children in this study were asked about their religious beliefs, ideas, activities, as well as attitudes towards certain activities and life situations. A careful examination of their responses has resulted in some common themes that give a picture of an emerging spirituality (or the lack of it) in each child. These themes are the focus of this section.

Sources of Spiritual Nurture. It cannot be denied that adolescents are not yet able to live by themselves and, therefore, are still dependent on people around them—financially, mentally, socially, and especially spiritually. It was very clear from the four children that their knowledge of God and other religious beliefs, as

well as their relationship to Him, were either inspired by or transmitted to them through their family, the church, and the school. These three agencies, coupled in some instances by personal devotion, were their main sources of spiritual nurture.

Though Susie's parents were not attending church, a substitute family member took the role of spiritual nurturer:

I knew Him (God) through my Grandma's stories . . . at bedtime and during family worship. But in terms of influence, my family and school are just equal.

Hazel combined the influence of her mother and personal devotion:

Whenever I pray, I feel so close to Him . . . as if it's just the two of us talking to each other . . . as if He is just beside me. . . . It's good that my Mama has taught me many things about God. If not, I might be a very bad girl by now.

The lack of regular family worship in Jenny's home is made up for by the Adventist school where she is attending:

My school has given me all the things I need to know about God. . . . because I'm always there. My family is next . . . then the church . . . and my friends.

Cecilia, whose family does not have any religious activity and whose religion is different from that of the Adventist school she is attending, claimed that

The church taught me about God. . . . My family and school taught me a little bit. . . . I don't have enough personal devotion.

Considering that Jenny and Cecilia attend the same school, it is surprising to note that they differ in the way they receive religious instruction in school. Could it be that the school is failing to reach its non-Adventist students? Conversations with their teacher revealed that:

Of course, they have the same Bible lessons every day. But

during religious study, as in baptismal classes, we do not require everybody to attend. We require all SDA pupils because we believe they should know the doctrines. These classes are optional to non-SDA pupils. They are only invited to come if they want to.

Church Connectedness

Research on spirituality frequently focuses on religious practices, such as church involvement. It is evident from this study, however, that mere frequency of church attendance does not mean that children like church. Parents or guardians may make them attend church even if they do not have a deep motivation to do so. The affective dimension of church connectedness—the love of worshiping God and the joy of fellowship with members of the same faith—shows a more realistic picture of adolescent spirituality in relation to the church. For that reason, this study focuses more on attitudes toward the church than on mere outward markers of involvement.

Attitude Toward the Church. When asked about their general feelings about their church, two Adventist respondents showed some satisfaction, using the words “Just okay.” When probed further as to how they define an “okay” church, they said:

Jenny: The church is generally okay but the members are moderately okay. . . . They treat me just as a family would.

Susie: They are friendly . . . but only some are close to me. Whether I go to church or not, they won't look for me.

Asked how close church members were to her, Susie answered, Just okay. On a scale of 1 to 10, she rated her fellowship with them at 4 or 5.

The third Adventist, Hazel, who never had the chance of going to an SDA school and thereby comes to church only during church services, said:

They seem to be very kind. They treat you like a sister though you are just a visitor. They are very kind to you. Though you are not yet a member and you need some money for medicine, they help you. Unlike the Roman Catholics, who seem not to care for you. . . .

The fourth child, Cecilia, the only non-Adventist in the interviewees, says:

The church is just okay. The members, however, do not mind if you are there or not. I don't know any of them. They just go there to attend mass, then go their own way afterwards.

Her exposure to the Seventh-day Adventist church gave Cecilia a point of comparison between the two churches.

Sometimes I don't like the Catholic Church anymore because their teachings are not found in the Bible. I go with my friends to that church (points to the Seventh-day Adventist church) on Saturday.

Church Involvement. Adolescents tend to enjoy activities that are designed for them, such as the Junior Sabbath School class. As shown in Table 1, conversations revealed that church involvement, for these adolescents, often happens because of external motivation. Whereas the presence of friends tended to motivate Jenny and Susie, church members who do not care for each other and boring programs de-motivated them to participate. The reasons given for a lack of involvement—such as sleeping, strolling in the park, and parents who do not attend church services—seem to underscore the importance of parental guidance or modeling in matters of church attendance. Except for Susie, there is a seeming parallelism between the involvement of parents and their children. Susie appeared to stand in the middle, between her devout Grandma and her non-church-attending parents.

Faith-Shaping Knowledge

Possession of a knowledge base from which to draw conclusions or make decisions on certain life issues is very important for a growing Christian. The adolescents in this study were asked about their ideas about prayer, the Ten Commandments, sin, and the Bible (see Table 2 for their responses).

It is clear from the answers that these adolescents are already capable of rationalizing their beliefs, though they are a somewhat egocentric. Prayers are believed because positive answers are received. Except for Cecilia, personal accountability for committed sin is not yet felt. They believe the Bible because somebody said it must be so. In the absence of strong family spiritual guidance, the school takes the lead in imparting biblical knowledge. Jenny and Cecilia's answers on the truth about the Bible are a reflection of what they learned in their Bible class. All three girls studying in an SDA school—Jenny, Susie, and Cecilia— know about the 10 Commandments.

Table 1
Involvement in Church Activities

| Jenny | Susie | Hazel | Cecilia |
|--|--|---|--|
| Describe your feelings about the activities of the church. | | | |
| The Sabbath School is fun because my friends are there. | I'm happy when I'm in Sabbath School and the Hour of Worship. | I'm excited to join. . . . I learn many things. The children seems to be very kind. . . . I love to recite the memory verses. | I feel bored. . . because I cannot understand the priest's sermon. I don't know their songs. |
| What activities of the church do you participate in? | | | |
| I attend the Junior Sabbath School class. I invite my friends there. I seldom attend the Hour of Worship | I attend the Sabbath School and the Hour of Worship; seldom A. Y. and vespers; never midweek | I joined the Junior division (Sabbath School). I always attend the Hour of Worship, A. Y., midweek with my | I only go to church every Sunday morning for mass. I never join any other church activities. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|--|
| because that is the time I eat breakfast. I do not attend A.Y., midweek or vespers. | because I have many assignments to do. | Mama, and vespers. I also bring my friends to Branch Sabbath School after A. Y. | |
| Describe your involvement in church activities (Range of 1-10) | | | |
| Moderately active. I give myself a 5. | Moderately active. I give myself a 5. | In my former church, I was very active. Here, I'm only moderately active. | If I were to rate my participation in the church, I think 2. |
| Reason(s) for (lack of) involvement | | | |
| I'm usually late. Programs are boring. My parents do not attend other church programs. I sleep or stroll in the park on Sabbath afternoons. | They don't give me a part. I sleep or stroll in the park on Sabbath afternoons. My friends do not attend. I have plenty of assignments. | I still feel shy because I'm new in this church. | Services are boring. People in the church don't care for each other. |

Table 2
Religious Beliefs

| Jenny | Susie | Hazel | Cecilia |
|--|--|--|---|
| Do you believe in prayer? How do you know that it is effective? | | | |
| Yes. When I talk to God, I can release my problems even if I can't hear Him. | Yes. Because He answers my prayers. . . . He gives me my requests. | Yes. Because I can't do anything without Him. He has answered all my prayers. | Yes. Because through it I can talk to Jesus. He gives me my requests. |
| Do you know the Ten Commandments? Can you follow them? | | | |
| Yes, but sometimes I can't follow them. | Yes, but I cannot avoid breaking them. | No.... According to the song "1-2-3-4-5-6, for us; the 7th is for Jesus," so I keep the Sabbath. | Yes, but I don't think I can follow them faithfully. |
| Why do people sin? Should they be blamed for sinning? | | | |

| | | | |
|---|--|--|--|
| People sin because of their own thinking. Satan should be blamed because he started it all. | We sin because of Satan. We cannot be blamed for our sins. | It depends on the person. If he will choose to obey Christ, he won't sin. But Mama said man is sinful by nature so he can't be blamed. | They do not think of what they're doing. They should be blamed because they choose to do bad things. |
|---|--|--|--|

Do you believe the Bible? How do you know that it comes from God?

| | | | |
|--|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Yes, because its prophecies are now getting fulfilled. | Yes, because my grandma said so. | Yes, Ummm I think God used humans to write the Bible because He cannot be visible to us. Mama told me it came from God. | Yes, because it tells our future and the signs of the end are now appearing. |
|--|----------------------------------|---|--|

Where/From whom did you get your religious ideas?

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|----------|---|
| School, sometimes the family. | My grandma, then my own personal study of the Bible. The school and church also help. | My Mama. | My teacher in school during our Bible class |
|-------------------------------|---|----------|---|

Personal Assessment of Faith Maturity

Since faith maturity is abstract, I tried to let the children relate to me their own assessment of their behavior and some decisions, made or yet to be made. I believe these personal assessments reveal, at least to some extent, their maturity in faith. Faith is a daily struggle with the Holy Spirit; but nobody else can truly know the faith level of another person, except for God and that individual.

Closeness to God. The four adolescents were asked to assess themselves on a scale of one to ten how close they feel to God. Jenny gave herself a 5; Susie rated herself at 6. Hazel felt she was at 10. Cecilia gave herself an 8. Jenny and Susie see themselves in the middle of the range because they experience swings in their behavior.

Jenny: *Sometimes I forget . . . then I feel far from God.*

Susie: *Because sometimes I feel there is no God . . . especially when my parents punish me.*

Susie's relationship to God is dependent on the way her parents deal with her. Hazel and Cecilia both feel close to God primarily through the experience of prayer. As Cecilia said, "when I pray, I feel as if He is just beside me."

Openness to God's Message. To determine whether sermons make sense to the

adolescents, I asked them to describe their feelings when they hear a sermon. Here are their answers

Jenny: I feel I must be what they are saying in sermons.

Susie: *I feel bored. They keep on repeating the same old story. I'd rather read or write or talk to my seatmate. Well . . . some sermons are good. . . . It depends on the speaker.*

Hazel: *I feel guilty of my sins. I regret what I did.*

Cecilia: *I learn many things . . . but I go out of the church when I don't like the speaker . . . boring!*

Adolescents, young as they are, are touched by the messages in the church. They only lose interest when the speakers talk about very familiar topics or when the delivery is poor. Susie has been studying in an Adventist school since kindergarten. She has grown familiar with certain illustrations from the Bible, so finds herself more easily bored.

Jenny: *Our baptismal class in school helped a lot. I decided to be baptized because I felt it was about time for me to obey God.*

Susie: *Our baptismal class and my Grandma helped me decide. I felt I must be baptized to be closer to Jesus.*

Since they had been baptized, I asked them why they have chosen the Seventh-day Adventist religion. Here were their answers:

Jenny: *Because . . . ummm . . . (Smiles) . . . you can obey the Ten Commandments.*

Susie: *Ummmm. . . . It's nice.*

Interviewer: *What do you mean by "nice?"*

Susie: *It's better than other religions.*

Interviewer: *What made you say it's better than other religions?*

Susie: *Ummmm It's nice.*

Hazel comes from a family of a different religion and studies in a public school. Presented with the same question, she answered:

I'm not yet baptized as an Adventist. But I was baptized twice already. Since my father is a Catholic, I was baptized when I was a baby. My Grandma is very active in "God is love" (another local church) so she let me be baptized there when I was 9. But Mama (an SDA) told me that I should make my own decision. The truth is I want to be an S.D.A. . . . They are the best people I've seen. . . . I want to be baptized soon.

When asked why she preferred the Seventh-day Adventist Church, she said

I've observed other religions. . . . I'm always happy when I go to an Adventist church. There I feel the people are very kind. They seem to be following God's commandments. They don't belittle people. . . . They look formal. They don't wear pants, unlike the Catholics. . . . Then I said "maybe that's really the best religion." I told my Mama "I want to be baptized as a Seventh-day Adventist."

Cecilia, being a Roman Catholic, was baptized as a baby:

I don't understand why I was baptized. But I think a baby is baptized for him to know God when he grows up.

Jenny, Susie, and Cecilia are similar in that they do not understand why they accepted their religion, yet they are different in that Jenny and Susie were baptized based on a personal decision. Though not yet baptized, Hazel has been able to compare two churches. However, she is idealistic, perhaps because of a lack of exposure to SDA members, since she only comes to the Sabbath service.

Sense of Forgiveness. All four adolescents gave similar descriptions of the feeling of forgiveness. As one of them said,

Hazel: When I sin, I feel heavy. I'm always angry. I shout at my brother . . . But after I pray, I feel lighter. I feel closer to God.

These adolescents are already sensitive to feelings of guilt and forgiveness. They can already "hear" their conscience bothering them, thus the "heavy" feeling as a result of sin. The reality of a forgiving God produces feelings of lightness after they have asked for forgiveness. They see prayer as a way of freeing themselves from the guilt of sin.

Readiness to Meet Jesus. To assess their general Christian lifestyle, I asked the adolescents if they were ready to meet Jesus, should He come tonight. Except for Susie, the girls reported that they were not ready to meet Him because of sins for which they had not yet asked for forgiveness. A typical answer was:

Cecilia: Ummm . . . I think in a range of ten, five only. I haven't confessed all my sins yet.

Resistance to Temptations. When asked how strong they could be in resisting temptations, the girls' answers varied according to their prayer habits and the commandments they follow. Jenny and Susie, who have been exposed to the Adventist lifestyle but have an average devotional life, gave negative answers.

Jenny: I don't think I can now stand against temptations on my own.

Susie: I think I still need the help of Jesus. On a scale of 10, I think 5 or 6.

Hazel, who is used to living in a mixed-religious environment and has a healthy devotional life, said

On a scale of 10, I think 10 because I already know what is right and what is wrong. My Mama doesn't know . . . I always pray alone in my room. I don't want them to see me . . .

It is possible that Hazel's lack of exposure to Adventist doctrines has lessened the limits in her lifestyle. It could be that she sets a lower standard for herself, and therefore is more satisfied with her performance. Yet, her prayerful life and her mother's close guidance could have contributed to her stronger resistance to temptations.

As a Catholic, Cecilia's behavior seems to be determined primarily by her parent's do's and don'ts. She does not have a healthy devotional life although she is studying in an Adventist school. She said:

Maybe I can resist temptations a little bit. In a range of 10, I think 7.

Faith Reflections

In order to determine how spiritual values are embedded in the minds of the adolescents, I showed them pictures that they could reflect on. I assumed that spirituality could be revealed through the insights that come directly from their own thinking processes. The following are the adolescents' response to the pictures I showed them, with the corresponding questions:

Picture 1 – Girl on a high, dark cliff

Question: If you are this girl, what might you be thinking about?

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Jenny | I'd be thinking about my future. Will I be saved? I must repent of my sins. |
| Susie | Why was I created? |
| Hazel | Will God accept me for what I am? I need to talk to Him in private. |
| Cecilia | I am thinking about what I will be in the future. |
-

The picture seemed to elicit deep thought. It is obvious that the three SDA adolescents were thinking more in spiritual terms than Cecilia. Thoughts about salvation, personal value as a created being, and God's acceptance of human beings occupied the minds of these adolescents. Cecilia's thoughts were more focused on personal accomplishments in the future. It is heartening to note that, in spite of the similar mental ability among them, Jenny, Susie, and Hazel gave more value to "higher thoughts" than to mere earthly goals in life.

Picture 2 – Praying adolescents**Question: What can you say about these young people?**

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Jenny | These young people may be close to God because they are praying. |
| Susie | These are very kind young people. |
| Hazel | These young people seem close to God because they are praying. They have unity because they pray in a circle. |
| Cecilia | They are not concentrating on their prayer. Some are smiling. |

This picture was meant to draw out general perceptions about church members and the act of worship or praying. Surprisingly, the three SDA adolescents gave positive reactions to the picture. They seemed to equate praying with being good. Only Cecilia was critical. The facial expressions of some people attracted her attention more than the act of praying.

Picture 3 – Scene in a Cemetery**Question: If you approached these people in the cemetery, what would you tell them?**

- | | |
|---------|---|
| Jenny | I will tell them not to worry because they will still see their loved ones later in heaven. |
| Susie | I will tell them not to be sad because God is with them. |
| Hazel | I will tell them to just pray. I know our loved ones are just near us. If they are in heaven, we must be happy, except if they are in hell. |
| Cecilia | I will ask them what could be the cause of their loved one's death. |

The beliefs these adolescents hold about the dead appear to be a function of their religious affiliation. Jenny and Susie were comforting, as they considered God's involvement in the affairs of men. Hazel's ideas were affected by her exposure to other religions, as evidenced by her mention of the dead being either in heaven or hell. Cecilia gave no spiritual meaning to the picture but only inquired about the cause of death.

Picture 4 – Very sick child**Question: How do you feel or what do you do when you see a child in this situation?**

- | | |
|-------|--|
| Jenny | I will pray for the child. |
| Susie | I will pray for the child. |
| Hazel | I will pray for the child. She needs help. |

| | |
|---------|-------------------|
| Cecilia | I pity the child. |
|---------|-------------------|

This picture was meant to determine what the girls would do when facing life's problems. Responses reflected the devotional life of the adolescents. Only Cecilia did not opt for prayer. Her reaction did not go beyond her feelings of pity.

Picture 5 – Jesus on the cross

Question: How do you feel when you see this picture of Jesus on the cross?

| | |
|---------|---|
| Jenny | Jesus died for me so I must be good always. |
| Susie | Jesus loves me very much, that's why He died for me. |
| Hazel | I feel hurt when I see Him on the cross. I can't understand why they had to do that to Him. He is indeed very kind because He saved us. |
| Cecilia | I'm sad because they hung Jesus on the cross. |

Reactions to Jesus' death on the cross showed that the three Adventist adolescents understood its meaning very well—that it was meant to save us because He loved us. Cecilia, on the other hand, did not go beyond the feeling level; she was sad.

Picture 6 – Fearful girl

Question – If you were this girl, what might you be afraid of?

| | |
|---------|----------------------------------|
| Jenny | Maybe she is afraid of the dark. |
| Susie | Maybe she did something wrong. |
| Hazel | Maybe she saw a ghost. |
| Cecilia | Maybe she is afraid of a ghost. |

This picture was meant to determine the possible fears of adolescents. Jenny and Susie gave justifiable fears such as darkness and punishment for wrongdoing. Hazel and Cecilia, on the other hand, feared ghosts, which are considered very real in religions outside the Seventh-day Adventist church.

It can be gleaned from the pictorial interpretations that the thought processes of adolescents are very much affected by their childhood religious practices and beliefs. The case of Hazel shows that lack of doctrinal knowledge results in a mixture of ideas from different religions. Though influenced to some extent by her family's religion, Cecilia is an example of poor spiritual perception due to a meager devotional life and a lack of church connectedness. This brings to the fore the importance of allowing children to experience religion in order to embed spiritual

values in their daily lives.

Messages

It was clear from my conversations with the four adolescents that there were at least three groups of people who primarily influenced their spiritual life. These were their parents, church leaders and members, and their teachers. I asked the girls to give some messages to these people on what they could do to better assist adolescents to be more spiritually stable Christians. Table 3 shows the messages for the parents.

Table 3
Messages to the Parents

| | |
|---------|--|
| Jenny | I want them to tell me more about my religion. We should have more frequent family worships. |
| Susie | I hope they will come with me to church every Sabbath. |
| Hazel | I will tell them that though our problems are too many, they should not forget God who is ready to help. They should hold on 'cause God is just there. They should not lose hope because God is our only hope. |
| Cecilia | They should always pray and go to church |

The messages reflect the problems experienced by these adolescents. Jenny has reported that her parents are too busy to have regular family worships. Susie's parents are no longer attending the church. Hazel's parents are having tight financial problems, no jobs, no house, etc. Cecilia's family does not have any devotional activity like family worships.

Table 4 shows the girls' messages for the church leaders and members.

Table 4
Messages to the Church

| | |
|-------|---|
| Jenny | I want them to use examples from our generation. I'm sick and tired of those old people in the Bible. Also, they should be models of kindness. |
| Susie | They should also greet me and shake hands with me. I don't have any other message for them. |
| Hazel | I want them to baptize me so that no longer be ashamed of participating in my Junior class. . . I want them to teach me more about God's teachings. I'm just this small, He's this big (Motions size). I will search for more knowledge from them |

that I may understand God.
Cecilia Pray for me. Give more messages about Jesus.

Having spent almost seven years in an Adventist school, it is striking to note that Jenny has grown tired of Bible characters. What she wants now are more modern models whom she can identify with. Susie reflects the church's seeming disregard of adolescents—who are usually regarded as too old to be fond of, yet too young to be heard. Hazel represents young people in non-SDA schools, who are thirsting for knowledge and, hence, need to be attended to by the church. Cecilia, on the other hand, represents those non-SDA students in Adventist schools who have grown critical of their religion due to exposure to Adventist doctrine.

Finally, Table 5 shows messages for the teachers are shown below.

Table 5
messages to the School Teachers

| | |
|---------|--|
| Jenny | Teach me how to make better decisions. |
| Susie | Just improve their teaching skills so they can inspire me. |
| Hazel | Nothing. She's very cranky. |
| Cecilia | Pray for me. |

Teachers are looked upon by Susie and Hazel as role models. They feel inspired to be good if the teachers teach properly and deal with them nicely. Jenny and Cecilia seem to look for some personal concern from their teachers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As mentioned in the beginning, spirituality is such a complex thing that an attempt to determine its extent in a person's life may prove difficult. These four cases can only give us glimpses of the spiritual world of children. While the convenience sample selected for this study is not generalizable to the entire population of young people in the Philippines, certain conclusions can be drawn regarding the way spirituality is shaped in adolescents.

The family remains the single most important influence in the spiritual development of an adolescent. Where there is weak parental spirituality, the children also revealed poor spiritual life. As we found out, a mother who transmitted her prayerful life to her daughter was successful in making her dependent on God's guidance. Shepherd (1997) contends:

Plainly, consistency is important. If the child is subjected to repeated inconsistencies between the words he hears and the experiences he undergoes, he will be confused; more than confused, wounded; more than

wounded, spiritually arrested. If the child hears words about truthfulness, love, forgiveness, yet finds himself in an atmosphere that contradicts all of this, then he is a spiritually disadvantaged child. Adults are disappointed when the person they trust acts in such a way as to contradict that person's word and therein violates the trust. Children, however, aren't disappointed; children are devastated. (para. 7)

It can be noted from the responses that schools can only go as far as transmitting religious ideas, but they can not do much on the development of a devotional life. School assignments were even reported to have prevented them from going to church on weekdays. The Bible class and baptismal classes appear to have the greatest value in bringing the children closer to God. Hill's (2002) study on developing spirituality in the classroom showed that student involvement in Bible classes contributed favorably to students' spiritual development.

The church appeared to have a poor influence on the adolescents. It was not clear whether it is because of the boring sermons and indifferent members or due to lack of church attendance by these adolescents. I do not suggest a cause and effect assertion on this. Rather, I would summarize their experience in three points:

1. Except for one, the girls do not feel a 'sense of community' in the church. In accordance with research (Parrott, 1995), the need for identity is gaining importance among these adolescents. Two girls reported that church members never showed interest in them. The other girl was attracted to participate through friends and hence attended the church only when friends were present. It follows that the girls want to identify with at least some church members to be more involved. Adolescents are still overlooked and treated as mere companions of adults. The exception to this rule in this study happened to also have less exposure to church members.

2. Adolescents can easily be touched by church sermons or messages; but they have become more critical of the speakers. Boring sermons were described as repetitive and the delivery was poor. They gave commendations to sermons about novel topics or with illustrative stories. Attendance in a Christian school may have exposed these adolescents to many topics in the Bible, hence the comment "same old story." One of them even suggested that modern models be used instead of the old Bible characters. Could it be that they are losing the connection between the Bible era and the present? Could it be that the Bible has become too remote in their daily experiences?

3. Poor church attendance is prevalent among the interviewed girls whose parents were also poor churchgoers. Adolescents still tend to come to church in the

company of parents. When parents do not go to church they tend not to go as well. When they do come to church and feel bored, they either do something else or go out of the church even when the parents are around.

Given these experiences, can we say that the church is losing its mission to these young people? It is not clear yet. Spirituality is not only measured by church attendance. It is important to dig deeper into the behavior and values of these young people. It is encouraging to see the depth of spiritual insights among the Adventist interviewees as compared to that of the non-Adventist. Concepts such as God's intervention in human affairs, forgiveness, salvation, and repentance easily came out of their thoughts without any preconditions. This is no reason yet to brag about Adventist children, though. These concepts are what Nye (2002) called "Christian language" which the children learn as a result of regular contact with religion. These children learn to imitate the spiritual life of adults rather than build on strong foundations of their own.

Another thing that can be observed among adolescents is that they start to think more deeply about whatever ideas they believe. Scholars agree that adolescents "rely more on rational thinking in their faith than on parental precepts" (Parrott 1995, para. 10). Although there were still some evidences of reliance on parental instruction, the girls usually took them only as one source of advice. They tended to explore and prove whether that advice was right. Once proven, then they believe. This is exemplified by their belief in prayer and obedience to God's commandments.

Adolescents have a strong sense of God's presence, especially during prayer. They all feel blessed, forgiven and report to having felt His presence as if He were just beside them. They also know when they are drifting far from Him and realize the need to repent. Feelings of guilt and conscience were mentioned by the girls whenever they commit sin.

It is clear from the preceding discussion that adolescents are still within the sphere of influence of the parents. They have not gone far, as far as control is concerned. To influence their spiritual life is not yet too late for any well-meaning guardian. It is, however, apparent that they are already starting to be critical of their parents and the church. Whatever spiritual conditions they are into are already taking shape in their lifestyle. This gives the task of attending to their spiritual needs a sense of urgency.

From this study, some recommendations can be made that I believe can be of help in realizing spiritual growth in adolescents. Inasmuch as these recommendations call for action, I will focus them on the three major nurturers of adolescent spirituality: parents, church, and school.

First, parents must consider the adolescent period as their last opportunity for controlling the steering wheel for their child's journey to spiritual maturity. Failure

to do this could be too late. This job is not that easy. It requires a transformation in the whole person. As Dawn (1999) suggests:

We who treasure children and want to nurture faith and faith-life in them, would often rather have a quick and easy miracle than the endless, frequently burdensome discipline (for ourselves and them) of genuine Christian training. But the long months of eating the same (spiritual) food over and over, of being extraordinarily careful and watchful and patient and diligent, of additional practices and ardent prayer, of resisting temptations and maintaining persistent self-control, of loving labor and sensitive safekeeping are not only necessities for the spiritual formation of the children; these nurturing disciplines on our part are also worth the efforts for our own sake (p. 80).

Secondly, the church should give adolescents a chance to participate in its programs and activities. Let them feel the warmth of fellowship and treat them just like the way they treat adults, extending to them the attention they need. Adolescence is the time of life when the child is experiencing the transition between childhood and adulthood. If they feel important, welcome and accepted they will remain in the church longer. Sermon delivery in the church must be carefully planned so as to motivate the adolescents to listen and reflect.

In all areas of spiritual life, what we need is total engagement of the child. Ashley (2002) suggests that this is an engagement of the mind, the emotions, and action. Adolescents must have both head and heart knowledge of God that will spur them to action—to be involved in finishing the work of God.

I cannot say that, when we have done our best, we can be assured of spiritually mature children. Adolescence is just the beginning of more challenges for our young people. What really causes them to go on straight forward or to be wayward later in life still needs to be studied. For a better perception of this journey, a longitudinal study could be done to examine what really transpires in the spiritual life of an individual, given his or her environment.

References

- Ashley, M. (2002). *Spirituality: right or wrong? An introduction to the conference on spiritual and moral development: Too much awe and wonder?* Held at the University of the West of England in October, 2002. Retrieved August 28, 2002, from <http://pathways.uwe.ac.uk/spiritual/moral/spirituality.asp>
- Dawn, M. J. (1999). "Until Christ is formed in you": Nurturing the spirituality of children. *Theology Today*, 56,(1), 73-85.
- Degelman, D., Mullen, P., & Mullen N. (1986). Development of abstract religious thinking: A comparison of Roman Catholic and Nazarene youth. *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 3, 44-49.
- Dillon, J. J. (2002). *Children's secret lives*. Retrieved October 4, 2002, from http://www.science-spirit.org/articles/articledetail.cfm?article_id=282
- Donahue, M.J., & Benson, P.L. (1995). Religion and the well being of adolescents. *Journal of Social Issues*, 51(2), 145-160.
- Fowler, J. W. (1981). *Stages of faith: The psychology of human development and the quest for meaning*. NY: Harper & Row.
- Goldman R. (1964). *Religious thinking from childhood to adolescence*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Hay, D. & Nye R. (1998). *The spirit of the child*. London: Harper-Collins.
- Harris, J. R. (1998). *The nurture assumption: Why children turn out the way they do*. Retrieved October 9, 2002, from <http://www.spiritualityprogram.com/research/nurture.html>
- Heller D. (1986). *The children's God*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hill, G. (2000). *Developing spirituality in secondary schools*. Nottingham: Farmington Fellows' Reports. Retrieved October 4, 2002, from http://www.farmington.ac.uk/documents/reports/phil_spir.html
- Hoge, D.R. & Petrillo, G.H. (1978). Determinants of church participation and attitudes among high-school youth. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 17, 139-154.
- Hyde, K.E. (1990). *Religion in childhood and adolescence*. Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press.

- Nye, R. (2002). *Children's spirituality?* U.K. Godly Play. Retrieved October 3, 2002, from http://www.godlyplay.org.uk/About/Childrens_Spirituality.htm
- Ozorak, E. (1989). Social and cognitive influences on the development of religious beliefs and commitment in adolescence. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 28, 448-463.
- Parrott III, L. (1995). *Adolescent spirituality, what can we expect?* Youth worker. Retrieved October 9, 2002, from http://www.youthspecialties.com/articles/topics/getting_results/adolescent.php?printIt=yes
- Piaget, J. (1969). *The psychology of the child*. New York: Basic Books.
- Psychology and Christianity Project (2001a). *Children's spirituality*. University of Cambridge. Retrieved September 4, 2002, from <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/pcp/>
- Psychology and Christianity Project (2001b). *The experimental investigation of religious cognition*. University of Cambridge. Retrieved September 4, 2002, from <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/pcp/>
- Ratcliffe, D. (1999). Exploring children's spiritual formation: Foundational issues. *Religious Education*, 94, (4), 468.
- Shaw, B. W. (1970). Religion and conceptual models of behavior. *British Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 9, 320-327.
- Shepherd, V. (1997). *Ages and stages in our spiritual development*. Retrieved August 28, 2002, from http://www.victorshepherd.on.ca/Sermons/ages_and_stages_in_our_spiritual_development.htm
- Stephens, L. D. (1996). *Your child's faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.
- Tamminen, K. (1991). *Religious development in childhood and youth*. Helsinki, Finland: Gummerus Kirjapaino Oy.
- Thompson R. & Randall, B. (1999). *Children's spiritual development*. Clemson University: Institute on Family and Neighborhood Life. Retrieved October 9, 2002, from http://virtual.clemson.edu/groups/ifnl/pdfs/Spiritual_development_fact_sheet.pdf
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Leni T. Casimiro
Course Coordinator, Division of Online Learning
Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies