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**FEATURE**

**Discipling Children in a Week of Prayer Setting:  
A Discourse Analysis**

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**Abstract.** *The week of prayer in schools is an avenue for nurturing discipleship. In order to be effective, speakers need to employ engaging strategies to connect to their audience and then the audience to the message, to open their heart to receive the gospel truth. This study analyzed children's experiences during weeks of prayer that used engaging strategies to present the Gospel. The research design used discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a qualitative research approach that analyzes human experience in written, observation, or recorded form (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002). Written notes of children to the week of prayer presenter served as the primary data. The study found that Bible stories, personal anecdotes, and humor are effective tools to connect to the message and thus to Christ. The study has implications for practice of Christian educators in general and those who are engaged in the discipleship of children for Jesus.*

**Keywords:** discipleship, week of prayer, children, sermons, discourse analysis

**Introduction**

The greatest mission ever given to Christ's followers is making disciples for Jesus Christ (Eims & Coleman, 2009; Geiger, Kelley, & Nation, 2012; Hull, 2014; Putman, 2014). Jesus said, "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19, NKJV). Numerous books have been written addressing the subject of discipleship. The writers of most of these books believe that discipleship is the life

of the church; without discipleship, a church fails its mission on earth (Bonhoeffer, 2015; Dever, 2016; Smallman, 2011; Wright, 2014).

Many different denominations in Christianity are based on the belief that making disciples for Jesus is the main focus of every Christian (Malphurs, 2009; Stott & Wright, 2015). Jesus's method of making disciples varied depending on the specific group that He ministered to. In line with the command of Jesus, the Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church gives priority to making disciples for the kingdom of heaven. However, the effort to disciple tends to focus more on adults and less on children. Children seem to be the most neglected members in the church. Most church programs only loosely or do not altogether consider the children (Dudley, 2010; Henderson, 2009; Richards, 2009).

Discipleship involves people of all age, children included. In fact, Jesus presented one of the greatest lessons in discipleship when He said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 19:14). Among the discipleship programs adopted by SDA schools is the week of prayer. It is a special time when children gather to hear the Word of God from a chosen speaker. Orton (2014) indicates that speaking to children is not an easy task. It is one that requires much preparation for it to be effective. Studies show that there is a significant relationship among catching attention, retention, and learning. Speakers need to employ special strategies to connect to their audience and then the audience to the message, to open their heart to receive the Gospel truth. No wonder Jesus as the Master Teacher and Preacher used different strategies to help His audience connect easily His with the Gospel truth (Drakeford, 1986; Simmons, 2015; Townend, 2016).

After a thorough study on the subject of children's discipleship, we—the researchers—found that even though much has been written on discipleship, very few of these writings focus on children's discipleship. Empirical research literature is also scanty in this area. This study, therefore, endeavored to fill the gap in the literature. It primarily sought to find practical strategies that can work for discipling children, particularly in a week of prayer setting.

### **Review of Literature**

On one occasion, Jesus was teaching about essential matters of the church. The subject was about marriage and family. It was at this point when Jesus was interrupted by little children. Some children were brought to Him while others walked to Him. It was a common practice in the time of Jesus for parents to bring their children to the teachers of the law for special blessing (Keener, 2014). When the disciples saw the children come to Jesus and mothers bring their little ones, however, the disciples tried to stop all of them. Children in the time of Jesus were not considered very important (Keener, 2014). The disciples thought that by preventing these children from coming to Jesus, they were saving His energy, but this act won them a rebuke from the Master Teacher (Mark 10:13-16).

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Jesus did not take children for granted in His mission of making disciples, and the church is to follow His footsteps. In most church programs, children are left out. In the divine service, there is little time allotted for the children. Having a children's story or homily and then putting the children aside for the rest of the divine service does not at all create a good impression in their hearts as young disciples (Holford, 1992). The church needs so much creativity if it is going to disciple the children. There should be a solution to the mistake made by the disciples in the days of Jesus when they ignored those whom Jesus considered as models for all who aimed for the Kingdom of Heaven.

One of the best ways of discipling children is introducing to them the life story of Jesus (Koh, 2015). When children fall in love with Jesus, there can be no limit to the work they can do for the Master (Koh, 2015). When Jesus was asked by His disciples as to who was the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, He called a little child into their midst:

Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck, and he were drowned in the depth of the sea. (Matt 18:1-6)

White (1940) recognizes the effectiveness of children if they are disciplined well. She said, "It is still true that children are the most susceptible to the teachings of the gospel; their hearts are open to divine influences, and strong to retain the lessons received" (White, 1940, p. 515). It is no surprise that in most evangelistic meetings, one can notice that children are always the first to be in the venue. In some evangelistic meetings, the biggest number of attendees are children. Yet, the message is focused on the adults, of which only a few attend. Additionally, when an appeal for baptism is made, children mostly respond positively.

What was it about the messages of Jesus that captured the attention of all audiences including the little children? What made the little children flock to Jesus amidst a discussion of topics that seemed hot at that time? If the prayer of Christians is "Lord teach us to pray" (Matt 6:9), then they should also ask the Lord to teach them how to preach to children in ways that these children could become interested and captivated by the message about Jesus. Christians can follow the excellent example set forth by the One whose messages attracted people of all ages.

Jesus is the greatest preacher this world has ever known (Barreca, 2017; Shahin, 2011). Aside from the fact that He preached the Gospel with passion, Jesus also always had a story to tell. Stories attracted the attention of His hearers, both young and old. The stories helped the audience connect easily to what He was preaching and teaching. If He did not use a parable, He used an illustration. One example is the story of the wise and the foolish builders. Jesus was seated in an

open space when he saw the houses that were built on a hill and those built in the valley.

He used the language of nature to convey the truth upon the minds of His listeners (Matt 7:24-27).

Jesus told stories that anybody could relate to. These stories drove the truth home to the hearts of the hearers. The stories were interesting and great reminders of the teachings of Jesus. Jesus's stories were mingled with humor. All who heard Him talk could not help but stop by to listen to His messages and hunger for more. Jesus took time to study His audience so He could address their specific needs in His sermons (Manners, 1998). Preaching sermons that can touch and change the hearts of people, most especially the little children, requires so much tact and commitment.

The process of discipling or growing like Jesus involves some steps. Habenicht (1990) suggested four important and practical steps for discipling children. These include (a) helping children know God, (b) helping them develop Christian characters, (c) leading them to accept the salvation that Christ offers, and (d) helping them make a commitment to an ongoing, lifetime relationship with God.

One of the best opportunities of discipling children is the week of prayer which is typically conducted once or twice a year in SDA schools. During such a time, children come together to hear about God for the whole week. Like adults, children's interest in the week of prayer is highly motivated by the strategies that speakers use to bring the message from the Lord. This study attempted to identify some of these strategies. The results of this study may help week-of-prayer speakers and pastors as they prepare to disciple children in schools through weeks of prayer. This study may also guide the SDA's Children's Ministries Department as they prepare materials to help children connect with Jesus.

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What kind of preacher personality are children attracted to?
2. What strategies help the children in building a relationship with Jesus in a week-of-prayer setting?

### **Methodology**

This empirical study used a qualitative paradigm in an attempt to discover strategies used by the presenter that help children connect well with Jesus and His teachings in a week-of-prayer setting. Qualitative research was seen as appropriate for this study as it helps understand the expressed views of participants using an inductive method of organizing and analyzing data (Creswell, 2013).

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that one of the purposes of qualitative research is to explore an issue. In this study, we set out to explore effective disciplining strategies through week-of-prayer sessions. Since qualitative research

uses an interpretative perspective, it takes into account the views of the researcher and the participants as co-creators of knowledge.

### **Research Design**

The specific research design employed in this study is discourse analysis. Discourse analysis is a design of qualitative research which analyzes patterns in a language (Jørgensen & Philips, 2002). It is one of several designs in qualitative research that takes human experiences in written, observation, and recorded form and analyzes them (Johnstone, 2018; Taylor, 2013). Discourse analysis is specifically “concerned with the investigation of language as it is actually used” (Griffin, 2007, p. 3). It considers various symbolic systems including verbal, visual and behavioral systems. According to Griffin (2007), since language expresses values and attitudes, discourse fits well as a research tool in this study.

### **Research Context**

The context of the study is the week of prayer sessions arranged by SDA schools in different parts of the Philippines. To maintain anonymity, the names and other details of the schools are not disclosed in this study. Three week-of-prayer sessions at different schools were used in this study. Each of the presentations was conducted in school auditoriums and lasted for 30 to 40 minutes. Students from preschool to senior high school were present in each session. Those attended numbered from 100 to 200 depending on the school size where the week of prayer was conducted.

### **Data Collection**

At the end of each week of prayer, children voluntarily shared written comments with the presenter, on slips of papers. These documents, although simple in format, provided valuable insights into children’s reactions to the presentations and served as the primary data for this study. In the present study, we used the written documents of participants to gain understanding of the issue. On average, a dozen notes were received at each site. Since one of us was also the presenter in each case, participant observation was possible by that researcher. Since the other researcher has also presented several children’s weeks of prayer, with similar experiences, collaboration in this study was considered appropriate.

### **Ethical Considerations**

This study used secondary data (the written comments of children) for analysis. Secondary data are those that exist prior to research use. Opinions of experts on ethical considerations in dealing with secondary data vary. The main issue of concern is the “amount of identifying information in it” (Tripathy, 2013, para. 1).

One way to go about it is to use codes to ensure anonymity. Removing names and any other identifying elements are ways to implement this anonymity. In such situations, the study may not require a full ERB review and the board “just needs to confirm that the data is actually anonymous” (Tripathy, 2013, para. 1).

Following the above-mentioned practice, the study was cleared through ERB. Written permission was also obtained from the respective schools to use the notes ensuring anonymity of the school and the children. The identities of the schools or the participants are not disclosed in this study. Pseudonyms are used to refer to the respondents.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using the inductive process proposed by Taba (1962). The analysis procedure consisted of three steps as follows: (a) Phase 1 (concept formation)—enumeration of the data, sorting the data, creating categories, and labeling the categories/themes; (b) Phase 2 (interpretation of data)—identification of critical relationships among concepts/themes formed, exploration of relationships, and making inferences about the data; and (c) Phase 3 (application of principles)—prediction of consequences and hypotheses.

Using the above procedure, data was assembled, read through, and patterns identified. Those statements with similar meanings were grouped to form categories. There were several written notes where statements could be separated into more than one category. Each statement, however, was used only for one category. Categories were combined to form three themes as related to the two research questions.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

Since the primary researcher happened to be the presenter of the weeks of prayer in this study, it was possible to attest the experiences portrayed by the children through their notes, firsthand. Since preaching is a skill that this researcher has been honing, weeks of prayer for children gave another dimension of experiences of preaching. The personality of the preacher-researcher helped in adjusting to the needs of children while preaching. The second researcher’s experience in teaching and preaching has provided another set of eyes to both corroborate and fine-tune this research.

### Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings analyzed from the feedback of children through their written notes. It further discusses the themes by connecting them to existing literature. Selected direct quotations from the participants' testimonies are also included.

#### **Preacher's Personality That the Children are Attracted to**

The reflections of the children testify that they are affected by the personality of the preacher. According to their reflections, being attracted to the personality of the preacher helps them to be open to the message that is being delivered. Their reflections also show that children can tell from the personality of the preacher whether he or she is sincere and has experienced the message being presented. According to Chapell (2018) and Keller (2015), the personality of the preacher contributes so much to the reception of the message by the listeners. Moreover, the listeners tend to access the preacher even before accessing his or her message.

**Kindness.** The children were thankful to the preacher for his expressions of kindness during preaching. In their notes, some children wrote, "Thank you for preaching during the week of prayer. I really liked your preaching, you were very kind." "In the week of prayer you really made us happy and you are kind." "You are such a nice and kind teacher. Thank you for all your preach [*sic*] to us. And we will not forget those stories of you, you told us thank you and keep on preaching in the name of Jesus Christ in heaven. You are so funny and always smiling." Kindness is an effective tool in that a teacher can use to pass on knowledge to the students ("3 Ways of Practicing kindness," 2019). It is a tool that enhances the learning process of the mind, bringing about concertation and putting stress under control.

A recent study conducted on the impact of kindness on learning, showed that students learning environment is enriched when the teacher incorporates kindness in his or her teaching strategy. The study further showed that kindness as a teaching tool affects the mind of a learner, by producing a special hormone responsible for retention. Kindness also promotes the general health of a learner (Shorberg-Turbeville, 2018). Another study conducted by Bryan, Mathur, and Sullivan (1996) showed that when students are in a positive mood, they are open to learning. This study was conducted by comparing the learning capacity of students in the different mood conditions.

Showing kindness and compassion was a powerful tool in the teaching ministry of Jesus. Crowds of men, women, and children were drawn to Jesus because of His unusual demonstration of kindness and compassion in His ministry. The results were overwhelming. Many became His disciples (Harris, 2007). In a week-of-prayer setting, children are sensitive to gestures of kindness and it casts an impact on how they receive the message being presented to them. Preachers and

teachers can touch the lives of children by being kind in the process of teaching or preaching to them. In the end, these children will become effective followers of Jesus.

**Cheerfulness.** The notes from the children showed that children are affected by how cheerful the preacher is when preaching to them. The notes further revealed that when the preacher is cheerful, then the children also learn what is being shared with cheerfulness. Moreover, to the children, according to their reflections, preaching to them with a cheerful spirit arouses their interest to listen to more sermons throughout the week.

Some children wrote, “You [the preacher] were always cheerful in preaching and made me laugh. I wish I can listen to your sermon once again one day.” “Thank you also for making us happy and laugh because laughing is the best medicine. Thank you for sharing your happiness in your life.” “I have been blessed by you and your faith. You are a joyful pastor.” “Keep on preaching in the name of Jesus. You are always smiling.”

According to Gaikwad (2004), children’s learning is enhanced by both taught and lived values. The interaction of the teacher or the preacher in a week of prayer setting leaves a great impression in the minds of the children. She refers to such teaching as the hidden curriculum. When one stands before children, there are unintentional expressions that attract the attention of the children. Such expressions, though unintentional, determine their learning mood as well. Nickerson, Diener, and Schwarz (2010) conducted a study on the impact of cheerfulness towards the success of students. In their study, they found that cheerfulness plays a great role towards the success of students.

### **Strategies That Help Children to Build a Relationship with Jesus**

In their relations, the children share how different strategies used by the preacher enriched their learning experiences. The reflections also reveal that strategies used by the preacher kept the children alert and attentive during the sermon sessions. Through the children’s reflections, three strategies emerged. They are (a) Bible stories, (b) personal experiences, and (c) humor.

**Bible stories.** The most recurring theme in the children’s feedback is the use of Bible stories. Children expressed their appreciation of enjoying the week because of stories presented in each sermon. These stories helped them stay awake during the preaching sessions and kept their interest in learning alive. For example, one participant wrote, “My favorite sermon is the first sermon. The power of Jesus. The woman who was sick for twelve years. When she touched the cloth of Jesus, she was never sick again.”

Another student wrote, “Am in grade five. I want to say that thank you for telling us nice stories in the Bible. I have learned many things from your message. The most memorable thing from your message was about the ‘five smooth stones’  
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that David used.” And most important, the student continued, “I will practice what you told us,” referring to the lessons learned in the story of David and Goliath.

Literature shows that preaching is an art that goes beyond just sharing information to helping the hearers apply the information in their daily lives. In order for application to happen, the speakers must be able to capture the attention and interest of their hearers. Onongha (2014) and Simmons (2015) share about the preaching power of Jesus, one that conveyed God’s truth through stories. Before Him was a multitude that included both children and adults. Jesus sought for ways to keep the attention of such a mixed multitude. Therefore, He took simple stories and shared them with His hearers to convey great truths. These were stories that could be easily remembered. Such stories were not for the sake of entertainment but for education. As a result, truths were planted in the minds of His hearers (Zuck, 1995).

Jesus connected with His listeners by using stories that were true to life and could easily help the listeners apply or relate to what He was saying. McCoy (2016) wrote that “from His stories, Jesus related to His listeners using everyday examples, referencing, for instance, fig trees, mustard seeds, fish, weddings, coinage, and the workforce” (p. 7).

The Bible is a book full of stories. In fact, God is the greatest storyteller. Children are attracted to Bible stories, most especially from the old testament (OT), because they are entertaining (Onongha, 2014). Children’s attention is captured by these stories and the learning is enhanced. This is perhaps one area where media has succeeded—in captivating the attention of the children. Onongha (2014) says that stories define our reality. How do we determine what is good and bad, right and wrong, friend or foe, person and nonperson? The stories we heard from childhood shaped our worldviews and determined for us what was an acceptable conduct and what was not.

Once upon a time, parents and the elderly in the community told stories to young children. Some stories were historical, others were mythical, while others were simply bedtime stories. The strange thing is that we have not forgotten those stories. Onongha (2014) mourns the everyday exposure of children to stories through popular media such as movies (Hollywood) and Internet. He challenges the Christians to counteract some of the undesirable values so powerfully transmitted through media. Story telling is seen as one way to go, along with other efforts that are being carried out by the church to keep the young and old on the path of good morality and sound beliefs.

In spite of the fact that not all presenters are skilled storytellers, especially to present to the level of children, they must develop the art of storytelling (George, 2017). Children may forget the lessons learned, but as long as stories and illustrations are connected to these lessons, children tend to remember them. In fact, even adults tend to recall stories told in their childhood by grandparents and

research has shown the impact of storytelling in adults (Eck, 2006). Being one of the earliest tools of education, stories are used to transmit beliefs, values and tradition. Teachers who use stories in their lessons help “to organize and remember information, and tie content together” (Caine & Caine, as cited in Hamilton & Weiss, 2005, p. 2). Stories also impact emotions. As philosopher Stephens asserts, “The head does not hear anything until the heart has listened. The heart knows today what the head will understand tomorrow” (as cited in Hamilton & Weiss, 2005, p. 2).

Evidence that stories indeed touched children’s heart during the week of prayer is seen in the following remarks of a child:

I became close with God and once again I thought about Jesus. I was afraid if I can’t go to heaven because I like this world too much. But after listening to your sermon, I felt that heaven is closer to me than before.

In 1988, technology was not so much developed as it is in the 21st century. Yet, even then, among the many obstacles in preaching were “the impact of television, motion pictures, videos, computer games, and other visual media” (Salmon, 1988, p. 21). It is challenging for a preacher to be heard in such a busy and noisy environment. The challenge is multiplied with a large number of children present, unless in classrooms. Such a situation seems to make preaching a dull and boring activity for the hearers, most especially children. However, there is a proven solution. Salmon (1988), through his years of preaching, observed that storytelling can be a good solution to such situations. He pointed out that storytelling can (a) “bring new life to a gospel message which is otherwise all too familiar;” (b) “help bridge the distance between the world view of the Bible and our own;” (c) “reduce or even eliminate the distance between the pulpit and the pew;” (d) “serve as a balancing corrective to an overemphasis on the rational argument by appealing to the emotions and the will. Stories can function effectively in a visual context because they enable people to see with the mind, imagination, and heart” (p. 22).

Stories having profound impact on the human mind can be explained by the fact that God is the greatest storyteller. His Word, the Bible, is a book full of stories. In fact, the Bible is a story of God’s love and redemption. Most of the lessons in the OT are explained through stories. One may understand the meaning of sin and its effect better through the story of Adam and Eve or Cain and Abel. In the New testament, Jesus also used stories most of the time during His ministry on earth. Jesus’ disciples wrote their messages in story form as well. Stories are directly connected to the human mind (McCoy, 2016; Salmon, 1988).

### **Personal Anecdotes**

Another theme that emerged from the children’s feedback was the use of anecdotes when preaching to them. Sharing of personal stories, be it to an audience of children or adults creates awareness of the one sharing; hence, leading to

strengthening the sense of trust among the listeners (Phillion, He, & Connelly, 2005). For example, one of the children wrote,

Thank you for teaching us new stories about God. I also like your old stories. My favorite story was the three wishes. I like how you met your wife and that you had baby girl and that you never give up. So now I know not to give up. The power of Jesus.

Still, in connection with the use of personal anecdotes, another student wrote,

I will miss you as a pastor telling wonderful stories and telling stories about your own experience . . . Thank you for sharing your happiness in your life. You told us about your story when before you married your wife and then after waiting for years you had a baby daughter. We are so happy to know that. It is good and wonderful to be in your chapel preaching because you are giving your best for us to learn everyday life lesson.

Children can relate better to stories that actually happened in the life of the narrator. For example, one of the children wrote, “You are really a great preacher, and thank you for telling us your story that are funny, cool, and scary. Thank you for teaching us more about God.” Another student wrote, “Thank you for the sermon every day. I have been blessed by you and your faith. . . you have amazing stories about your life.” Faith is something that students or hearers need to not only learn but also experience. They do this by hearing the life of a particular teacher who has been impacted by the lessons shared (Taylor, 2001).

The connection with the audience, most especially children, becomes even more intense or stronger when not just stories but personal stories are shared. These personal stories in most cases illustrate how Jesus has impacted or changed the speaker’s life. According to Chapell (2013), one cannot share effectively what he or she has not experienced. In order for the grace of Jesus to be shared effectively, it must first be experienced. In other words, there is a difference between what one says and what one does. People are more concerned with what one does, because indeed actions speak louder than words. It was after the once demon-possessed man, in Mark 5, experienced a transformation from his encounter with Jesus that he was able to share with others his own story. Many were led to Jesus through this man’s personal story. The text says,

However, Jesus did not permit him, but said to him, ‘Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.’ And he departed and began to proclaim in Decapolis all that Jesus had done for him; and all marveled. (Mark 5:19-20; NKJV)

Once speakers develop the skill of telling personal stories, they gain the way to the heart of the listeners. It is one thing to share what one has read or researched somewhere; it is another thing to share what one has experienced. Experiential stories tend to connect well with the listeners (Simmons, 2015). Well-presented

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personal stories have a significant effect as it captures the attention of the hearers. When one shares a story that is personal, he or she is communicating the personal value of what is being shared. This is what captures the emotions and attention of the hearers. People connect to meaningful personal stories.

Preaching in a week of prayer is not an easy task as it requires art, skill, and so much commitment. In addition to having careful preparation to be able to deliver a series of sermons well, the speakers need to be well informed about the audience so as to connect the messages with them (Chapel, 2013; Keller, 2015). Good preaching brings the hearers close to Jesus; hence, leading them to behold the beauty of following Jesus in everyday life. This is what discipleship is all about. Research conducted by Rosario, Aguillon, Opao, Opao, and Adil (2014) revealed that many church members were brought to Jesus through week-of-prayer programs when they were still young students in SDA schools. This fact shows the significance of taking the weeks of prayer seriously as this may be the only opportunity where some children might ever get to commit their lives to Jesus.

Rosario et al. (2014) further indicate that some young people find today's sermons boring and not relevant. The bottom line is that these sermons do not help young people connect or know more about Jesus. Jesus' method of preaching and connecting with the audience is still relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for effective preaching. Chapell (2013) and Frymire (2006) emphasize the importance of the power of using stories, illustrations, and anecdotes, in this age when media seems to set the standard to which people's attention, especially the children, depend.

Teachers who use personal anecdotes in teaching are doing well to enhance content learning as well as value formation. Weeks of prayer may be considered an out-of-class activity, or informal curriculum. However, the informal curriculum in schools is "a valuable part of the overall curriculum . . . . The real-life nature of these learning experiences is often more impressive to the minds of the learners and can have a lasting impact" (Gaikwad, 2004, pp. 9, 10).

### **Humor**

Another theme that emerged from the feedback of the children was the use of humor in the sermon. For example, one of the children wrote, "Thank you for teaching us the good things that God did. I listened to you very well because it is so funny. From now on I will follow my Jesus. Please remember me." Another wrote, "Thank you for those funny stories, I really want you to stay. Your stories really did tell me a lot about Jesus, and I also learned to trust Jesus more." According to Drakeford (1986), there is a connection between laughter, learning, and attention. Holding people's attention is very challenging in an environment where technology dominates.

There is psychological proof that starting a sermon with a funny story induces a hormone in the human brain that is responsible for learning. First of all,

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humorous stories shared by preachers capture the attention of the listeners. In fact, it is a good strategy to insert humorous stories in the course of preaching (Drakeford, 1986). The following comments of the children about the week of prayer show how they learned from funny stories.

Thank you for teaching us many lessons. We liked it and also some act you made was funny. So, next time I play football I will remember you so that if I get hurt I will call my mom to help. This is what I learned, that calling my mom to help is like calling to Jesus.

Thank you for the inspiring story and funny stories you tell us. Also about Jesus love. I learned to be good girl to my parents and older people. I will never forget your funny stories, memorable stories.

Another student wrote, "You told funny stories and made me laugh. We thank you for your teaching." Another said, "Thank you also for making us happy and lough [*sic*] cause laughing is the best medicine." Still, another student wrote, "Thank you for preparing some stories that were funny. I have learnt so much lessons from you that helps me smile."

Humor creates an environment of response and engagement from the audience. The tension that lies between the hearers and the presenter is easily broken by simple humor. Be it in the classroom or church setting, humor creates an atmosphere of friendliness (Jeder, 2015; McCoy, 2016). In fact, one of the students shared, "I really liked your preaching. You are very kind and humorous. My favorite one was about the five stones; courage, confidence, preparation, trust, and victory. I will remember all of your messages and put them into practice".

Valuable insights were gleaned from the experiences of presenting in children's weeks of prayer. Though challenging, presentations can be made engaging and interesting by using Bible stories, personal anecdotes and humor. From observations of children during weeks of prayer, children's interest is captured by a physically active presenter. Body language through gestures, facial expressions, and walking around on the stage can enhance children's attention. Because children's attention span is shorter than that of adults, the presentations should be relatively short. These observations support sound pedagogical practices in the learning situations where children are involved.

### **Conclusion**

This study on discipling children through weeks of prayer has provided insights on attributes of presentations that attract children and strategies that enhance learning. The attributes and strategies can be summed up in three elements: (a) Bible stories, (b) personal anecdotes, and (c) humor. Living in times where social media and all forms of entertainment have become the norm of the day, ways must be devised for the Gospel to be presented in attractive ways to those who hear it. This is important, most specially for the children who, in most

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cases, are ignored. Consequently, children fail to connect to sermons preached. Presenters need to spend much time in prayer, seeking guidance from the Holy Spirit on how to deliver effectively the message to the little ones. This study revealed that Bible stories, personal anecdotes, and humor are effective ways of connecting with the children in a week of prayer. In various contexts of children's learning—home, classrooms, informal learning situations—these elements can enhance children's interest in learning, thus paving the way for discipleship.

### **Recommendations**

This study provides recommendations for those engaged in discipling children. Week of prayer presenters are encouraged to have (a) thorough preparation, (b) understanding the psychology of children's learning, (c) use of creative presentations, and (d) short presentations. When children's interest is aroused, they learn easily and remember the lessons they heard. The study also has implications for practice in Christian classrooms. The presentation techniques identified in this study can also be recommended to teachers who minister to and help children to follow Jesus. Leaders of children's ministries may include the elements in providing the curriculum for disciplining children. The result is that these young ones can fall in love with Jesus, hence become His disciples. This should be the goal of every week of prayer, every lesson in a school, and children's ministry.

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