

BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE THROUGH CHILDREN'S CHAPEL:
A WEEKDAY PRAYER AND BLESSING EXPERIENCE
FOR PRESCHOOLERS

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ABSTRACT

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by

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This study established that a blessing based, prayer centered weekly worship experience with day preschool children, at Memorial Presbyterian Preschool, Xenia, Ohio had laudatory benefits for spiritual attitudes and practices of children, teachers and parents. The multi-dimensional qualitative research process was grounded in solid understandings gleaned from within the Christian tradition with reference to theological, biblical, historical and psychological disciplines. Basic assumptions examined included spirituality of children, blessing, holiness, worship, prayer, community, Holy Listening and Sabbath. The research data was gathered from children, through observations, artwork and writing exercises, and through written and oral interviews with teachers, parents and observers.

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Heartfelt thanks goes to the Memorial Presbyterian Preschool and Context Associates for sharing the richness of their experiences with Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture; to Professional Associates, Mentors and Colleagues in the United Theological Seminary doctoral program for support, wisdom and advice freely shared, as this document was developed; to family and friends for their love and sacrifices along the way.

DEDICATION

This document is dedicated to young children who present adults with the clearest possible exhibition of the longed for Kingdom of God.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Maribelle looked around her as she perched high in the choir loft at Memorial United Presbyterian Church. Way down below was the wide open red carpet of the Chancel. Mrs. Scott played the organ grandly, stopping often to talk to the four and five year olds about the sounds coming from behind Maribelle's head. Quietly, the child stood up and walked over to her Chapel time leader. "Come, Ms Jackie, come!" She tugged on the adult's hand, drawing her from her seat and down the steps to the Chancel. There Maribelle, caught up in the presence of the Holy Spirit and her exuberance for life, began to dance, leading the way for her teacher.

The story above is one of many sprinkled throughout this paper. It shares with the reader an act of grace offered by a child to an adult. It provides a window into what happens with young children when they are given encouragement to sustain their inborn connection with the God who created each of them. It offers an opportunity for adults to look at children in new ways, to begin to understand the implicit power of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and the Act of Ministry which is Children's Chapel.

This Act of Ministry at Memorial United Presbyterian Church, Xenia, Ohio, began accidentally, as the writer sought to find ways to increase the number of families with young children who were active on Sundays. A high percentage of the congregation's families participated in the church's weekday educational program, Memorial Preschool. Most of these children were not regular attendees at Sunday education or worship. Parents had been known to say, "My child is getting his Christian Education in preschool. It is just too hard to get to church on Sunday."

Solutions were sought therefore to a two-fold problem—the children of the congregation needed education in the faith, which they were not getting in the preschool and it was desirable that they become comfortable in the community’s worship space, so they might be more likely to appear for Sunday worship. Therefore, the writer, who was the church Educator at the time, proposed a Children’s Chapel Time for the day preschool classes, modeled upon Berryman and Stewart’s, *Young Children in Worship*,¹ which would take place in the church sanctuary. Liturgy was written, songs and Bible stories and a closing blessing chosen.

The children loved coming to Chapel time. It quickly became clear that what they desired, even yearned for, was prayer time, for sharing and singing and listening to one another, as well as to receive an affirmation of God’s presence in their lives. A Bible story segment was moved back into the classrooms so more time could be given in Chapel to sharing and praying. In the early years of the program, the young ones had their hands waving much of Chapel time, excitedly waiting to tell their joys and concerns, those things which made them “happy, or mad or sad or angry or scared.” In order to alleviate the possible frustration of waiting and waiting for a turn and to offer the more introverted children an opportunity to speak, a Sharing Lamb, a small soft, stuffed lamb, was added to the sharing time. The lamb was passed around the gathered circle of children and the child who had the lamb was able to speak, without interruption, while the rest of the group, and God, listened. The movement through the elements of Chapel Time became increasingly calm and peaceful, children grew more and more patient, joys

¹ In the material, as cited here, the introduction to and “living with” Bible stories is essential. Sonya Stewart and Jerome Berryman, *Young Children in Worship* (Louisville: Westminster Jon Knox Press, 1990).

and concerns were shared as children and teachers offered these to God in prayer. The Act of Ministry had been conceived.

The Children's Chapel Time program, which was researched for this paper, was predicated upon the following particular understanding of children: Children are born spiritual beings, connected with God. Acknowledging this and encouraging its continuing development is a central task of families, the faith community and the church. In today's American culture, both secular and religious, the nurture of spirituality usually takes a back seat to many other things, if its importance is acknowledged at all. When spiritual nurture and formation happen well, the presence of children in a congregation bring freshness to the life of a community where they are teachers as well as learners on the journey of faith.

In order for children to become an essential part of the life of faith communities, they need to be valued for what they bring, at whatever age they are. Children must be welcomed not just as the future of the church, but as integral to the church. It may matter less how children's programs are set up in any congregation, than that the children are appreciated as people possessing innate spiritual strength, with capacities to become more and more the beings God has in mind for each. This means that congregations must look at the spiritual nurture they offer children and their families, from the beginning of each child's life.

Joyce Ann Mercer challenges the most current practices of Christian Education, in her book, *Welcoming Children*. She offers a compelling assessment of the practices of many American Christian churches today, criticizing the "reduction of Christian education to instructional downloading of moralistic sound bites delivered to children

through entertainment-oriented styles of teaching in a context sequestered from the practices of the wider community of faith.”² Mercer proposes instead, that Christian education should be formation into an out of the ordinary identity, which requires the “participation in the church as a ‘community of practice’ that seeks to walk in the ways of Jesus and organizes its life and practices around the central symbol of the kin-dom of God, with its reordering of power and its transforming commitment to an alternative way of life.”³

In order for this radical reordering of the priorities of congregations to take place, the spiritual nature of the child must be both recognized and cherished. Children need to be given a myriad of opportunities to worship and pray, share and care, in a calm and relaxed atmosphere, where real listening takes place. This Holy Listening acknowledges the presence of God and importance of children (and adults) listening to each other because they care for each other. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture offers a context out of which these opportunities can flourish.

This writer’s work with the children’s Chapel Time concentrated upon reclaiming an understanding of the holiness of children (and therefore, of all people), through foundational work and studying the Chapel Time program itself, in order to come to new understandings about what was occurring in this spiritual nurture experience.

In Chapter One, the author tells some of her own story and how it provided the fruitful ground out of which grew the Act of Ministry. She shares ways her faith journey

² Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (Atlanta: Chalice Press, 2005), 163.

³ *Ibid.*, 165.

led to Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture as a path for bringing into a coherent whole the myriad means by which her call to ministry had been lived out over the years.

Chapter Two is a broad ranging review of recently published materials relating to the pillars upon which the Act of Ministry is built. Writers include those who have recently ventured into the field of child theology and some who are studying the spirituality of children, through the lens of mainline Christianity. Historians and other scholars of theology and the Bible are also noted. The field is suddenly ripe with material upon which to build solid understandings of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and how this kind of nurture can become an effective Children's Chapel program.

Chapter Three encompasses biblical, historical and theological foundations for the pillars of the Act of Ministry. Within the foundations section are found places in the tradition of Western Christianity where children could comfortably be included in these pillars: spirituality, holiness, Sabbath, Christian community, worship and prayer, listening and blessing.

Chapter Four shares the methodology used in this Act of Ministry. It gives reasons for using qualitative research as the mode of research best able to uncover data relating to the author's hypothesis that children's spiritual growth can be effectively nurtured if they are carefully prepared for and regularly offered a chapel time experience which embraces community, Sabbath-living, liturgy, sharing and listening, prayer and blessing.

Chapter Five explains the research process and shares some of the data collected. This was gathered from children, teachers and parents using a variety of age appropriate

methods and by taking field notes during many periods of observation of the Children's Chapel Time itself.

In Chapter Six, the author explores the possibilities and challenges which grow out of the interpretations drawn from researching the Act of Ministry, which is Children's Chapel time. Summary conclusions will be suggested. In addition, this chapter will include personal reflections upon opportunities within the institutional church to use Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture in ways which enrich not just the lives of young children, but that of whole congregations.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS: MEMORIAL PRESBYTERIAN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN'S CHAPEL

“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.”
(Gen. 1:31, New Revised Standard Version [NRSV])¹

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them;
and the disciples spoke sternly to them.

But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them,

‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them;

for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.

Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God

as a little child will never enter it.’

And he took them up in his arms,

laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”

(Mark 10:13–16)

Maliah, her curly black hair in two tight ponytails and Josiah, long khaki shorts topped by a racing t-shirt, sat “crisscross applesauce” on either side of Mrs. Beam, the Chapel Time leader. They were two of the sixteen bright-eyed children in the three year old class, who came “hip to lip” from their busy classroom in Memorial Preschool. Their weekly Chapel time was about to begin on the red carpeted floor of the sanctuary, in the thirty year-old, brick colonial style building, which housed Memorial United Presbyterian Church, the school’s host church.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

The author watched the children sit with full childish confidence, encircling a small worship center, waiting for what would come next—the lighting of the Children’s Candle. She was moved by the power of that small light, the liturgy of welcome, the lamb which indicated who was to share, the prayers, songs and blessings. Each week the children anticipated their visit to Children’s Chapel, settling easily into the worshipful time, welcoming the ritual, learning the songs, sharing their joys and concerns and listening closely to those of their peers and teachers. They prayed freely and waited patiently for their turn to receive God’s blessing from the Chapel Leader. This experiment in Christian Education and Spiritual Formation deeply touched the author and the other adults who experienced Children’s Chapel.

The author wondered in what subtle ways Children’s Chapel influenced each child’s spiritual growth and the culture of the school itself. How did this carefully structured time with God and each other encourage and deepen the participants’ connections with God? In what ways might this program support the children when they were challenged or hurting? What might life have been like, she speculated, if her own childhood had included such a time of nurture?

Born into a family with emotionally distant adults and subjected to sexual abuse, she grew up fearful, unable to say “no,” desperate to please. Dissociation became a remarkably effective way of coping, so she is left with few memories of early life. Her brother commented once, that he didn’t remember the author living in his house, though he was born when she was seven. At the same time, she was healthy in many respects—bright, inquisitive, and personable, trusted by neighbors from the age of twelve with the care of their children.

Her mother was diagnosed with bipolar disease late in life, though she spent her first time in a psychiatric hospital after the birth of her fifth child. Her mother's mother was controlling, critical, cruel (in the nicest possible way), and very pious. An unhealthy enmeshment of relationships was typical of the family, with one sister feeling for many years that her life would end if her mother's did. A much loved father only became accessible toward the end of his life, when the writer's mother finally began to exhibit clearly psychotic behavior. The family situation in which the author grew up was not unlike that of a home with alcoholic parents.

Strength was a characteristic though, of many of the author's family members; some gave up along the way, only to pull themselves together later in life. Her father, a member of the "greatest generation," kept his stories, his worries and joys to himself, soldiering on like he had been taught. Her maternal grandmother and mother were very strong women, who, while handicapped by mental illness, did, at times, in their own ways, live useful, helpful lives. Where, she asked, in the midst of a family structure which included psychosis and depression, did that strength come from? Was it only a function of genes or were other forces at work? A common factor in her biological family was religious commitment, which while primarily literalistic and fundamentalist, was also devout and piously prayerful.

Church was a sanctuary of peace from the time she was five. The actual sanctuary through her earliest years was where the author's lay pastor father preached each Sunday. Cavernous in her young eyes, yet also inviting and warm and safe, it had a congregation of eleven or twelve. The Episcopal liturgy was a comfort, as was the soaring music, even when she was not sitting beside the organist. One thing the author knew about her daddy,

as distant as he was in his relationship with her, was that his was a deep and abiding faith, into which he, in some mysterious way, welcomed her. God was forever and always present in that place.

After reaching adulthood, motivated by the parenting of four sons, schooling in early childhood development and elementary education, and nurtured through pastoral counseling and trusted friends, she came to recognize her own strength, God's indwelling. This allowed her to begin to confidently participate in God's ongoing work of creation in and through her own life, a life ultimately belonging to and with God.

The events and choices, the people who both impeded and accompanied her through life, had prepared the author for holy opportunities inherent in providing Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and in particular, for leading Children's Chapel time. Work and lifestyle decisions made from early in her adolescence culminated in seminary concentrations on the nurture and education of children and youth. The author heard a new call to provide children from their earliest years, and those who cared for them, with relationships, nurture and training which could proffer that of which she had received too little during her own growing up: security, trust and responsible intimacy.

In 2000, while in a pastoral counseling class, the instructor played a song which had been important to the psychological and spiritual growth of a student at Fuller Seminary in California. "How Could Anyone," written by Libby Roderick, was sung by Shaina Noll and included these words:

How could anyone ever tell you you were anything less than
beautiful . . .
how could anyone ever tell you you were less than whole . . .
how could anyone fail to notice that your loving is a miracle . . .
how deeply you're connected to my soul . . .

The music opened a floodgate of feelings that eventually enabled the writer to make sense of much that had been locked inside for so very long. Each of her seminary years brought increasing clarity to the call. Academic, emotional, developmental, psychological, and spiritual knowledge she had been gaining over the years, were becoming integrated in new ways, a coherent whole was emerging.

Though a fulltime student at United Theological Seminary, she was also serving as Christian Educator and pastoral caregiver for a church. While in that position she was able to extend a welcome to all of God's children, and exhibit acceptance for each person as valued within the body of Christ, regardless of age, gender, race, economic situation or other condition. Memorial United Presbyterian Church afforded her the opportunity to lead a nurture and educational ministry for the entire community. She offered sanctuary, safety, love and nourishment to all who were part of the programs of the congregation.

Seminary students' use of Sonya Stewart's and Jerome Berryman's *Young Children in Worship* materials affirmed her own work teaching Bible stories in the context of worship, confirmed the importance of spending *time* with the scriptures even with very young children and of framing teaching in liturgy and worship. Rigorous dialogue through directed study and in Christian Education classes about ways education occurred in the congregation, what comprised and was the end point of Christian Education, and the importance of modeling Jesus, also impacted her daily work in the church. The experiences during this time were fitting her to fulfill good purposes—working with God, to be an exhibition of the Kingdom of God, through what became this Ministry Focus, this Act of Ministry—offering Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture through Children's Chapel.

The passion in her ministries, in recent years, became focused more and more upon the children, in particular those three, four and five year olds at Memorial Presbyterian Preschool. Beginning early in 2001 through 2002, two ministries were launched which led to this time and this project.

The Session at Memorial Church approved, as part of the Christian Education program of the church, *The Blessing Center*, affiliated with *First Steps Spirituality Center* in Colorado. The ministries of the Center included: Children's Chapel, a Baby Prayer Blanket and Booklet ministry, Prayer Shawls for adults needing comfort and nurture, other tangible prayer items offered as reminders of God's presence for older children, teens and adults, a Lamb Ministry for children undergoing difficult transitions, Holy Listening with stones, lambs and prayer beads as nurture tools, and provision of training in these ministries through Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture classes, for people in Ohio and surrounding states.

A Children's Chapel program had begun earlier, in January 2001, the culmination of conversations about young children and Christian Education in the church, over more than a year. Family attendance at worship was dropping and therefore, fewer and fewer children were being incorporated into the life, witness and education of the congregation. The Director of the day Preschool, the church Christian Education Committee and the Preschool Board of Directors agreed to an experimental approach to Christian Education in the form of a weekly Children's Chapel Program. Each preschool class would experience a basic liturgical ritual in the church sanctuary, learn simple songs of the faith, be introduced to a Bible story and be taught to pray. All this would be in the form recommended by Berryman and Stewart in *Young Children in Worship*. As such it would

include a quiet, meditative beginning and blessing as closing, in which “a good word” would be said to each child, as he or she was dismissed by name.

While all *The Blessing Center* ministries had a profound effect upon those with whom the ministry took place, it was Children’s Chapel, which had the most broad-ranging results. Begun to provide children with an experience of worship, some exposure to Bible stories and hopefully to increase family worship attendance at Memorial Presbyterian Church, Children’s Chapel time impacted the entire preschool, in the way people lived with each other and in ways adults taught. It deepened the faith life of teachers, helped families discover a family based spirituality, and most encouragingly, it nourished the spiritual growth of the children in the school.

Chapel began as noted above, but quickly changed. While the author was leading Chapel Time and at the same time deepening her conception of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, it was the children who propelled the shift. They wanted to share their joys and concerns, to listen to each other. They deeply yearned to pray and receive God’s blessings. Therefore, Bible stories were moved into the classes, as long as half hour segments for Chapel were carved out of busy daily schedules, teachers learned to carefully prepare the children for their time in Chapel, Chapel Helpers and Spiritual Nurture Baskets became a part of each classroom and the use of tangible nurture items such as Calming Feathers and Prayer Beads became integral to the nurture and routine of each group of children.

The author’s decision to study Children’s Chapel became possible when she was no longer leading the program. For then she was able to step back, to observe the children and their reactions, to explore the fullness of spiritual nurture taking place in the

preschool, and to consider the particular implications of the ways Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture impacted Chapel time, as well as the school itself. These words of Emily Dickinson offered a promise of richness to be revealed by slowly, closely and carefully listening to the children; to being present with them without distraction.

It was given to me by the Gods—
When I was a little Girl—
They give us Presents most—
you know—
When we are new—
and small.

This school year, Memorial Preschool had a full enrollment of eighty-five three to five year old children. The school is a busy and happy place, which is visible when one walks in the doorway from either end of the Preschool hall. Each morning is spent in much the same way, children are greeted warmly by their teachers and then play until all have arrived. The classes gather for circle time soon after this, to welcome the day and each other. Following circle, boys and girls work and play at various interest centers, while teachers meet with individuals and small groups of students. Music, art, science and religious education are integrated into the daily curriculum.

During the morning there is snack and prayer time, which includes, but goes beyond, a standard rote grace or blessing prayer. A student offers the prayer, beginning by using a set of large Prayer Beads, which are pulled as the child praying lists things for which he or she is thankful. Then the food and time together are blessed.

At another circle time later in the morning, the children are read to and everyone reviews the day's activities. Special events, such as a visit from the fire department, are common, as are whole school activities, including Harvest Festival and Christmas Parties for Jesus, Pancakes with Daddy and Mother's Day Tea.

During transitions and when the room gets too noisy, it is likely that the week's Chapel Helper will be seen with the Calming Feathers, brushing other students' arms, in a quieting fashion. A hurt or upset child may go to a solitary place, alone or with an adult (sometimes with another child), and hold the classroom lamb, in order to have space to become peaceful again.

Once a week, each class goes to Children's Chapel in the church sanctuary. Before Chapel, at circle time in the classroom, teachers prepare the children for this time of praying and listening, sharing and blessings. Religious Education, beyond preparation for and Chapel Time, infuses the school's culture. Materials in Appendix C detail the fullness of the school's Religious Education program.

Memorial Preschool has developed such an excellent reputation that advertising is not necessary. Most pupils come as siblings or other relatives or hear of the school from satisfied families already in the program. Students are drawn primarily from Beavercreek and Xenia, with a smattering of children from other communities within a twenty mile range. Most are middle-class, with scheduling flexibility and/or extended support available to deal with midday dismissal. A few spaces are held for social service agency referrals of children in particular need.

Family adherence to Christianity is narrowly diverse. There are some parents who were raised in Christian households, but now label themselves agnostic or atheists. Others attend literalist, fundamentalist or evangelical churches. Mainline denominations are well represented. Nearly a third of the children are Roman Catholic. While there have been Jewish children in the school, the faith background of students and staff in the 2006–2007 school year was either Christian or non-religious. Racially, the school is mostly

Caucasian. A few Asian families have been a part of the school and this year's school population had three African-American students.

The preschool employs ten staff members, including the Director and her Assistant who have been with the school since its founding in 1995. Frequently lauded as one of the best preschools in the state, it fully meets State of Ohio licensing requirements. The Director has remained dedicated to maintaining the school's half days operation, for her primary commitments are as Lead Teacher and to continuing to develop the school as a mainline model for an explicitly faith-based Preschool. A move into afternoon classes would mean a change from her role as Director-Teacher, an added strain on the physical environment and an increasing complexity, which could negatively impact the current blessing-based culture of the school. The command of the Deuteronomist is heeded by the Preschool in all aspects of its work with children and families:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. (Deut. 6:4–7)

The school, a Christian Education program of the church, uses all the rooms in the building's west wing, sharing classrooms with other church education programs. Until 1999, it had minimal contact with the congregation's elder and pastoral leadership. The church's Christian Educator was the primary point of contact, serving as advisor to and supervisor of the Preschool Director and being the liaison between the church Session and school. That year, at the urging of the Educator and the Preschool Director, the Christian Education Committee and the Preschool Advisory Board looked seriously at the numbers of day preschoolers, the children of members who were pupils but did not attend

on Sunday, and assessed the theology related to its understanding of the Preschool as a part of Memorial Church. All involved agreed that the school should be a part of the religious education programs of the church.

Key people talked for six months about the possibility of including carefully planned and explicit Christian Education in the Preschool. It was a serendipitous time, or some may say, a movement of the Spirit, for when the church updated classroom spaces, the Director's office became part of "Temple School" for Sunday Christian Education. This room had been painted as a sun-dried block house of Jesus' time and the Director's office became the "holy of holies" curtained space. Every time parents met with the staff or first visited, they were ushered into a beautifully rendered Christian education space. At the time, while the grace and love of God and Jesus' high valuing of children were implicit in the school's operation, there was little overt Christian education taking place. But because of the biblical atmosphere of the remodeled area, families were immediately brought into a religious space, which had an impact upon the school. To quote John Bell, "No matter what or how much you profess in conviction, the architecture of the space will always speak more loudly. Architecture will always win."²

The Preschool Director embraced the wisdom of this new approach, though she had neither the training nor the time to plan the school's Christian Education component. The children were already saying a grace at snack and learning religious songs and Bible stories at Christmas and Easter. The church Educator began to research possibilities. It became clear that there were, and are, two primary types of day preschools operating in

² John Bell, *Iona Community*. Quoted in Lisa Hess, *Showers Lectures* (Dayton: United Theological Seminary, 2004).

Christian churches. One focuses upon child evangelism and sees as its primary mission bringing children to Christ. The other, most likely to be housed within a mainline church, is the school which uses church space to serve children, with the church making that possible, through donated or reduced fee space. There is seldom much interaction between the school and church and usually little to no involvement by the church in the curriculum, support of staff or supervision of the school. These preschools rarely include much, if any, spiritual formation in their educational plans.

Memorial Preschool began a pioneering effort to incorporate careful and explicit spiritual nurture and Christian Education into its day-to-day curriculum, which has culminated in the current spiritually infused culture of the preschool, revolving around Children's Chapel.

The community of Xenia, Ohio has a rich history, including being a stop on the Underground Railroad. Over the years, Xenia, the county seat, has seen little housing growth; what there is has been among the least expensive in the county. The city schools serve neighboring communities, including Wilberforce, the home of two historically African-American schools of higher education, Wilberforce and Central State Universities. In the last 10 years, as private school education has become increasingly popular, the largest private system in the Miami Valley, Dayton Christian Schools, has opened a school for children in Kindergarten through 12th grades, in Xenia. There are at least a half-dozen other Christian schools within the city limits. The community has large populations of Baptists, members of churches of Christ, Pentecostals and others whose religious affiliation is conservative and/or fundamentalist. Xenia is the home of Legacy

Ministries International, a prosperous evangelical consortium of schools, mission organizations and social services.

The fact that this specific Children's Chapel amidst a spiritually nurturing, child-centered preschool thrives in this cultural milieu is clearly a gift of the Holy Spirit and presents an opportunity for other mainline churches to learn how to offer this kind of Christian Education, beginning in the earliest years of a child's life. Memorial Preschool is a pioneer in integrating religious with secular education, from a mainline church perspective. It has committed leadership and parents, whether they attend Memorial or not, whether their faith tradition parallels the church's or not, who value the religious education program of the school and the spiritual nurture being offered their children.

Children's Chapel

Each week, as many as twenty young children, after preparation for Chapel time in their classroom, enter the sanctuary quietly to sit in a circle, pass a Holy Listening Lamb to one another, share joys and concerns, pray for and with each other, and be offered God's Blessings. Leadership is provided by the Chapel time leader, assisted by the teachers in each class. Adults sometimes weep when taken by the hand, looked in the eye, called by name and told, "God created you, God loves you, God blesses you, God is with you." Young children understand. Adults enjoy their blessing balm, but children are delighted with it and can be seen sniffing the scent, looking at its sparkle, saying, "See!" to a nearby companion.

Experiencing the compassion and prayerfulness of the children is to encounter holiness. Boys and girls pray for each other without prompting by adults. There are times

in which they ask God to be with those they do not even know. They are comforted by being told they can give God the things that make them mad or sad or scared. They listen to one another with rapt, loving attention. One boy gave God the same prayer each week all year long—that God would be with him and protect him from the monsters in his room. A four-year-old repeatedly told the group, about his fears of monsters in his room. People and pets die, friends move away, new babies are born, parents are shipped off to Iraq. All these and more are given to God, and the burden (or joy) is shared by classmates, each week.

The need children have for ritual and tradition is part of what adults are taught by them in Chapel. Their worship center must remain the same; for it is what they know and come to count on. Memorial's Chapel worship center sits on the chancel floor of the church sanctuary. A three foot square, eight inch high platform, it is covered by a white cloth. On it is a candle in a stained glass holder made by a member of the congregation. Arranged around the candle are a Bible, candle snuffer, lamb and Blessing Balm. These items do not change from week to week or year to year, for the children depend upon their presence.

A simple liturgy opens the worship and three songs are sung during the Chapel Time. Neither the songs nor the movement of the time together should ever change very much. As noted above, the Chapel Time progression from Opening through Sharing, Praying and Blessing is included in Appendix C.

As noted earlier, Children's Chapel has a profound effect upon those with whom the ministry takes place. It has also impacted Christian Education at Memorial Church

and has spurred spiritual nurture opportunities offered children around the country in congregations, daycare programs and at summer camps.

Pillars which undergird Children’s Chapel, which is this author’s particular Act of Ministry, are listed here and developed fully in Chapter Three:

- embracing the innate *spiritual nature of the child*;
- honoring the *holiness* within each person, no matter what his or her age;
- welcoming all people into *koinonia community* which is faithful to the ways of Jesus;
- practicing *Sabbath-living* as a way of life rather than an hour each week;
- practicing *Holy Listening* in the wholeness of life as a way of honoring God’s presence and the *imago dei* within each one;
- encouraging *worship* practices which engage the spirits of all ages;
- affirming God’s *blessings* intrinsic to each person.

The Problem

In *Welcoming Children*, Joyce Ann Mercer begins chapter seven, “Toward a Feminist Practical Theology of Childhood” by sharing a story of a Sunday morning at church. There, babies and children, teens and adults of all ages worshipped together, with children sharing in the leadership. The worship had liturgical elements to it. It was rich with sensory experiences. Children were able to quietly move around, as needed. At the end of the service, a blessing was offered and fellowship began. Mercer wrote,

(This church’s) liturgical, missional, and community life represented common struggle and celebration among all—including children—who gathered as church there.” Alas, then she

“awoke” from this dream in which “everything that happens in this church happens with children.”³

The community of faith, the Body of Christ, practicing being an exhibition of the “kingdom” of God, is not yet a reality. This author believes that the inclusion of children and youth in the fullness of congregational life has the potential for bringing new hope, transparency and vitality into those churches which truly welcome all people.

Because the reality about which Mercer dreams is still that, a dream, those who care passionately about the state of children and youth find ways and places to make small in-roads of difference. The work of the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Ministries Cohort group has found ways of reclaiming the “historic ministry of nurture and care in a variety of forms that help children from their birth, youth and adults as well, to be whole within God’s grace.”⁴

From the hours of conversation recorded by Robert Coles in *The Spiritual Life of Children*⁵ to the anecdotes in every parent’s memory, we can be assured that children connect with God on many levels. Our task as parents or adults in their lives is not to manufacture this connection. Rather it is to help children keep that connection alive. As Betty Shannon Cloyd says, in *Children and Prayer*, “If we as people of faith value our children, we will recognize that one of our most significant responsibilities is to help them stay in touch with their spiritual selves.”⁶ In *Beach Music* by Pat Conroy, one of the

³ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 242.

⁴ *The Blessing Center*, 2005, “What Is Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture,” <http://blessingcenter.org/> (accessed June 19, 2006).

⁵ Robert Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

⁶ Betty Shannon Cloyd, *Parents and Grandparents as Spiritual Guides: Nurturing Children of the Promise* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000).

main characters muses, “As a child I spoke easily with [God], but I had a gentler gift for small talk then and took myself less seriously.”⁷

It is clear to all who pay attention to the condition of children in this country that a child’s life is far from carefree. The Children’s Defense Fund publishes yearly statistics about the condition of children in the United States. According to the 2005 statistics, nearly twenty percent of children in this country live in poverty. One-half million children live in foster care. Close to 3000 children and teens died from being shot in 2002. These stark numbers point to an increasingly perilous state in which too many of this country’s children live. Children suffer from an untold number of stressors in families beset by poverty. The story for children whose lives are more privileged in terms of material goods is not rosy either.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture cannot put food on a table, it cannot open a parent’s prison door, nor can it magically turn a chaotic family into one which is safe and nourishes its children. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture through a Children’s Chapel program can provide young ones with Holy Listening opportunities where their concerns as well as their joys are accepted by others, as they are given to God in prayer. The affirming act of offering God’s blessings in the midst of a Sabbath time spent in a loving community is also a regular reminder for the children of God’s presence and the blessings of spiritual strength which are theirs.

The current state of the church’s ministry with children in the United States in 2007 is not one which brings encouragement to many who care about children. More often than not, the guiding principle behind congregational children’s ministries is to

⁷ Carol A. Wehrheim, “Spirituality and Children,” *Hungryhearts*, Spring 2004, 3.

provide children with interesting activities which keep them entertained until their parents are ready to leave the building. This may include teaching the stories of the Christian faith; but usually this is done in isolation from the broad themes of the Bible and in such short periods of time that children do not get to mull and ponder the stories, much less have time to pray together. In some churches, children attend the worship service, but seldom is the worship planned considering the spiritual needs and gifts of the youngest in the sanctuary. Many congregations offer mission opportunities but rarely are they intergenerational in nature.

An entire book could be written from the perspective of ways the Christian Church has, through its history and down to today, diminished its own children, abandoned God's children all over creation, increased children's suffering throughout the ages through its theologies. Could it be though, that this is changing? Resources found by members of the Blessing Ministries Cohort Group point to nascent theologies which value children, a new consideration of the spirituality of children and a new focus upon children as teachers, as well as learners on the journey of faith, who need supportive intergenerational communities in which to grow and blossom.

While most of the high profile, entertainment oriented, easy-to-prepare materials, websites and programs for children are woefully inadequate, there are useful resources for those who take seriously the words of Jane Rogers Vann, "Across the centuries and around the globe Christians have always learned the Christian life from the experience of

congregational life. Or as Christian educators are fond of saying, everything the church does teaches.”⁸

Attention to some of these issues was given as early as the seventeenth century, by Jan Amos Comenius, a theologian and “Father of Modern Education” in Europe. An early post-modern pioneer is Dr. Donald B. Rogers who wrote of these considerations more than twenty five years ago in a book entitled *In Praise of Learning*. Included in the 1990’s literature are helpful resources such as Robert Coles’, *The Spiritual Life of Children, Engaging in Transcendence*, by Kimes and Myers, Anderson and Johnson’s, *Regarding Children* and *The Spirit of the Child* by Hay and Nye. These works and others are considered in greater depth in the Literature Review chapter of this paper.

None of the books written recently, with a mainline Christian theological orientation, give fully adequate attention to the subtle ways parents and other shape their children’s spiritual lives. Observations of parental interactions with their children can be quite telling. Illustrative of the power found in honoring children’s holiness and spiritual nature in the process of teaching and learning, are these two observations made at the Hancock Building patio in Chicago:

Hungry birds perched on rails and walls awaiting crumbs tossed by those sitting at round metal tables. In the early morning most of the inhabitants of these tables had a cup of coffee in hand and their noses in a newspaper. The sparrows and pigeons feasted on muffin, bagel and toast bits scattering the ground. One morning, a mother and two children entered the patio area at a time when the birds had flocked to eat. The little boy, followed by his smaller sister, pulled from their mother’s hands and dashed toward the

⁸ Jane Rogers Vann, “What Is Missing?” *Hungryhearts*, Spring 2003, 4.

birds, causing them to fly away in fright. The mother calmly walked up to the children who were looking around to see where the birds had flown. She sat down on a patio step and invited her children to sit with her. She told the boy and girl that if they stayed still and were quiet, the birds would come back. She talked about the birds needing to eat and that they were afraid of fast moving, big people. Patiently she helped her children be serene and wait. Soon the birds returned and the children had a delightful time moving slowly toward the feeding birds, gently throwing pieces of bread to them. The boy and girl walked and spoke quietly and the birds allowed them to get quite close. All the time their mother encouraged their compassionate behavior.

The next morning, the birds were back. A father and his preschool aged son came out of the bakery which bordered the patio. As soon as the little boy saw the birds hopping around the patio, he too, like the children the day before, rushed, shouting toward them amidst a flutter of wings and cheeping complaints. Unlike the other parent, this one pointed out another bird which had landed farther away. The son dashed toward it, delighted that he could make the bird take flight. Over and over the boy hollered and chased away the birds trying to eat, encouraged in this behavior by his father. The child learned he had control over the birds and that his happiness in chasing was more important than the birds' comfort in eating.

Children's Chapel, as it is practiced at Memorial Preschool, offers a way for children to act out of and deepen their innate spirituality, to practice Holy Listening and compassion, to claim God's blessing of spiritual strength and in so doing to lead the adults in their lives toward a new depth of spirituality, a recognition of God's connection to them. Children's Chapel and the entire Preschool therefore provide a vehicle for

growth in wholeness which is both self and other centered, embodying Jesus words, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt. 22:37b–39 New International Version)

There are no known programs of spiritual nurture that permeate the life lived together in a church day preschool, which are akin to this one at Memorial Preschool.

The closest to be found is noted by the editors of *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*.⁹ While published programs which do this are few and far between, they will be also be regarded in Chapter Two.

At least some of what is considered crucial in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture to children’s spiritual nurture is missing in these other programs. They are all present in the way Children’s Chapel is structured and lived out at Memorial Preschool:

- Preparation—the children are carefully and gently prepared by their teachers through circle time before Chapel. At this quieting down moment they are encouraged to think about what joys and concerns they will want to share; teachers may make suggestions of concerns or praises they themselves have. The girls and boys are reminded about what will happen in Chapel and then they go to their classroom door, “hip to lip” (see Glossary). This way of walking down the hall makes it easy for the children to move sedately through the hallways and into the church sanctuary, where the Chapel Leader awaits them in their *House of*

⁹ Karen Marie Yust et al., eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 240.

*Prayer.*¹⁰ The Chapel Leader has prepared the space, paying attention to lighting, as well as the worship area around which the children will gather. She sits quietly and welcomes the children in a low voice, helping them get seated as they arrive.

- **Ritual and Tradition**—The worship space is in the same place each week. It looks the same each week. The children are comfortable in the familiar environment and do not need to learn and then relearn the ways of an ever-changing experience. They know that the Leader will light the children’s candle and say to them, “The Lord be with you,” to which they will reply, “And also with you.” This is the way each chapel time begins.
- **Song**—Songs of the faith are an important component of Chapel for people learn through music. There are three songs taught, which become *the* songs of Chapel time and also they become *the children’s* songs.
- **Holy Listening**—Everyone is given practice in Holy Listening by the passing around of a lamb. Whoever is holding the lamb, rich with its biblical connotations, is the only one to be talking. This person gets to share her thankfulness for the goodness in life, as well as those things which make her “mad or sad or worried or scared.” Everyone listens because everyone cares about the others in the group.
- **Extended prayer**—The Chapel Leader will often ask the child who has just shared a concern if he would like to give God the concern in a prayer. If he says “yes,” the group will pray with him. If the answer is no, the Leader will voice it in her

¹⁰ Matthew 22:13, Isaiah 56:7

Prayer Time Closing. After every child has had the opportunity to share, the Leader leads a prayer which ends the same way each week. The children learn this prayer also and will be heard praying it with her.

- Blessing—The Blessing ends each Chapel Time and it is at this point that each child receives an affirmation of the love and blessings of God, as well as that of the Leader.

Through the process of Holy Listening children are enabled to express the things they believe about God, to explore and make spiritual sense of what is happening in their lives, to use their own spiritual strength (their relationship with God) to work through problems, and learn to trust their inner selves, knowing that God is at work within them. In addition, they grow in their connectedness with those around them, in their capacity to pray for others, and in their abilities to lead loving, compassionate lives. Adults using Holy Listening in the spiritual nurture of children are blessed also by seeing with “new eyes” the presence of God in their own lives, as well as those of the children; they find their personal spiritual lives deepened and nourished.

In prayer children practice silence and offering up the things which burden them. They do this by using “Kerplunk prayer.” The prayer is just given up to God. There is no attempt on the part of others to fix or even reassure the one praying that things are not as bad as they seem or that things will get better. The group simply holds the prayer, too. Even the oldest adults learn that God accepts all prayers and that the weight of worries and sorrows is lessened when the prayers are shared.

In the blessing each child is reminded by name that “God blesses you.” When used in the God-to-human relationship some interpret bless to mean “favor” or

“privilege” and some translate blessing as “happy.” Another understanding, which is more in keeping with Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, is that of Dr. Walter Brueggemann, a Christian Hebrew Testament scholar, who uses the words “enabling vitality” to define blessing. It is this presence of and strength from God which is affirmed in the words of blessing. In Children’s Chapel, the leader announces “God blesses you.” Children, with their innate connection to God still palpable, have this relationship reinforced both by the acknowledgement offered through the adult’s words and by its repetition. As people get older and are faced daily with another reality, that of sin and its destructive power, this is a powerful, recurring reminder that God gives “the vitality that enables us to face difficulties, rise to challenges, keep commitments. We may forget that and try to generate our own vitality, venturing into that common error of self-sufficiency. We may need to remind each other: God blesses you.”¹¹ Though we live in a fallen world, we are challenged to continue to live out of the knowledge that God originally blessed creation and that this “enabling vitality” remains present in each human being.

This act of ministry focus with children, as teachers as well as learners, with adults who are open in childlike ways, makes these affirmations, daily, as policy, practice and promise. In Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, the original blessing of God upon God’s creation takes precedence over the theology of original sin. Children, especially those who have not yet been socialized into the ways of the adult world, are understood as desiring lives which are in harmony with God’s intention for the kingdom, full of compassion, contemplation and connection with others. When life is approached through this lens, the gospel of Jesus makes sense; the radical inclusion of all people becomes

¹¹ Don Rogers, e-mail message to author, 2004.

more possible; the power of the Holy Spirit is acknowledged. Children teach. Adults learn.

Words of Rubem Alves make a fitting conclusion to this section:

Adults always and everywhere, take their values for granted. No one ever doubts that the adult style of life and the adult world are superior to those of children. Children are weak. They have no means to defend themselves against the facts of power. Because they are systematically defeated, we assume that our power to force our values upon children is evidence that our way of defining reality is truer or more human than theirs, . . . We want them to become adults . . . Because if we are to preserve our world, children must play the game of life according to our rules. So they are socialized—that is, their imagination and aspirations are controlled and defined by ourselves. When we succeed, we say they have become mature . . . (Peter) Bergson comments, not without nostalgia: “What a childhood we should have had if only we had been left to do as we pleased.”¹²

¹² Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity and the Rebirth of Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 85–87.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Child in Theology and History

Historically, the child has been mostly absent from the church. This is not to say, though, that there was no concern for children. There was, as there is; but for most scholars, children were no more regarded as important to the ongoing narrative of the Christian church than were women, the poor, the stranger.

A twentieth century exception to this is Brazilian theologian, Rubem Alves, who wrote *Tomorrow's Child: Imagination, Creativity and the Rebirth of Culture*¹: where he explored the nature of God and humankind and the essence of the soul. Alves returned again and again to children and to their childlike characteristics as ways to help adults reconnect with the sacred.

Theological understandings of children lie at the heart of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and this author's project. Therefore, in any review of the pertinent literature, that related to theology and children must be included. Throughout history, scant attention was given by theologians to children, other than in consideration of salvation and baptism. By the late twentieth century, in the mainline Christian church, salvation issues related to children had become mostly moot. Recently, though there has been interest

¹ Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*

shown in the development of theological understandings which take children into account and/or include children in theological thinking.

A well-grounded body of work is being developed, which has the potential to change the way the Christian church perceives children, and if children, then society and the rest of those who remain, “the least of these (our) brothers and sisters.” (Luke 9:48). *Regarding Children*,² written with utmost seriousness of purpose by Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson, was an early theology of children which recognized children as fully human beings from birth, possessing potential and integrity. The authors proposed a theology of childhood that did not consider children as less than human, depraved, or as possessions and regarded Christian guidelines for family living, such as hospitality, compassion, justice, and affirmation, as providing a vision for the whole of community life.

Barbara Kimes and William R. Myers co-authored *Engaging in Transcendence*³, which was published in 1992, by the United Church of Christ’s Pilgrim Press. The authors called the church to change the way it engages the children in its midst, replacing the current ways of doing things with relationships which understand the sacred in all of life, which respect children and intensely value what they bring to the community of faith. This book was followed in 1997 by Kimes Myers’, *Young Children and Spirituality*⁴. Myers explored, from diverse perspectives, the spirituality of children and

² Herbert Anderson and Susan B.W. Johnson, *Regarding Children* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).

³ Barbara Kimes Myers and William R. Myers, *Engaging in Transcendence* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1992).

⁴ Barbara Kimes Myers, *Young Children and Spirituality* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

introduced the reader to child development theorists and philosophers, who are instrumental in forming a solidly grounded, practical and useful theology of children and the church.

*The Child in Christian Thought*⁵, edited by Marcia Bunge, was the outcome of a research initiative directed by Dr. Bunge, funded by the Lilly Endowment and associated with the University of Chicago. The material was generated by Bunge's work done between 1998 and 2000, which addressed the marginalization of children in contemporary theology and encouraged scholars to investigate the theology of children throughout church history.

Other examples include *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective*⁶, *Welcoming Children* and *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood*.⁷ *Let the Children Come*, by Bonnie Miller-McLemore, Vanderbilt Seminary, Nashville, Tennessee, assisted readers in understanding how a faith which stresses thankfulness for God's goodness, the love of Jesus and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, could have such a checkered past and present when it comes to its views of children. Dr. Miller-McLemore did a thorough job of exploring the Christian church's view of children throughout history, pointing out that children are seldom the focus of any reflection upon the faith. Miller-McLemore raised careful and sometimes profound concerns about recent theories and understandings which bear on the well-being of children, but of which, at best children are but a "subtext."

⁵ Marcia Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 2001).

⁶ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2003).

⁷ David Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability: A Theology of Childhood* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2005).

Graced Vulnerability, published in 2005, is a sensitive and respectful book. Written by Assistant Professor of Reformed Theology, David H. Jensen, at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, it presents a theology of childhood and children which challenges the church to take the youngest among them with utmost seriousness.

In 2005 also, Joyce Ann Mercer, Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Graduate Theological Union and San Francisco Theological Seminary, authored *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*.⁸ Mercer wrote a critique of the theological understandings out of which western denominations have functioned. This practical theologian explored diverse topics, ranging from biblical texts to socioeconomic studies and proclaimed in her book the necessity that the church offer a spirit of welcome for children. This work has integrated a theology of childhood with abundant proposals for ministering with children.

Dr. Bunge also directs The Child Theology Movement,⁹ the objective of which is stated this way, “Child Theology is a purposefully disciplined enterprise of Christian theology whose service is done through exploring, deepening and sharing Christian theological understanding.” Its web presence includes papers written by scholars and practitioners from around the world.

A newcomer in the field of child theology, The Center for Children and Theology, can be considered through the website *Child Theology*, where it is stated,

Jesus put a child in the centre of the disciples when they were having a theological argument about greatness in the kingdom of

⁸ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*.

⁹ “Articles And Papers,” *Child Theology Movement*, 2006, www.childreligionethics.org/ (accessed July 2, 2007).

God. It is plain that Jesus thought the child's presence would give the disciples a clue to the essential truth they were missing. Occasionally over the centuries, the child has disturbed theologians at work, but has not been in a position to shape theology consistently. In Child Theology, we are invited to take good note of the child in the midst as we think about, for, to, from and with God in Christ. As we do that, we expect our theology to change for the better. In Child Theology, we embark afresh on the journey with Christ into the open secret of God in the world.¹⁰

The Center offers papers written from the point of view of both the academy and the parish.

While liberation theologians wrote from adult points of view, Janet Pais, an attorney and author who has explored ways doctrines of the Christian Church have oppressed children, focused upon the youngest of people. She wrote *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse*¹¹, published by Paulist Press, in 1991. In this book she viewed theology through the lens of child abuse, her own and that of others. Pais explored psychological and religious teachings that rationalized abuse of children and showed how misuse of the understandings of God as Father and Jesus as sacrifice wrongly justified abuse. Through the doctrine of the Incarnation, Pais maintained that healing of an inner adult/child split could lead toward true relationship with children.

Jurgen Moltmann is a theologian, who has incorporated into his thinking a respect for children, with an understanding of the words of Jesus related to them. *In The End—The Beginning: The Life of Hope* expressed the power of Christian hope and included a

¹⁰ Director Catherine Maresca, "Occasional Papers," *Center for Children and Theology*, 2007, www.cctheo.org/ (accessed May 2007)."

¹¹ Janet Pais, *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

consideration of children in the development of this theology of hope, “in our end...our beginning”¹². This inclusion of children, who represent some of the least appreciated and valued members of society, especially in the more esoteric academic realms, is an example of the radical nature of community when fully realized within the church of Jesus Christ.

The importance of the faith community, as more than a collection of independent individuals, was well thought-out in a *Hungryhearts* newsletter of the Presbyterian Church (USA), entitled “Spirituality in the Faith Community.” The authors contended that, “unlike much of Western individualism an awareness is emerging in many denominations that ‘the spiritual life of a human being’ is not an individual venture. Instead, classical Christian spirituality refers to the concrete lives of faith lived by individuals in a corporate body of faith that in turn forms and re-forms its participants.”¹³ These persons of developing faith include both adults and children, who can assist the church in changing its angle of vision and therefore claim ministry as a lived response to God by every person, no matter what the age.

Just as theology has little to say about and for children, the history of the Christian Church has been mostly silent about them and this has extended into the current literature. Passing mention was made to their presence in the life of the church in Margaret Miles’ *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought*.¹⁴ The author, an

¹² Jurgen Moltmann, *In The End—The Beginning: The Life of Hope*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), 29.

¹³ Freda A. Gardner and Lisa M. Hess, “Spirituality in the Faith Community,” *Hungryhearts*, Spring 2003.

¹⁴ Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh* (Malden, CT: Blackwell, 2004).

Augustinian scholar, provided a broad picture of the world in which Christianity developed, from the second-century Roman Empire, through the European and North American worlds of the 1800s. It explored Christianity, with its diversity, controversy and schisms, as it existed within the surrounding cultures throughout these time periods. Miles treated images, music and architecture, as well as words, as primary evidence in reconstructing Christianity and it is in some of the images particularly, where children became visible.

*Jesus and the Children*¹⁵ remains the standard bearer for consideration of children in biblical times through exploration of the gospels. Author Hans Ruedi Weber maintained that Jesus' words about children and the Kingdom are to be radically appropriated by the church, in order to be true to its founder.

A recent historical treatment of children in the context of their surrounding societies can be found in *When Children Became People*.¹⁶ The author detailed the distinctiveness of the early Christian church and its theologians, in comparison to the surrounding Greco-Roman culture.

Children's Spirituality and Spiritual Nurture

The mainline church was silent through most of the last century concerning the spirituality of children, preferring to focus upon that of adults. In response to beliefs in the innate sinfulness of all humanity, some were more comfortable with Rousseau's

¹⁵ Hans Ruedi Weber, *Jesus and the Children* (Loveland: TreeHaus, 1994).

¹⁶ O.M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, trans. Brian McNeil (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

blank slate understanding of development; few adopted an understanding of original blessing. Ascendant among theorists with which many mainline professionals were fully comfortable, were Dr. Lawrence Kohlberg and Professor James Fowler, men who understood moral and faith development through the world of words and abstract thought. In addition, the work of Dr. Ronald Goldman, in the 1960's, suggested that religion should not be taught to children before the age of twelve. Together with others, these theoreticians were responsible for a continuing bias toward later youth and adulthood. This understanding, that the most fertile ground for deepening spiritual and moral development lay with those who are able to think abstractly ultimately relegated young children to a "nice to have around; they'll get what they need when they're older" place in the church.

Psychiatrist Robert Coles, whose primary work had been done with children's moral development, authored *The Spiritual Life of Children*¹⁷ in 1990. Coles' approach, through interviews with children, was to listen carefully as they recounted significant, deeply felt religious experiences. This carefully researched book was one of the first of its kind to document, across geographic, cultural and religious boundaries, a common spiritual nature observed even in those children with no religious faith at all, which he described in detail in this eminent book. Another author of importance in changing the attitudes of religious educators and clergypersons in the areas of children and spirituality was David Heller, whose book, *The Children's God*,¹⁸ was published a few years before Robert Coles. Heller carefully analyzed drawings, writings and interviews with forty

¹⁷ Coles, *The Spiritual Life of Children*.

¹⁸ David Heller, *The Children's God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

children, from an equal number of Roman Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Hindu homes and formed conclusions about their developing understandings of God. While the conclusions he drew were considered tentative, he was featured on the cover of *Psychology Today*. Later Heller went on to author several additional books on children's spiritual nature that were less research oriented, including *Children's Letters to God* and *We Gave the World Moses and Bagels: Art and Wisdom of Jewish Children*.

An earlier, dense and scholarly study was authored by Ana-Maria Rizzuto. Hers was a classic study used primarily by other scholars who followed her as each researched children and their developing concepts of God. *The Birth of the Living God*,¹⁹ written from a psychoanalytic perspective, heavily influenced by Freud and the theory of object relations, was of greatest use to other researchers and did not have much influence on the practice of religious formation in the local parish.

For some years, the mainline Protestant Christian church allowed the fertile field of children's spirituality and spiritual nurture to be filled by those for whom "spirituality" tended to be inconsistent with traditional religious practice. The important, ground breaking work done by Sofia Cavalletti in religious formation, based on the Maria Montessori method of whole child education, was critical for Roman Catholic educators, but virtually unknown to Protestants. Cavalletti's informal research into the catechesis of children impacted later more formal research, as well as the approaches of a variety of religious education authors. These include Jerome Berryman, Gerard Pottebaum, and the curriculum most directly identified with Cavalletti, *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*.

¹⁹ Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

As well as the solid research done by Cavaletti, Rizzuto, Heller and Coles, there are any number of vaguely Christian books which guide caregivers in helping develop children's spirit and faith. Some of these latter books, especially those written from a Jewish perspective, can be useful in spiritual nurture, but none have an explicitly progressive Christian orientation. The evangelical Christian church, because of its focus upon child evangelism and salvation, has continued to publish books related to this topic, but most of these are either church school curriculum with a heavy "decision to follow Christ" emphasis or family oriented. Some will be considered later in this chapter.

Fortunately, the distressing paucity of theologically progressive sound material considering the formation of faith and nurture of spirituality from the earliest years of a person's life, has been turned around by the appropriation of some of the Roman Catholic materials to a Protestant orientation and by the publishing of fine new books. These provide a psychologically sound and educationally up-to-date framework for studying the spirituality of the child and spiritual nurture of children. In 1998, *The Spirit of the Child*²⁰ was published in England. It was a seminal work for those studying the spiritual needs of children, who were also concerned about the general state of western society.

For many people, this was a ground-breaking research study, conducted by Rebecca Nye as part of her doctoral study, and given a theoretical and philosophical context by David Hay. Rebecca Nye now heads a research program in children's spirituality at Cambridge University, and at the time of the writing David Hay chaired a research group at Oxford University. Many, perhaps most, subsequent research studies made use of their definitions of

²⁰ David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount, 1998).

“spirituality” and the broad perspective of spirituality that encompasses all children everywhere.²¹

Two other very recent important books are *Children’s Spirituality*²², with senior editor, Dr. Donald Ratcliff and *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World’s Religious Traditions*²³. Within these volumes are a rich compilation of articles, from a variety of Christian and ecumenical perspectives, about spirituality and spiritual nurture. *Children’s Spirituality*, written out of traditional to conservative Christian points-of-view, covered topics ranging from identifying children’s spirituality through encouraging the deepening of spirituality in children in home, at school and in the world. *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*, ecumenical in spirit, explored both the commonalities and distinctive ways in which spirituality is nurtured in various religions and communities. *Children Matter*²⁴ was a welcome addition; a helpful book, solidly researched and respectful of children as part of the community of faith. While written from a somewhat conservative and evangelical Christian point of view, it is broad in its scope and not overly oriented toward children as inheriting original sin nor needing to be saved from eternal damnation.

Of note also are the following recent books and articles which explored the spiritual nature and nurture of children: “Spirituality and Children,”²⁵ an article in the

²¹ Donald Ratcliff, “Resources,” *Children’s Spirituality*, <http://www.childspirituality.org/don/> (accessed May 11, 2006).

²² Donald Ratcliff, ed., *Children’s Spirituality* (Eugene: Cascade, 2004).

²³ Yust et al., eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*

²⁴ Scottie May et al., *Children Matter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

²⁵ Wehrheim, *Hungryhearts*, 3.

adult oriented spirituality newsletter of the Presbyterian Church (USA), by Carol Wehrheim; *Nurturing the Seeds of Spirituality*,²⁶ also published by Presbyterians, which, while not acknowledging the innate connection of children to God, did examine ways the faith community could nurture a child's spirit; *Exploring the Spirituality of Childhood*,²⁷ the proceedings of the first ecumenical National Conference on the Spiritual Life of Children and published by The Spiritual Life of Children Institute.

Family Nurture of Spirituality

A traditional understanding of nurturing the faith and spirit of children, especially in the United States, is that it takes place within the nuclear family and, for conservative Christians, is part of the important responsibilities of parenting. A consistent feature of family nurture across the Christian landscape has been mealtime and bedtime prayers. Otherwise, until recently, more progressive Christian parents have tended to make spotty use of secular and religious spiritual nurture ideas and materials or pretty much ignored the area all together.

Among the many publications on both the right and left, are some books which have been published in the last twenty years or so can be usefully applied to Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and to this author's Act of Ministry. In 1990, Rolf Garborg wrote, *The Family Blessing*²⁸, a book consistent, in great part, with Blessing Based

²⁶ Ann Reed Held, *Nurturing the Seeds of Spirituality* (Louisville: National Presbyterian Mariners, 1998).

²⁷ Vivian Gussin Paley, Wade Clark Roof, and Jane P. Ward, *Exploring the Spirituality of Childhood*, ed. Gerard A. Pottebaum (Loveland: Treehaus Communications, 1998).

²⁸ Rolf Garborg, *The Family Blessing* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1990).

Spiritual Nurture and the practice of offering God’s affirming blessings, which is critical to Children’s Chapel. Garborg wrote from an evangelical perspective about sustaining others through offering blessings. His focus was particularly on the nurture of family and ways in which blessing enriched family life. Another book, *The Gift of Blessing*,²⁹ also by conservative Christian authors, lifted the importance of blessing children and others in families and included an extension of being blessed, becoming a blessing to others, too.

Available practical guides to nurturing children’s spirituality follow, which are examples of publications with orientations in keeping with the author’s theological understanding of children as innately spiritual, connected to God from before birth, and a part of the broader community of faith. While these books are primarily from Roman Catholic and mainline perspectives, author and medical doctor, Annette Hollander explored spiritual nurture across the boundaries of eastern and western religions in *How to Help Your Child Have a Spiritual Life*.³⁰ Therese Boucher, in *Spiritual Grandparenting*,³¹ spoke of children and grandparents as partners in the “dance with God,” and in *Games Grandmas Play*,³² Joan Jacobs raised the importance of being fully present with the child. Living a Sabbath life within families was a focus of the following two books: *Living in God’s Time*³³ and *Seven Times the Sun*.³⁴ Both Wigger and Cloyd

²⁹ Gary Smalley and John Trent, *The Gift of Blessing* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1993).

³⁰ Annette Hollander, *How to Help Your Child Have a Spiritual Life* (New York: A&W Publishers, 1980).

³¹ Therese Boucher, *Spiritual Grandparenting* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

³² Joan Jacobs, *Games Grandmas Play* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2001).

³³ Margaret McMillan Persky, *Living in God's Time: A Parent's Guide to Nurturing Children Throughout the Christian Year* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1999).

offered a mainline understanding of nurturing the spirituality of children, though mostly through an at-home orientation, in *The Power of God at Home*³⁵ and *Parents and Grandparents as Spiritual Guides*.³⁶ These books explore praying with children and wondering about faith, as does Pat Fossarelli in her Roman Catholic guide to prayer for families, *Praying with Your Children*,³⁷ which has a particularly well done introduction to praying with young ones, taking into account both the connection they innately have with God and their natural inclination to pray.

Communal Christian Education and Spiritual Nurture

The Roman Catholic Church and many Jewish communities have understood throughout their history the importance of educating children in the traditions of the faith. Evangelical and conservative Christians, in the United States and Western Europe, are often intentional now about the same thing. In the past thirty years, progressive Christians, in homes and within the community of faith, lost, to a great extent, the awareness that nurturing children in the faith is a way of life, rather than a Sunday School hour. Christian Education, occurring in classroom situations, mostly on Sunday mornings and often *during* the adult worship hour, became the norm in too many communities of faith.

³⁴ Shea Darian, *Seven Times the Sun: Guiding Your Child Through the Rhythms of the Day* (Marshall, WI: Gilead Press, 2001).

³⁵ J. Bradley Wigger, *The Power of God at Home* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

³⁶ Betty Shannon Cloyd, *Parents and Grandparents as Spiritual Guides: Nurturing Children of the Promise* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2000).

³⁷ Pat Fossarelli, *Praying with Your Children: A Guide for Families* (San Francisco: Resource Publications, 2000).

Authors, with theological orientation consistent with the mainline Protestant church, did publish books throughout the late twentieth century, related to the need for children to be part of a community in which they would taste and see and hear and fully experience what it means to be Christian; so they would, in Horace Bushnell's words, "Know themselves as no other" than part of the Christian family of faith. Most of these were guides for teachers, while some were part of or included curriculum, the instructional portion of Christian formation.

Catherine Stonehouse, in *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*,³⁸ summarized many different areas of research related to children's spirituality including the Godly Play approach, a curriculum which weaves teaching the Bible with liturgy, a hands-on experience of the stories and a good word to each child. Her book is accessible to researchers and to those in classroom settings. Two early compendia which remain pertinent to the field and include aspects of nurture, as well as instruction, within a faith community setting, and which are important for this author's work, are *Religious Education as Social Transformation*³⁹ and *Handbook of Children's Religious Education*.⁴⁰ *And the Children Pray*,⁴¹ a Roman Catholic teaching guide, includes an understanding of children and the many ways in which prayer is intrinsic to the child. *Fashion Me a*

³⁸ Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988).

³⁹ Allen Moore, ed., *Religious Education as Social Transformation* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1989).

⁴⁰ Donald Ratcliff, ed., *Handbook of Children's Religious Education* (Birmingham: Religious Education Press, 1993).

⁴¹ Janaan Manternach, *And the Children Pray* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1989).

*People*⁴² was also published in 1989, by a Roman Catholic woman, Maria Harris, whose orientation was consistent with the mainline Protestant church. Harris explored ways congregations are instrumental in religious formation and was used broadly in Christian Education courses in a number of Presbyterian seminaries. Her consideration of the formative aspects of life together in the church, especially those activities which are not “instruction,” is helpful to the Children’s Chapel act of ministry.

A small treasure of a book which speaks to teachers and leaders, to parents and also directly to children, about the richness of Christian formation is *In Praise of Learning*,⁴³ written by Donald Rogers. While ostensibly about Christian Education, it is more about the many ways the community of faith teaches, through socialization, enculturation and formation, as well as instruction. A section related to the strength children have to overcome hurtful encounters in the church and the world is especially pertinent to Children’s Chapel.

In *Come Unto Me*,⁴⁴ Elizabeth Caldwell considered the nurture of people of all ages into the family of faith, through the eyes of children, relationship and the protestant sacraments of Holy Communion and baptism, including that of infants. Her later book, *Making a Home for Faith*,⁴⁵ included a chapter on calling and vocation, which was especially useful for those working with groups of children.

⁴² Maria Harris, *Fashion Me a People* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989).

⁴³ Donald Rogers, *In Praise of Learning* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980).

⁴⁴ Elizabeth Frances Caldwell, *Come Unto Me* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1996).

⁴⁵ Elizabeth F. Caldwell, *Making a Home for Faith* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000).

Published curriculum material for working with children which includes an extensive spiritual formation component is sparse. Sofia Cavalletti's work, of which *The Religious Potential of the Child*⁴⁶ is representative, involves the catechesis of the Good Shepherd, the sacraments and young children. This is but one of a number of books written by Ms. Cavalletti which explored children's spiritual nature and their religious education growing out of their innate connection to God. Jerome Berryman and Sonya Stewart, in their *Young Children and Worship*⁴⁷ and *Godly Play*⁴⁸ materials, also take a multidimensional approach to spiritual formation, which encompass the community, liturgy and prayer, blessing and Sabbath components of the seven pillars upon which rests Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture of children through Children's Chapel. A new curriculum of the United Methodist Church, *Companions in Christ*⁴⁹ has a piece entitled "The Way of the Child," which begins by celebrating children's innate spirituality. Even this well-done curriculum is missing, as are Godly Play materials, a focus on encouraging children's inborn compassionate natures through careful listening to and praying with one another and outreach beyond the individual and the "tribe." *Companions in Christ* has no regular affirmation for the children of God's presence in their daily lives. Gianna Gobbi stressed a core principle of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and Children's Chapel, that of the importance of adults and children listening to God together, in her book *Listening*

⁴⁶ Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992).

⁴⁷ Stewart and Berryman, *Young Children and Worship*.

⁴⁸ Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: A Way of Religious Education* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

⁴⁹ Wynn McGregor, ed., *Companions in Christ: The Way of the Child* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2006).

to *God with Children*.⁵⁰ Two other books that encourage spiritual formation, as part of the task of Christian Education in the church, are *Teaching the Mystery of God to Children*⁵¹ and *Following Jesus*.⁵² The second is a continuation of the curriculum materials written by Sonja Stewart. Finally, Cassandra Williams has included in her text, a mainline approach to children's ministries, *Children Among Us*,⁵³ building spiritual nurture into the ways children are cared for by the church.

The Act of Ministry: Children's Chapel Program

None of the preceding materials approach spiritual formation through an intentional, carefully planned day preschool group experience of worship, prayer, listening and blessing.

There was just one book found, *Curriculum of Love*,⁵⁴ to have much of the substance of the pillars upon which Children's Chapel is built. The closest program identified, St. John's Children's Center, was lifted up in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*.⁵⁵ One of the ministries of St. John's Presbyterian Church in Reno, Nevada, this school is noted for its fine work with spiritual nurture. Its atmosphere includes

⁵⁰ Gobbi, Gianna, *Listening to God with Children*, trans. Rebekah Rojcewicz (Loveland, Ohio: Treehaus, 1998).

⁵¹ Judy Gattis Smith, *Teaching the Mystery of God to Children* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing, 2005).

⁵² Sonja M. Stewart, *Following Jesus* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000).

⁵³ Cassandra Williams, ed., *Children Among Us: Foundations in Children's Ministries* (Louisville: Witherspoon Press, 2003).

⁵⁴ Morgan Simone Daleo, *Curriculum of Love* (Charlottesville, VA: Grace Publishing and Communications, 1996).

⁵⁵ Yust, et al., eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*, 240.

careful nurture in Christian faith, but even this program pays little explicit attention to encouraging the transcendent in the children's prayer lives or their sense of Sabbath and sacred space.

The pillars identified as critical to and supportive of the Children's Chapel program researched by this writer are:

- there is an innate spiritual nature in the child;
- holiness is within each person;
- koinonia community is faithful to the ways of Jesus;
- Sabbath-living is a way of life;
- Holy Listening honors God's presence and the *imago dei* within each one;
- worship practices are essential to all ages;
- God's blessings are affirmed regularly, to each person.

These aspects of spiritual nurture, development, discipline tend to be part of explicit work with adults and seldom include consideration of children. In current Christian literature on Sabbath, children are not noted as examples of or in need of Sabbath lives. Books related to daily practices of spiritual discipline for adults abound; there are some now being written with a focus on youth, but nothing for children. Spiritual disciplines are habits or regular patterns in life which open the one practicing to God, the sacred, to others. Children thrive when there are rituals and traditions which can be counted upon; they thrive too on those patterns of activity which nurture their spirituality.

The process of passing on the faith, the essence of what it means to be family, to be a part of the body of Christ, comes from living in community. While ways of nurturing

the connectedness of adults have been written about extensively, little religious formation material exists which includes children. This development of identity is also at the heart of worship practices, of which much has been written especially lately, but where are the books written that begin with an understanding that the presence of children are a given in the congregation?

The words “holiness” and “blessing” are important theological words, with a multitude of meanings. In the context of this writer’s work they point to God—holiness is the image of God in which each human being is born; blessing is an act of God, which affirms the connection between God and individuals. Holiness is seldom used to express the *imago dei* and even less understood as being part of the human condition. Claus Westermann, Matthew Fox and Walter Brueggemann explore “blessing” deeply and with great integrity, but not within the context of children.

Listening is another pillar. There were no references to “listening, hearing, stillness, silence” in the Christian history books referenced for this paper, other than in cursory overviews of the Society of Friends (begun in 1668) and Nicolaus Zinzendorf, the father of the Pietist movement. A look at the index of John Calvin’s *Institutes* turned up no references to listening. Listening for God and to one another seems to have been, for a long time, an act for mystics and other ascetics, certainly not Protestants, with no place in the Reformation Church.

Particular sources on listening to one another can be found which stand out as unusual in the religious literature of the twentieth century. One is Douglas Steere’s classic book, *On Listening to Another*⁵⁶ which began as a lecture given at Swarthmore in

⁵⁶ Douglas V. Steere, *On Listening to Another* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1955).

London in 1955. Steere's book is an articulate exploration in few words of the importance of listening to others. Cari Jackson, in her 2005 book, *The Gift to Listen, The Courage to Hear*, uses his work as a springboard for her own and also quotes him, "Holy listening—to 'listen' another's soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery, may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another."⁵⁷

Another is a book for Christian Educators written by Don Rogers and referenced earlier in this chapter, *In Praise of Learning*. This succinctly written book was certainly one of the most humane and accessible texts ever written for educators. A pivotal objective was to encourage persons in the church, "to take the time to listen carefully to the learners with whom they work."⁵⁸ *In Praise of Learning* with its focus on children is unusual. The quote which follows describes a way in which children can be encouraged to listen, a way in which they do listen in Children's Chapel:

Listening has a firmly established value in prayer and meditation. The quieting of one's being so that the still small voice may speak is known to be essential to cultivating an awareness of the Almighty. We pray, and in our speaking and listening, claim a God who also both listens and speaks. To be able to listen is to take on the quality of godliness . . . To listen—really listen—one must be able to concentrate, to accept the speaker, to be unfailingly honest and transparently real, and be willing to enter an experience from which the listener may not return unchanged . . . Listening is the means to give life to what is already known . . . Listening allows us to perceive the uniqueness that is the other person.⁵⁹

Other books are now being published on listening and on becoming better listeners, though again the direction points toward adult to adult listening. Added to the

⁵⁷ Cari Jackson, *The Gift to Listen, The Courage to Hear* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003), 1.

⁵⁸ Rogers, *In Praise of Learning*, 14.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 59–62.

books on listening noted above, these become new hope for a renewal of the Hebrew understanding of listening as engaging all of body, mind and spirit as God is present when “two or three are gathered.” (Matt. 18:20)

One book notably embraces the dance of children and adults which is child rearing, both in the home and as part of community. It is Bonnie Miller-McLemore’s *In the Midst of Chaos: Caring for Children as Spiritual Practice*.⁶⁰ Miller-McLemore cherishes children and the process of raising them up, teaching them, living with them and learning from them. She says, “We need to recover the ‘lost chaos of creation’...to (practice) the presence of God (in) sanctifying the ordinary, pondering, taking children seriously, giving to others and to oneself, doing justice, playing, reading, and blessing and letting go.”⁶¹ Dr. Miller-McLemore has moved the conversation a great distance toward a more whole and Holy provisional exhibition of the kingdom of God, which includes all ages.

Because few of the pillars for the author’s Research Project can be found in books which consider the needs and gifts of children in these areas, the writer turned therefore to the most current available literature published by Doctor of Ministry students, which is accessible by Internet. Interesting papers were found on the RIM Index of Doctor of Ministry dissertations related to children in the community of faith and children in worship. A small number of papers were found which may be in harmony with this writer’s work. While there are many which contain a kernel of consistency, those that follow seem the most likely, based upon the abstracts:

⁶⁰ Miller-McLemore, *In the Midst of Chaos*.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

“The first act of love is to listen” by Karen A. Lundwall, from the Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago, Illinois, 1993. The abstract notes that listening to children and their experiences of God is essential to nurturing faith.

“The son-father relationship: a correlative study of a son’s perceived paternal blessing and his adult life satisfaction,” published in 1988 through Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, by Tom J. McFarlane. In this dissertation, a significant correlation was found between a son’s parental blessing, defined as shared, vital, sustaining affirmation of a son and his adult life satisfaction.

“Blessed are the children: a liberation theology for abused and neglected children,” by Kimberly A Shinabery, at Iliff School of Theology, in 2005. In her abstract, Shinabery says of her dissertation which deals with child abuse, “Within each child is a spark of life lit only by God.”

Patricia Fossarelli, whose book on praying with children was noted earlier, published her Doctor of Ministry abstract in 1997, through Wesley Theological Seminary. Entitled, “Children in our midst: listening to children talk about God,” it takes seriously the words of children about their experiences of the Holy.

Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, an editor of *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*, also finished a doctoral dissertation, called “Nurturing the religious imagination in children.” Her abstract includes this statement, “By the time they reach school age, all children, with or without religious instruction, have a concept of God.”

While focusing upon adults, Miriam Lawrence-Leupold, notes that all are children of God and a life of intentional Sabbath practice keeps that understanding alive. Her

dissertation, done at Columbia Theological Seminary, in 2006, is entitled, “Sabbath keeping: accepting God’s gift to reject the rat race.”

Patricia Coulter’s doctoral work abstract was listed as “A way of being in ministry with children: exploring the catechesis of the Good Shepherd from a pastoral perspective.” Done at Toronto School of Theology in 1997, the research “explores the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd as a means of empowering adults to accompany children on a spiritual journey in a mutually formative manner, so that adults are prepared to nurture spiritual lives of children and also to be nurtured by them.”

Finally, Gloria Wade Dillon’s work with hurting children, in 2005, “Empowering grieving children with spiritual tools in their journey toward healing and recovery” while she was at United Theological Seminary, promised connection with an intent of Children’s Chapel, which is to deepen the inherent strength of children through their spiritual nurture.

CHAPTER THREE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPING THE THEORY, PRACTICES AND POWER OF BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE

The spiritual nurture of young children became a priority for Memorial Presbyterian Preschool as its Children's Chapel program developed. As a way to assess its effectiveness, the leaders listened carefully for stories from parents about how the addition of this Sabbath time experience was influencing family life. One such story is this:

Melanie, dropped her bike on the ground and ran to her mother, as she was getting into the driver's seat of the family car. Tired from a long day, Jeanne sighed as she leaned out of the door, expecting to have an argument about who was and who was not going to the store.

"Mommy, here," said Melanie, handing her mother a silver streamer from her handlebars. "Here is a blessing for you, Mommy."

The development of theoretical foundations of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture became desirable in order to better engage children in the tasks of spiritual formation and evaluate its efficacy and to provide optimum nurturing companionship for all persons in times of difficulty. It also became clear that understanding spiritual nurture would enhance the ways Children's Chapel was practiced and experienced.

Current academic and popular literature are replete with books and articles about spirituality, and spiritual direction. In the United States, until very recently, the most

accessible materials were grounded in Roman Catholic and traditional pietist faiths, or had a “New Age”¹ sensibility.

While evangelical and mainline Christianity had, in the last two decades, begun to name and take seriously the nature and nurture of adult spiritual life, little attention had been given to the spiritual nurture of children and teenagers or what constituted spirituality in those who often lacked the verbal or abstract thinking abilities to describe their experiences.

According to Wheaton University Professor, Dr. Donald Ratcliff, who has studied the spirituality and religious education of children for more than 25 years, it was only with the 1998 publication of the seminal work, *The Spirit of the Child*, authored by Dr. David Hay and Dr. Rebecca Nye in Great Britain, that scholarly attention began being paid in this country to the crucial importance of identifying and attending to the spiritual nature of the child. “Many, perhaps most, subsequent research studies made use of their definitions of ‘spirituality’ and the broad perspective of spirituality that encompasses all children everywhere.”²

The Spirit of the Child was written out of “concern about the coherence of society as a whole, allied to an intuition that spirituality has importance in maintaining what Philip Selznick calls the ‘moral commonwealth’.”³

¹ Of or relating to a complex of spiritual and consciousness-raising movements originating in the 1980's and covering a range of themes from a belief in spiritualism and reincarnation to advocacy of holistic approaches to health and ecology, as cited in *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “New Age.”

² Ratcliff, *Child Spirituality*.

³ Hay and Nye, *Spirit of the Child*, v.

It was that same concern, as well as the struggle by the Protestant church to come to grips with its declining population, that propelled this new academic interest in the spirituality of children (and even more recently, of teens). But little intentional work had been done to identify and understand just what constitutes excellent spiritual nurture of children or youth. “Spirituality” has been defined with a great deal of consistency across the theological spectrum of authors studying children, teens and spirituality. Definitions which follow are consistent with the insights of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practitioners.

Defining Spirituality and Spiritual Nurture

A spiritual life is not something we begin to lead or to cultivate in our children, after analyzing every book in the Bible, or resolving to be do-gooders, or even deciding we believe in God. Spirit is our life’s breath...Spirituality is not something we need to pump into our children, as though it were nitrous oxide at the dentist’s. Like oxygen, it is freely available to each of us at every moment of life. Spirit is in every breath we draw and so is spiritual nurture.⁴

According to the editors of *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality:*

Perspectives from the World’s Religions, the working definition of spirituality which guided their book was:

“Spirituality is the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual participates in the sacred-something greater than the self. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility. It is experienced,

⁴ Kathleen Norris, *unknown*; quoted by Betty Ellis, Ruth Price, Sarah Adams, *Growing in Faith with Children* (a leadership workshop, 2006).

formed, shaped, and expressed through a wide range of religious narratives, beliefs, and practices, and is shaped by many influences in family, community, culture, and nature.”⁵

In *Children’s Spirituality*, Ratcliff and May explored, in the first chapter, the spiritual essence which is a part of each human being. They wrote,

Children are just as much spiritual beings as are the adults in their lives. From the very beginning of life, infants seem to live a life of awe and wonder, often transfixed in the moment. . . . When just a little older, youngsters can lose track of time and space as they watch ants building a huge mountain, at least a mountain in comparison to their small size. . . . The children stare entranced at the non-stop activity, never dreaming that an ancient sage once said, “Consider the ant” (Proverbs 6). Spiritual aliveness knows no age barriers; the young child and aged philosopher stand on level ground.⁶

Spiritual learning, spiritual development, spiritual education and spiritual formation are commonly used phrases in texts related to children and their spiritual life. But few definitions of “spiritual nurture” were to be found. A useful one is that spiritual nurture is the simple act of nourishing another (feeding or sustaining with substances necessary to life and growth).

Another description which encompassed a Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture understanding was found in material of the Office of Spiritual Formation, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Though this office’s work is focused generally upon adults, as seen through the lens of reformed Christianity, it is applicable particularly for its inclusion of the corporate and other-oriented natures of spiritual growth:

Spiritual formation is the activity of the Holy Spirit which molds our lives into the likeness of Jesus Christ. This likeness is one of

⁵ Yust, et al., eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*, 8.

⁶ Ratcliff, *Children's Spirituality*, 7–8.

deep intimacy with God and genuine compassion for all of creation. The Spirit works not only in the lives of individuals but also in the church, shaping it into the body of Christ. We cooperate with this work of the Spirit through certain practices that make us more open and responsive to the Spirit's touch, disciplines such as Sabbath keeping, works of compassion and justice, discernment, worship, hospitality, spiritual friendships, and contemplative silence.⁷

Chapter five, 'A Spirituality of Caring,' in Barbara Kimes Myers book, *Young Children and Spirituality*, began with these words from Abraham Joshua Heschel, " . . . we meet as human beings who have much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a soul, fear, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding the kinship of being human."⁸ Heschel captured the nature of the spiritual nurture of children. His statement is a doorway into the arenas of poetry and prayer where one must move in order to develop a useable definition of this work with young ones: The spiritual nurture of children is the process which occurs when one or more children and one or more supportive older persons meet as human kin and enter into the "secret of childhood" as voiced in Maria Montessori's prayer, "Help us, O God, to enter into the secret of childhood, so that we may know, love and serve the child in accordance with the laws of thy justice and following thy holy will."⁹

⁷ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Office of Spiritual Formation, "Definition of Spiritual Formation," *Hungryhearts*, Spring 2004, 2.

⁸ Myers, *Young Children and Spirituality*, 59.

⁹ Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, vii.

Understanding Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture

The term “Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture” originated in Colorado Springs, Colorado in November 2000, with the inception of First Steps Spiritual Nurture Center for Hurting Children and Teens. Founder, the Rev. Leanne Hadley, an Elder in the United Methodist Church, chose the term as descriptive of ways of practicing spiritual nurture which stresses the blessings of inner strength and God’s presence in each person’s life. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is a form of care used with children, teens and adults today in a variety of settings around the United States.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture began with the belief that children are imbued with innate spiritual strength. When assisted in identifying, claiming and strengthening their own spirits, they are able to maintain their connection with God throughout life. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture presupposed also that children could discover, with God’s help, in relationship with caring adults who walk with them on their journey through life, how they can best thrive, cope and, when needed, heal. This becomes especially important in traumatic times and during crisis, as they grow to become the children, teenagers, and adults God has called them to be.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture posits the holiness of children and all people. Understood this way, holiness means that each person is born in the image of God, with a natural and instinctual spiritual connection with God.

This connection:

- provides the basis for growth in faith and life, in healing and in the ability to solve problems.

- is a means of maintaining and heightening self esteem, without which we can not truly care for others.
- when nurtured and encouraged, flourishes throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.

Practitioners of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture recognize that:

- children accept God's relationship with them and theirs with God.
- caring adults can help children identify their experiences of God and encourage each child's religious potential, by participating with them, learning from them, providing them with opportunities to grow as children of God.
- in encouraging their spiritual capacity, adults help children identify, claim and strengthen their spirit, their relationship with God and their ability to live lives of love. This spirituality also provides the basis for healing, coping and thriving in everyday life.

A key component of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is Holy Listening. Through the process of Holy Listening children, as well as those of all ages, are enabled to express the things they believe about God, to explore and make spiritual sense of what is happening in their lives, to use their own spiritual strength to work through problems, and learn to trust their inner selves, knowing that God is present with them. In addition, they grow in their connectedness with those around them, in their capacity to pray for others, and in their abilities to lead loving, compassionate lives.

Adults using Holy Listening in the spiritual nurture of children are blessed also by seeing with "new eyes" the presence of God in their own lives, as well as those of the children. They find their spiritual lives deepened and nourished.

In 2001, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, after preaching a sermon based on Jeremiah 17:5–11, shared the following prayer:

“God of all our times: We have known since the day of our birth that our primal task is to grow to basic trust in you, to rely on you in every circumstance, to know that you would return when you are away, to trust that in your absence you will soon be present, to be assured that your silence bespeaks attentiveness and not neglect, to know that in your abiding faithfulness, all will be well and all will be well.”¹⁰

Those who know Eric Erikson’s *Childhood and Society* hear the echo, consciously or unconsciously intended, of the first task of life in Erikson’s developmental schemata: Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust.¹¹ In the prayer could be heard also, the fear/assurance pattern of the newborn infant and parental care. Brueggemann’s phrase ‘to grow to basic trust’ affirmed, along with Erickson, that if the first task was reasonably well negotiated, the foundation was laid and the growth continued. If the first task was reasonably well cared for, then the journey continued on ‘good legs.’

The Jeremiah passage with which Brueggemann worked, contrasted the state of blessedness/cursedness of they who trust in God or in human strength only. The one who trusted in God was like a ‘tree planted by the water, that sends out its roots by the stream.’¹² This again was an image of growth well begun and nourished in a state of blessedness where trust was first learned in parental arms and care and was seen, as appropriate, to be the primal task of those growing in faith.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 47.

¹¹ Eric Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1950), 247–251.

¹² Jeremiah 17:8

As is spoken in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture with young children, to each by name

God loves you
 God created you for God's own
 God is with you
 God blesses you.¹³

The pillars upon which the author's act of ministry was predicated are identified and briefly discussed in the section which follows. They are then elaborated as the riches of the biblical, historical and theological resources are considered.

The Pillars Under-Girding the Practices of Children's Chapel

There are seven pillars upon which Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture with Children's Chapel stand (See visual representation in Appendix A). These are:

1. Children are of inestimable value to God and therefore must be among the highest priority for adults.
2. Holiness is connectedness, wholeness, sanctification, spirituality, grace. In the holiness of children, the kingdom of God is manifest.
3. Community, defined by the quality of relationships developed within, is foundational to the spiritual growth of children and also of those adults who live and work with and learn from children.
4. Sabbath is a way of living which places importance on being present, experiencing the goodness of God's creation, growing in connection with that creation and with all others who are also of infinite worth to God.

¹³ Donald Rogers, "To Grow in Basic Trust," *The Blessing Center*, 2005, <http://blessingcenter.org/> (accessed April 2006); used with permission.

5. (Holy) Listening is the act in which God is present, the one listened to is enabled to grow more whole and the listener too, may be transformed in this encounter by being wholly present for the other.
6. Worship is the work of all God's people. Prayer as an act of worship, connects one with God and with others.
7. Blessing is the affirmation that God is present; that God has given the receiver the strength and enabling vitality to grow in wholeness, throughout life, no matter what comes along the way.

The following quotes about *children* exemplify a Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture attitude toward them:

“People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, ‘Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.”¹⁴

“Thus, when he says that we must become like children, he is not praising helplessness. He is inviting us to join the game of freedom and creativity, preconditions of human wholeness and social rebirth. Dance, celebration, and joy, the substance of the heavenly ‘sabbath’—the day when productivity is forbidden and all is play—are now our only hope.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Mark 10:13–16

¹⁵ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*.

“Children are the human beings most closely associated with an active embodiment of the ‘*imago dei*,’ the image of God in which we are each born and the relationality to which we are called.”¹⁶

They are, according to Jesus, an exhibition of the kingdom of God within our midst. Children need adults to enjoy them, to take them seriously, to affirm them in whatever their stages of development, to encourage their continued and deepening connection with God.

In *holiness* each one is born. Persons also become holy; connected to God and growing in God. Understanding and affirming the holiness of children means acknowledging the *imago Dei*, the image of God in which each person is made and accepting this holiness as a “divine spark” embodied within each person throughout life. Seeing the image of God in others means relationships change, interactions are challenged, lives transformed. Knowing children as holy does not mean they are perfect or incapable of sin. It means recognizing each person as a God-bearer.¹⁷ In the midst of the process of becoming involved in a world beset by sin and evil, it also means acknowledging that God’s grace has had an encompassing redemptive effect, and that means including all, even to the “least of these.”

¹⁶ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*.

¹⁷ Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 17.

The Gospel passages where Jesus was in the company of children express the very heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus said simply, “Look at these little ones, these children. They ARE the Kingdom of God in your midst.”¹⁸

There are three basic ways of looking at children, out of which are formed adult thoughts about and interactions with them and, by extension, with all ages:

1. Children are born into sin and have a bent toward evil—adults do TO children.
2. Children are born unformed clay or blank slates—adults do FOR children, molding them.
3. Children are born holy, in the image of God with unfolding potential as well as immediate revelatory standing—adults do WITH children; walking alongside them as they develop into all God has in store for them; delighting in learning from them as well as teaching them.

Community, out of which enduring relationships form, is defined as belonging. According to David Jensen community is relationship, an exhibition of the *imago Dei*.¹⁹ Community is hospitality, where nurture occurs and relationships are nourished . Hospitality is integral to a healthy community where all are welcome.

Such a *koinonia* community is foundational to the spiritual growth of children and also of those adults who live and work with and learn from children. Trusted adults and safe places are critical for children, both those whose home life includes these and particularly for those who desperately need security, safe touch, wholesome boundaries, a place to be themselves.

¹⁸ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 29.

¹⁹ Jensen, *Graced Vulnerability*, 32.

The *Sabbath* pillar can be described as sacred space, silence, quiet, time to simply BE. Sabbath life is trust, faith and a creative hopefulness which works toward wholeness and restoration. We are called to a quality of living that reflects the injunctions, if not the particulars, of being conscious of God and God's blessings and of being concerned that others, particularly the marginalized in any culture, might enjoy the same awareness, gratitude and shalom. This is a call to 'the good life'—a life variously described as one of peace, fullness of relationships, respect for others, and remembering God.

Children naturally live lives synchronous with Sabbath. This Sabbath sense is socialized out of them as they become more and more inculcated into today's culture.

Holy Listening is mindfulness and being fully present with the one speaking. It is holy conversation, three-way with both a horizontal and vertical dimension. Listening is also understanding, affirmation, indirect communication; it is symbolic.

Holy Listening consists of more than being polite. It is being reverently attuned to what the other is saying, listening with the whole being and with the knowledge that God is at hand. Holy Listening can be modeled by adults for children, who easily pick up this way of attending to each other, of showing compassion and caring.

Worship is the work of God's people, both grown and young. Composed of numerous elements, worship draws people of all ages toward each other and God.

Of critical importance is ritual, a counted-upon movement through and in time. It echoes Sabbath in sacred space, silence, singing, quiet, thanksgiving. Words and actions, song, poetry, and liturgy are repeated again and again so it becomes part of the child, the community, the relational aspect of the time together.

Prayer is thanksgiving, it is presenting and receiving joys and concerns. The Chapel way of praying is also termed “kerplunk prayer,” voicing a concern into the midst of the community, without any need for a response from the rest of the gathered body. All that is expected is an acknowledgement that God and those who hear will hold the concern and thereby lighten the hurting person’s burden. Prayer comes naturally to children. The job of adults is to encourage their praying, to provide them with opportunities and ways to pray, to learn from them about talking to God, to say “Yes!” to each child’s connection to God.

Children naturally adopt an attitude of thankful prayer. As they are affirmed in this practice, the young ones, and the adults with them, are reassured that this is a gift from God, a gift from the one who knows now, as of old, how life works best.

Further elements of worship space and time include:

- Serenity is especially important in worship which is designed to elicit wonder and awe. Sonya Stewart voiced this understanding well, in *Young Children and Worship*, as she asked the children to come to the worship space, finding the quiet in themselves.²⁰
- Things of the faith learned with a consciousness of God’s presence.
- Space, recognized as sacred and affirming all space as sacred, created by God.
- The candle, which when lighted acknowledges God’s presence.
- A blessing which occurs each time.

²⁰ Stewart and Berryman, *Young Children in Worship*, 66–67.

Blessing, is both encouragement and pronouncement; it is God’s gift of enabling vitality. In The Interpreter’s series, *Genesis* volume, Walter Brueggemann wrote that the creation narrative was a statement about the blessing God had ordained into the processes of human life. He said, “The delight in the goodness and blessing of life is asserted against the view that life is neutral or hostile and that God is an outsider to it all.”²¹

The blessings of God are given to each person and each one is nourished by a regular reminder of this. Naming, creating, calling, loving, and presence are components of blessing, which, though extended by one person to another during Chapel time, is not a blessing of the leader, but of God.

In summary, Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is spirituality formation with a focus upon “going alongside” a person seeking to deepen connection with or become more united to God, as she or he grows in relationship with God and others. The development of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture drew upon work of scholars, educators, parents and others. It appreciates and includes the insights of children and teens. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture continues to articulate particular aspects of spiritual nurture which are believed to be necessary for the fruitful engagement one with another and with others, out of which develops increasing intimacy with God, individual realizations of the interior strength with which each has been blessed and deeper connection with all of God’s creatures and creation. Again, the foundational understandings of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture are:

Children are holy, valued by God; persons in their own right, from whom adults can learn.

²¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 36–38.

Holiness is an attribute of children, who are not perfect, but neither are they burdened with original sin or guilt. If holiness is lost as a person ages, it is the result of a society which is too greatly under the influence of the powers and principalities about which Paul spoke.

Out of *community* develop relationships through which human beings embody the *imago Dei*, hospitality is practiced, the stranger and sojourner invited in.

Sabbath is a way of living everyday life, aware, appreciative and in response to God's active involvement in creation.

Holy Listening is practiced in community where the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the act of listening are acknowledged and celebrated.

Worship occurs in a myriad of ways, allowing persons of all ages to become attuned to God's presence and grow in relationship with God and others.

Blessing is a practice which affirms God's love and connection with the one blessed and which stresses that this blessing is of God, not of human making.

Biblical, Historical and Theological Foundations

The Child

Children are of inestimable value to God and therefore must be among the highest priority for the adult koinonia.

Children were cherished members of the Jewish community around the time of Jesus birth. Even so, Jesus made statements about children which were of a radical nature. These were discerned by seeing the way children were viewed throughout western history, beginning with the scriptures which were Jesus' own. According to the

scholarship of John Dominic Crossan it was essential to have an understanding of the “Big Picture,” the anthropology, sociology and religions out of which Christianity grew and within which Jesus lived.²²

Jesus was raised in a stratified agrarian socio-economic system, which had been in place for 200 years, a system where subsistence and need were the identifying marks for most of the members of the culture. Rome ruled not only Palestine, but most of the thriving region ringing the Mediterranean Sea. Romans along this stretch of the fertile crescent, along with their Jewish lackeys, of which much of the religious establishment was a part, made up no more than ten percent of the population. The vast majority of people, adult and children, were in the underclass, always a day (or drought) away from slipping into the very bottom, from which the dispossessed, itinerants, day laborers and beggars struggled to stay alive. Most Jews were part of the peasant class, village-based people who owned two to four acres of land, from which they scratched a living. Peasants did not move up the social ladder to join the small number of people who comprised the ruling, merchant and priestly classes. Mobility was downward with artisans beneath the peasants, followed by the “unclean” and “expendable.” Jesus’ family, most believe, were members of the artisan class, five percent of the male population, who were carpenters, fishermen and masons.²³

Jesus was raised in the middle of Jewish village life by parents who thoroughly taught him the precepts of his religion. Rural life among the people of Nazareth, though

²² David Hawley, “Biblical Scholarship,” speech delivered to annual meeting of retired clergy, May, 2005, Dayton, OH.

²³ Ibid.

hard, was close knit. Children grew up among the adults, learning alongside them. They were taught mostly at home. There was little biblical material related to family life during this time, so it was necessary to go to extra-biblical writings to better understand the world in which Jesus grew up. The Bible did tell an important story of Jesus going with his extended family to Jerusalem at the age of twelve for the festival of Passover. While there, he left his family to study with the Temple rabbis, causing his parents no end of grief until he was found.²⁴

Jesus' ancestors, the Hebrews, a tribal and often dispersed people, coalesced into Judaism with the rebuilding of the Temple in around 500 BCE. It was at this time that the Jewish scriptures were compiled. In the law and history, stories and poetry, songs and prayers there can be discerned care for and valuing of children. Traditionally it was thought that children's worth lay solely in their ability to carry on the family lineage. Newer research indicated that Semitic tribes valued their children and the Hebrews stood out among these people by their commitment to the children in their midst. In an article written by Kohler and Philipson, it was noted that, "In the domestic life of the ancient Hebrews the mutual respect existing between parents and children was a marked feature . . . it was of first importance with the Hebrews, as is evident from the frequent mention of the duties toward parents."²⁵

²⁴ Luke 2:41

²⁵ Kaufman Kohler and David Philipson, "Blessing Of Children," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, http://jewishencyclopedia.com/view_friendly.jsp?artid=1133&letter=B/ (accessed May 10, 2006).

Stories of children as highly desired gifts from God were found throughout the Old Testament. Roy Zuck pointed out that the “Bible includes hundreds, even thousands, of references to children and related subjects. . . .”²⁶

The first children mentioned were the offspring of the mythic Adam and Eve. Prehistory stories of children reached a peak moment in the tale of the angelic visit to Abraham and Sarah, where Sarah laughed incredulously at the messengers’ words of a child to be born of her dry and shriveled body.²⁷

Following the birth of Isaac and the demotion of Hagar in the family, the model of a child as one who prayed, was found in Gen. 21:14–20b. God heard and answered Ishmael’s prayer.

Children in the Old Testament were, as the Psalmist says in Psalm 139, known before birth and empowered to live out their calls from God while yet very young. Some examples include:

- The account of Miriam’s pivotal role in the infant Moses’ return to his mother, in the second chapter of Exodus.
- Samuel’s call as a prophet, which begins with these words, “The boy Samuel was ministering before the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.”(1 Sam. 2:18)
- David’s anointing by Samuel years later, while he was a shepherd boy in 1 Samuel 16 and the story of his childish strength in 1 Sam. 17:42–45.

²⁶ Roy Zuck, *Precious In His Sight* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 13.

²⁷ Genesis 18:11–12

These were representative of significant roles the young played in the ancient history of Israel. Later, one of Judaism's most important prophets, Jeremiah, received God's call, as a child. In the book of Jeremiah, the 139th psalm echoed, "Now the word of the Lord came to me saying, 'Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.' Then I said, 'Ah, Lord God! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.' But the Lord said to me, 'Do not say, "I am only a boy;" for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you,' says the Lord." (Jer. 1:4–10)

The book of Acts and the letters were the first New Testament books written. They said little about children, but within the context of particular scriptures could be found an acceptance of the importance of children in the structure of the families within the early New Testament church. The first generations of Christians were primarily Jewish and those who were Gentiles joined a very Jewish church, with all its customs and mores. Children and slaves, as well as adults, were a part of each household and when the patriarch became a Christian, the whole family was baptized with him.²⁸

While most of Paul's uses of the word child/children referred to those young in the faith, the references to child/children, by non-Pauline authors, were used both to refer to real children and also as metaphors. James taught the members of his Christian community to care for the widows and orphans (James 1:27) The three letters of John all contained loving, gentle references to children, and at least some of these were clear allusions to the young in years.

²⁸ Acts 10

The surrounding Greco-Roman society had a much more utilitarian approach to children. Free male citizens were thought to possess *logos*, or rational thought. This was considered to be the most desirable quality for a human being. It was believed that slaves, children and barbarians had none and as such were thought of as worthless.

Roman law decreed fathers as absolute heads of their families and children as property to be owned or disowned as he desired. “There is no doubt that children were treated in a very rough way, and relatively many of them were exposed to what we today would call violence and sexual abuse.”²⁹

Plato (428/427–348/347 B.C.E.), one of the most prestigious thinkers of his day, whose imprimatur is found today in logic, philosophy and religion, called children “marginal actors” and “wax tablets” referring to them as malleable because of their lack of *logos*/intelligence.³⁰ This understanding of children, held by those in power over the Jewish community, influenced early Christian leaders, even though their worldviews had been formed within the culture of Judaism.

As the New Testament church was being established, a discussion began about the role of celibacy in church leaders. With the ascendancy of Paul’s argument that celibacy was of a higher, more virtuous order than sexual activity, and marriage should be the lesser road taken, an implicit devaluing of children, as products of sexual intercourse, got a foothold among the thinkers and other leaders in the nascent movement.

²⁹ Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 54.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

In addition, Paul's conversion experience, from his former life as oppressor of the followers of Jesus, and shill for the Romans, which caused him also to betray his own Jewish people, were the ground of his theological thought. Some of Paul's writings grew out of his need to make peace with himself. As churches began in various places under his leadership, their arguments, personal behaviors and tendency to follow teachers who presented ideas in opposition to Paul, buttressed his understanding that not only was he a sinner in desperate need of salvation, but so were all other people. The experience Paul had of the gracious love of Christ turning his life around became of less importance in his thinking than his sin which had caused the need for his radical transformation. The earliest creed spoken about Jesus was "Jesus is Lord" and there was little need to say anything more. Paul's mantra became, "Christ crucified!" Laughlin states, "forming the heart of Paul's message, (was) the resurrected, ascended, and exalted 'Lord Jesus Christ', who is the 'Son of God' in a unique sense."³¹

Paul's single-minded focus upon Christ's death and resurrection and the implications of this sacrifice for humanity, was a message for those with *logos*, who could think and argue and make abstract decisions. Paul was, apparently, unmarried, childless and lived his life in itinerancy. As a man with a logical, sharply-honed mind, given to using terms related to law and judicial process, he likely had little time for or interest in the youngest of those around him, who played with abandon, who spoke in metaphors and who could not engage in the thought processes which Paul held in high esteem.

³¹ Paul A. Laughlin, *Remedial Christianity* (Santa Rosa: Polebridge Press, 2000), 121–122.

It was in the Gospel writings on the life and teachings of Jesus that were found the most compelling and also counter-cultural (within the context of the authors' times and also for today) valuing of children as emblematic of the Kingdom of God, as bearers of the image of God, as representative of all who were (and are) on the margins of society. It was also within these stories that the children, who were taught, also became the teachers of the ways of Rabbi Jesus.

It is worth noting the contrast between the great importance of children in Jesus' ministry, and the earlier writings in the New Testament, as one keeps in mind both the historical worth of children in Jewish culture and the surrounding Greco-Roman world where children were considered of little more value than the dog on the street. Here again, both in Jesus' high regard for children and in the Gospel writers inclusion of children in their narratives, are illustrations of the sweeping nature of Jesus' ideas, his claims upon people and the radical vision of the Gospels' authors.

There are numerous accounts in which children played pivotal roles. The author found the child as compassionate, guileless giver in John 6:5–9; as teacher in Luke 2:42, 46–49; as exemplary, in the story of a child as the one who best exhibits the *imago Dei*, told and retold in Matthew 18:1–5, Mark 9:33–37 and again in Luke 9:46–48. The Gospel writers included the healing of children, children as followers, children as examples for Jesus' teachings. Joyce Ann Mercer cited an intriguing use of a child as a model of discipleship in the stories of the boy who ran off without his clothes when Jesus was arrested (Mark 14:51–52) who then reappears in Mark 16:5–7 as the young man encountered by the women outside the empty tomb.³²

³² Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 63–65.

Jesus neither romanticized nor demonized children; his view of them was practical and realistic, as pointed out in Weber's exegesis of the story of the children's conflict while at play, in Matthew 11:16–19 and Luke 7:31–35.³³ Jesus claimed for children the role of teachers, rather than solely taught, in his words to adults about “becoming like a child” in Matthew 18:3, Mark 10:16, Luke 18:15–17³⁴.

Jesus extended radical hospitality to children, as representatives of the most oppressed and marginalized. The consummate story of Jesus welcoming the children told in Matthew 19:13–15, Mark 10:13–16 and Luke 18:15–17 has been immortalized in syrupy, romantic pictures. The real children of his day were not the clean, sweet, well-fed little ones pictured in such Sunday School art. The children of the Gospels, these unique gifts of God, were likely to have been the ragged, dirty, ill-kempt youngest of the many insignificant people in Palestine. These stories, which mirrored one another, pointed out the nature of the upside down Kingdom about which Jesus spoke. They came in the midst of a continuing narrative, moving ever more quickly toward Jerusalem. Crowds of people surrounded Jesus all the time, as he preached and taught, healed and argued with those who came his way. At times he was tired and overwhelmed by the press of people. Yet when the disciples attempted to keep children away from him, Jesus was indignant, meaning his response was “from much grief,” a very strong word used only seldom in the New Testament and here alone, as a response of Jesus.

He chastised any who would keep children from him. A powerful treatment of Mark 10:13–16, was be found in chapter two, of Hans-Ruedi Weber's book, *Jesus and*

³³ Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

the Children. Weber's conclusion was that the "very core of the Gospel is revealed" in Jesus' actions and words related to this incident.

The original Aramaic must therefore have said, "To these and other such children belong the Kingdom of God." . . . At that very moment, the children (were revealed as) the greatest gift possible, the Kingdom of God, which is both a present and future reality. Jesus intended to teach (the adults) about the gratuitous love of God, assured to the children in Jesus' prophetic words and action, (which) turns upside down both the Greek and Jewish classifications (of importance). Children receive preeminence, if human realities are considered from the point of view of God's Kingdom.³⁵

In summary, grounding a respect for children as inestimably valuable to God and welcoming them as fully participating members of our families, congregations and communities is soundly biblical and it is in the Gospels that one finds the importance of children explicitly stated. The first letters to the churches outlined the problems within and from without, with which the Christian community struggled from its first Pentecost. Children, as part of Christian households, were a part of the church, but with no consideration given to their needs or capacities as people connected to God. The ascendancy of Paul's theology of sin and his argument for a celibate leadership, along with both violent external oppression and the broadly accepted anticipation of an immediate *eschaton*, turned the focus of church life to Jesus' return and the need for the faithful to remain stalwart until that time.

But, there was no second coming of the Lord. The church grew in numbers and spread geographically. Paul's theology came to be the most powerful among the competing voices of the church leaders who evangelized along with him and who came

³⁵ Ibid., 19–20.

after him. While there appears to have been no deliberate effort to keep children at the edges of the new Christian faith, the words of Jesus about children and the stories of children in the Gospels, never took even a peripheral role in the development of the doctrines of the church. The compelling nature of the dangers facing the early church, perceived as threatening its survival, along with controversies over fledgling doctrine, were all-consuming. Other than in considerations related to baptism, children mostly disappeared from the teaching and writing of the leadership. Councils were held, the basic confessions of traditional Christianity were adopted, heretics were exposed and within a few hundred years, the centralization of power and standardization of what comprised acceptable belief in the Church were completed.

Within the theology being developed by the early church fathers, there *were* writings consistent with the Gospels and a high view of God's love and providential care for creation, which could be interpreted as sympathetic to children and accepting of their importance, as other than future adults. Aristides of Athens, a second-century apologist, thought it important and striking enough to point out that Christians valued their children and considered them gifts of God.

Of particular interest were these words of Iraenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, writing in the late second century, "Jesus came to save all through his own person, all, that is, that through him are reborn to God; infants, children, adolescents, young and old . . . He was made an infant for infants, sanctifying infancy, a child among children, sanctifying childhood . . ." ³⁶

³⁶ Miles, *The Word Made Flesh*, 33.

O.M. Bakke noted that Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Shepherd of Hermas used children as metaphors for behaviors adults should adopt. According to him, “Although Clement (a third-century Church Father) paints a picture of the child that emphasizes qualities fitting his program of transforming people into what he considered the proper understanding of Christian life, the very fact that he uses children as positive paradigms is striking.”³⁷

Other influential men, such as Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate Bible, a contemporary of Augustine (354–430 C.E.), associated children with “shame and sorrow,” because procreation had to take place in order for them to come into being. Continuing to advance Paul’s understanding of the better way to grow a church, he saw celibacy as a purer route to the love of God.³⁸ Along with an almost universal adoption in the church of Augustine’s idea of original sin, the increasing elevation of the celibate life, as being closer to God, led to a continuing depreciation of childhood and children, and a unceasing decline in any consideration of their value to church life.

Augustine of Hippo’s writings had and still have an enormous impact on the theology of the Christian church. Some of his profound words could be applied to people of all ages, and result in gratitude to God for God’s bounteous grace and mercy. But his work on sin, which grew at least as much out of a misreading of Paul in Romans 5:12³⁹ as it did from his desperate need to be freed from his licentious past, has done incalculable damage to children in and out of the church.

³⁷ Bakke, *When Children Became People*.

³⁸ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 149.

³⁹ Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 78.

From an early Hebrew family and tribe orientation, the Christian Church, as it is primarily understood today, adapted to and adopted the values of the predominate surrounding culture which reached a pinnacle with Charlemagne. A rigid authoritarian stress on feudal hierarchy, which further separated the rulers from the ruled, was used to “win the world for Christ.” There were winners and losers in politics and religion and power used religion for its own purposes. These forces worked against any theological development which would have included an orientation toward Jesus’ thoughtful and careful consideration of children (or any on the margins of society).

In *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*, O.M. Bakke explored, in great depth, the place of children in the society and early church while theologies were developing about sin and innocence, guilt and the need for humanity to come to salvation through an intermediary, the church. His consideration of Augustinian original sin permeating views of children, especially within the church, even today, is exceptional.⁴⁰

Another historian, Margaret Miles, a protestant Augustinian, helpfully reminded this author that, “Perspective, composed of many elements (such as social location, age, race, ethnicity, gender, class, education and other variables), both enables and limits one’s ability to notice and understand.”⁴¹ In her book, she attempted to provide as broad a picture as possible of the world in which Christianity developed through the 1800s, and of the world within the Christian faith, with its diversity, controversy and schism, in order to consider the roles of women and those not associated with mainstream Christianity in

⁴⁰ Bakke, *When Children Became People*.

⁴¹ Miles, *The Word Made Flesh*, 390.

shaping Christian thought. Unfortunately, there was no mention of children, which is representative of the fact that children remain mostly absent in theological and religious history books into the twenty-first century.

Miles included a helpful distinction about theology as it developed in the Eastern church. Three men were called theologians; they were not systematic thinkers, but mystical and poetic in their writings. About Western theological knowledge, she said, it was “primarily analysis, definition, and exploration of the relationship of one theological proposition to another.”⁴² On the other hand Eastern theological wisdom was cataphatic (“knowledge that can be affirmed about God on the basis of revelation [scripture] and experience”) and/or apophatic (knowledge which recognizes the limits of human knowledge of God, acknowledging its metaphoric and imprecise nature. It has been called the way of negation.”)⁴³ While there was no space here to explore any further the differences in theological processes in the Eastern and Western churches, it seemed clear that an Eastern understanding of knowledge could be more open to children’s wisdom and thought than that of the west, where language and abstract cognition were necessities.

According to theologian Andrew Park, “the predominant view of the Eastern Church denies the theory of original sin and universal guilt...They affirm the relatively free and spontaneous will of humans.”⁴⁴ Might it be possible that children would have been welcomed into the church universal if the strengths of both eastern and western

⁴² Ibid., 117.

⁴³ Ibid., 117.

⁴⁴ Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 79.

liturgy and theology had been available throughout history to God's people, in the Christian church?

Christian theology developed as all theology does, out of the need to make sense of the world, God and humanity's place in creation and in relationship to God; and usually, out of a need to make a particular point, to defend an idea, to grind an axe. History, until very recently was only recorded by those in power. Within, behind and next to the predominant views of history and theology there were and are other streams of thought. It was there that some nuggets of understanding about and valuing of children were found. These threads anchored Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture to the historic Abrahamic faiths and wove through Christian history and theological development.

During the Middle Ages, between the end of the Holy Roman Empire and the Enlightenment, charges of heresy often rang out. Winners and losers were sometimes declared by virtue of being most in favor with the King, the Pope or other power broker of the day. In the places where Christian theology was being reformulated, the losers of these battles were often those whose views of God and creation are more in line with Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, than the ideas which held sway and won the day.

For example, Peter Abelard's life (d. 1142) was so full of turmoil that his gracious understanding of God was drowned out by the violence which surrounded him. Abelard's moral influence theory of atonement was much more in line with valuing children, than was Anselm's understanding of the death of Jesus as a way of satisfying the honor of his father, God.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ William P. Anderson and Richard L. Diesslin, *A Journey Through Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 67–72.

Jan Amos Comenius, ignored by some of the classic treatises on the history of the Christian Church, has a theology chair named for him at the University of Prague. Comenius (1592–1670) was best known in Europe during his life for his education reforms . . . seen as a result of his faith and theology . . . education was in essence a pastoral calling. It was the process by which people could be trained to see beyond the apparent chaos of the world and discover the underlying harmony of God’s universe.⁴⁶

Comenius “saw all truth as God’s truth, and believed education included the understanding God had given man through three areas: human reasoning, nature and Scripture. He saw God’s wisdom as the final goal of education.”⁴⁷ “Infants are given us as a mirror in which we may behold humility, gentleness, benign goodness, harmony, and other Christian virtues. The Lord himself declares ‘Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.’ Since God thus wills that children be our preceptors, we owe them the most diligent attention.”⁴⁸

Ernst Troeltsch, early twentieth century Christian social ethicist, studied the history of societies and institutions in order to understand the way movements solidify into institutions which become static and convinced of their own righteousness, causing splits and new movements. According to him the church worked this same way. The New Testament church moved from a collegial place where all was owned in common, to become an institution, which operated to a considerable extent out of greed and the lust

⁴⁶ Jan Amos Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*. Translation and Introduction by Howard Louthan and Andrea Sterk. (New York: Classics of Western Spirituality: Paulist Press, 1997), 26.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁸ Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World*, 62.

for power. The Reformation splintered the united grasp of the western church on the hearts and minds of people. New churches formed, out of hope and promise. They too, became institutionalized, causing break away groups to form. Over and over, the church, in seeking to be either aligned with or in opposition to the world, has found it has no place for children.

The Reformation, which changed and split the Western church, began long before Martin Luther posted his theses upon the door of the Wittenburg Church. This act was emblematic of the battle for the hearts and minds of Christianity; it colored the continuing development of theology and doctrine, as the Church marched forward (and sometimes backward) through time. Never again though was the normative thinking funneled through the lens of a particular understanding of the faith, as it was at the height of the power of the Roman Catholic Church in the late Middle Ages.

Lutherans were joined by Calvinists and shortly after that by the Anabaptists as thoughts diverged, doctrines and churches formed and dissolved. All the ferment and discussion, argument and theological development took place beyond the ken of children. The youngest ones in the churches were taught to memorize the catechisms of the faith and to be obedient, as were all those without power within the churches and surrounding societies.

Yet, still, as before, within, under and around the predominate ideas of those whose names are best known today, were kernels of understanding related to children and their preferential place in God's world. Even from the mouths of some who excoriated adults for their sinful nature and lectured them on their responsibility for conquering the

devil within their children; from some who taught the utter depravity of humankind, there were gentle words of appreciation for and acceptance of children.

Bonnie Miller-McLemore stated, “John Calvin in particular stands out as a sixteenth century theologian who especially loved the language of children as God’s gift and understood . . . the need for a return gifting . . . In declaring the fruit’s of God purposeful beneficence, he underscores again and again that children are a special blessing.”⁴⁹

In Calvin’s defense of Infant Baptism discourse, he reminded his readers of Jesus words in Matthew 19:14, “for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven” and follows with, “And thereupon he attests his will by his act when, embracing them, he commends them with his prayers and blessing to his Father . . . how much more precious shall we regard baptism, by which we attest that infants are contained within God’s covenant, . . . by which Christ himself present declares both that they are his and are sanctified by him?”⁵⁰

Other theologians of the late Reformation could evidence in their writings a deep concern for the child. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, encouraged parents to carefully instruct their children in religious faith. While childless himself, he was influenced by his mother, Susanna and possibly too, by Nikolaus Zinzendorf, a bishop of the Moravian Church, who was visited by Wesley. Zinzendorf valued childhood play and gave children the freedom to act like children.

⁴⁹ Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 102–103.

⁵⁰ Calvin, John, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV*, ed. John T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 1325.

One of the earliest theologians of the Enlightenment, Friedrich Schleiermacher, (1768–1834), believed in the education of the whole child and had a very positive view of children and childhood in general. He wrote in his *Aphorisms on Pedagogy*, “Being a child should not prevent becoming an adult; becoming an adult should not prevent being a child.”⁵¹ Dawn DeVries, the author of this article on Schleiermacher, commended Schleiermacher to today’s reader, for his attention to children, his respect for the spirituality of childhood and for the many ways adults could learn from children.⁵²

With the inception of formal Christian Education in the late 1700s, credited to Robert Raikes, in England, a movement began which eventually would come to focus upon the educational needs of all children, from the perspective of the child’s development and needs. In its earliest stages though, Sunday Schools were begun for the purpose of supporting the economic well-being of those in power in the cities during the Industrial Revolution. Christian Education Sunday Schools came into being shortly before the Great Awakening Revival Movement of the early nineteenth century and worked hand in glove with the revivalists. Converting the heathen and saving them from the depths of eternal hell, whether adults who had never heard of Jesus Christ or children of tender years, was the aim of the revival preachers of the time.

The stress on child evangelism prodded a courageous American theologian, Horace Bushnell (1802–1876) to take a stance in opposition to the idea that children were doomed without a conversion experience. He spoke out about Christian nurture as a daily

⁵¹ Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 349.

⁵² Dawn DeVries, “Be Converted and Become as Little Children,” in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Bunge, Marcia (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001).

practice, taking place in families, and creating an understanding, “That the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as being otherwise.”⁵³ Bushnell’s respect for children and the process of Christian formation has had an enduring impact upon Christian Education and those involved in educating children, particularly in the mainline churches.

In *Welcoming Children*, Mercer argued that Neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth (b. 1886), affirmed the importance of children, as children. She noted that in his *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, Part IV, pages 278–79, he says, Christ “wills to call his little brothers and sisters . . . And in practice this means that parents are challenged to see their children from the divine standpoint.” Barth, highly esteemed by many mainline protestant adherents, included in his theological understanding that children were capable of direct encounter with the divine.⁵⁴

Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian of the early twentieth century, who once traveled in the United States visiting with seminary students. In Chicago, he sat at a bar late one night, smoking a cigar and sipping whiskey, with a small group of students. When asked to state his most important theological idea, he answered, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”⁵⁵

Lesser known to many Protestant professionals in the field of Christian Formation was Karl Rahner, a Roman Catholic, German theologian, who sought to recover insights of Thomas Aquinas that had been distorted by those who interpreted his work. Mercer

⁵³ Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861; repr., Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 10 (page references are to the reprint edition).

⁵⁴ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 139.

⁵⁵ Thomas B. Martin, narrative conversation, used with permission, 2006.

states that his work, as Aquinas', contains a "strong sense of the mystery of God and of all human existence."⁵⁶ He wrote copiously following Vatican II, becoming its primary voice. Some of his writings were particularly focused upon childhood. The eighth volume of his twenty-three book series, published in 1971, *Theological Investigations*, includes an essay entitled, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood." Rahner understood that children have an innate connection with mystery and the divine and in this essay he explored childhood, out of his understanding of time.

Childhood does not constitute past time. . . . childhood itself has a direct relationship with God . . . It must be the case that childhood is valuable in itself, that it is to be discovered anew in the ineffable future which is coming to meet us.⁵⁷

Hans-Ruedi Weber's book, *Jesus and the Children*, published in 1974, was written to give explicit attention, biblically and theologically, to the meaning of Jesus' teachings related to children, as those young in years. His work, as well as Rahner's, has had a profound effect upon the current study of children and theology.

Rubem Alves, contemporary theologian, in *Tomorrow's Child*, wrote

The world of play lives by forgetting. The long-held presuppositions never become a law of human behavior . . . the future can be created according to the shape love takes in the imagination. It is along these lines, I believe, that we must understand Jesus' admonition that "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." . . . he wanted to open the present for the future . . . Thus, when he says that we must become like children, he is not praising helplessness. He is inviting us to join the game of freedom and creativity, preconditions of human wholeness and social rebirth. Dance, celebration, and joy, the substance of the heavenly "sabbath"—the

⁵⁶ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 150.

⁵⁷ Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8 (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 35–37; quoted in Mercer, 150, footnote, 281.

day when productivity is forbidden and all is play; in this is the future . . . Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁵⁸

Alves presented a compelling argument for the ultimate importance of Jesus' teachings regarding the youngest people. Children, when nurtured, loved and supported, model the kingdom at play with God, from the time they awake until their prayers are said and they settle into the night, resting in the arms of the Spirit.

The author found that there was almost no widely read and well accepted literature, in which children were integral to considerations of Holiness, Community, Sabbath, Listening, Worship and Blessing. These foundational pillars, along with "The Child," were those upon which rest the hypothesis that the carefully structured environment around and of Children's Chapel has a profound effect upon the spiritual formation of young children and the adults who work with them.

Because writers of history, the Bible and theology seldom reflected upon the ideas above related to the concerns and needs of children, the author dealt with implications and sought places in scripture, history and theology in which children could possibly be found, where there was room for the youngest of God's people. For children do not grow in a vacuum. The people and environment, physical setting, ways in which they are tended and attended, comprise the culture in which they live and which has a lasting impact upon them.

A.S. Neil, was an example of one who understood the import of the whole of a child's surroundings upon the child's development. An educator in England, he began Summerhill School for children in 1921. Neil believed that, and his school practiced this

⁵⁸ Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 99–101.

understanding, “The function of a child is to live his own life-not the life his anxious parents think he should live, nor a life according to the purpose of the educator who thinks he knows what is best. All of this interference and guidance on the part of adults only produces a generation of robots.”⁵⁹

Neil recognized too, that each child needed careful structure in order to “live his own life.” This school, at its best, modeled a community where “Warmth, optimism, independence and self-reliance are contagious qualities of the school. The structure of the school lets kids be independent and at the same time accept their responsibilities toward each other just as the best families do.”⁶⁰

The pillars which follow are intended to offer potential structure for those working with children in Spiritual Formation, particularly in the Christian tradition, helping young ones remain consciously connected to God, able to articulate that connection in age appropriate ways and capable of drawing on the blessings of that relationship with God, in community with others, in both good times and bad.

Holiness

Holiness is connectedness, wholeness, sanctification, spirituality, grace. In the holiness of children, the kingdom of God is manifest.

⁵⁹ A.S. Neil and Summerhill School, <http://www.spinninglobe.net/albert.htm>, Albert Lamb, editor of *Summerhill School* (accessed May 19, 2006).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

One of the insights of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is that people are born “holy,” connected to God, called by God, precious to God. This does not mean pure; rather it is the holiness of being created “*imago Dei*,” in the image of God.

Holiness is a characteristic of God in creation. The concept was woven from Genesis through Revelation. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of holiness in his work *No Religion is an Island*. He wrote, “A person is not just a specimen of the species called homo sapiens. He is all of humanity in one . . . the human is the disclosure of the divine. . . Many things on this earth are precious, some are holy, humanity is the holiest of holy.”⁶¹

The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defined holiness, as derived from the Greek *hagios* (set apart), as “the devotion and purity of life associated with Christian discipleship . . .” Christian holiness was labeled also as sanctification.⁶² Children, in their innate connection with God, bring into life a promising holiness, which can be encouraged and practiced. This holiness can be a model of practice for adults and other older people, in which transparency and compassion, playfulness and passion are affirmed and returned to children in developmentally appropriate ways.

Biblical Hebrew, as well as Greek words for “holy” and “holiness,” often conveyed an understanding of “separation or set apart.” The Old Testament had many references to holy places, holy things and the Hebrew people as a holy people, called by and connected to Yahweh. In these ancient texts, according to the *Christian Word Book*,

⁶¹ Abraham Joshua Heschel, *No Religion is an Island* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 8.

⁶² Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 130.

the “root meaning of separation, with its suggestion of power, was either the same as or very much like ideas of holiness in the ancient Near East generally.”⁶³

“Holiness” often referred to characteristics of God shown through God’s activity on behalf of (sometimes in punishment of) and through the Hebrew nation. Moses’ and Miriam’s songs of triumph in Exodus 15 wove praises and celebrated the holiness attributes of Yahweh. It was because of God’s holiness that God’s people were to be holy also. In Isaiah 62, the redeemed of the Lord were called a Holy People: “. . . Say to daughter Zion, ‘See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.’ They shall be called, ‘The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord’; and you shall be called, ‘Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.’” (Isaiah 62:11b–12)

The apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon 7:24–27, included the following description of wisdom bearers, implying inborn holiness: “For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets; . . . ”

Turning to the New Testament, the word “holiness” was found only once in the Gospels, in Luke 1:75, as Zechariah spoke of the holiness of the redeemed people of the

⁶³ J. Sherrell Hendricks et al., *Christian Word Book* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 143–44.

covenant. This use is specifically related to the people of Israel. Otherwise, “holy” was connected with the Spirit of God.⁶⁴

In the letters, “holy” was used to denote a new way of life in Christ, characterized, for example, in Colossians 3:12–17.

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.
(Colossians 3:12–17)

To be without blemish, a saint, was the expectation of the author of 1st Peter when using the word holy (*hagios*) for those who were members of the church, “Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’” (1 Peter 1:14–16) Peter’s words were thought provoking because they referenced real children. If the leaders of the new religious movement had been adept at squatting down, looking children in the eye and seeing things from their vantage point, Christianity might have developed as a champion of

⁶⁴ The term Holy Spirit is used especially in John’s Gospel. The New Testament Church made little of the idea, until the fourth century when the creeds of the church began to emphasize the Holy Ghost/Spirit. A theological understanding of the Holy Spirit, as the breath of God present in each new creation made in God’s image, can be consistent with a belief in the holiness of children.

children, rather than accused throughout the centuries as responsible for some of the worst of abuses against them.

As the church grew in numbers, and was fiercely oppressed during the first three centuries after Christ's death and resurrection, it also faced internal conflicts over interpretation of the Bible and biblical witness. Creeds were written and Councils convened. Both the Nicene (381 C.E.) and the Apostles' (eighth century) creeds included the phrase "the holy, catholic Church," in which "holy" meant belonging to God.⁶⁵

The Apostle's Creed, first developed around 180 C.E., was a refutation of Marcion, a Christian living in Rome. Marcion, who believed in a God of goodness, love and mercy, rejected the Old Testament, into which he read a God of wrath and punishment. Not only were the anti-Jewish and Old Testament beliefs of Marcion rightly rejected, unfortunately so were his understandings of God. Marcion and his opponents were examples of ways the Bible was used and misused throughout its history. Often the unholy alliance of power and the church worked to raise particular theologies to the forefront while others were shunted aside or even worse, declared heresies.

Those who studied the Bible came to it with at least implicit biblical theologies. For reasons outside of the scope of this paper, theologies focused upon adult sin and separation from God, atonement and salvation, were the primary lens' through which much western church doctrine was formulated. Because of the arguments made by St. Paul and Augustine of Hippo about the universality of sin and sinfulness, primarily as manifested in adults, an understanding of the sinful nature of human beings, brought into

⁶⁵ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 6.

the world in each new birth (original sin), became an almost universal belief in western Christianity.

The doctrine of original sin affected the writings, the art, the liturgy, the child rearing practices of Christianity from early in its development. The Holy God of love, grace and goodness found in the Old and New Testaments, gradually was overtaken by the Holy God of wrath, judgment and punishment. Jesus, at first understood as Savior because of his life and resurrection, became the atoning Christ, God's child, sacrificed for the sake of an otherwise doomed creation.⁶⁶

Personal holiness, rather than having the potential to flow naturally from "*imago Dei*," too often became a response based upon fear of retribution by this God who did not hesitate to sacrifice His only begotten son. Infant baptism was practiced as the only way to protect those imbued with original sin from eternal life in hell. The catechesis of children, who could have been encouraged in holiness, was instead aimed at breaking their spirits, spirits assumed, based on Paul and Augustine's theology of desperation, to be evil at their core.

There remained though, within the expanding church, a proclivity for honoring those who were holy. In the Roman Catholic Church young people who evidenced holiness early in their lives were beatified. The earliest included Philomena, said to have been martyred in the early days of the church. Maria Goretti, an Italian child, born in 1890, was canonized in 1950, the only time a parent witnessed her child's elevation to

⁶⁶ Rita Nakashima Brock, a Disciples of Christ minister and founding Co-Director of *Faith Voices for the Common Good*, in a speech delivered to Ohio Council of Churches, January 23, 2005, Columbus, Ohio, pointed out that the earliest images of Jesus focused upon his incarnation, his acts of ministry with people and his resurrection. It was not until the tenth century that art regularly showed Jesus as suffering or dead.

sainthood. The story told about her was that at the age of 12, in an attempted rape, she was stabbed. Two days later she died, after forgiving her attacker. Later Saint Maria, appeared to her jailed attacker, leading him to his conversion.⁶⁷

In the Protestant world, reformers such as John Calvin, followed later by the founder of English Methodism, John Wesley, understood holiness as lifelong growth in discipleship and piety, rather than a mystical attribute evidenced by few. Most Protestants, throughout history, concentrated upon adult aspects of holiness and believed, along with their Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, children were tainted by original sin.

In *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, Leith noted that John Calvin insisted on a life of holiness for Christians as witness to their faith, the ultimate goal of which was to conform to the will of God.⁶⁸ For Calvin, holiness meant not just personal piety and moral behavior. The sum of the law, in light of the teachings of Jesus Christ, was

. . . that man may form his life on the model of the divine purity. For therein God has so delineated his own character, that any one exhibiting in action what is commanded, would in some measure exhibit a living image of God . . . Moreover, this holiness of life is comprehended under . . . 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength, and thy neighbour as thyself'. First, our mind must be completely filled with love to God, and then this love must forthwith flow out toward our neighbour. You see that conscience and faith unfeigned are placed at the head, in other words, true piety; and that from this charity is derived.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Patron Saint Index Topic Children*, "Maria Goretti," <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintm09.htm> (accessed May 28, 2006).

⁶⁸ John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Faith* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 79.

⁶⁹ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 415.

The archetype, the “living image of God” found in children, could be appreciated in their young lives, as they exhibited characteristics Calvin lifted from scripture representing faithful holiness.

To Wesley, authentic Christianity was marked by two inseparable qualities: holiness and happiness. Again, in the lives of children, were examples of his understanding of holiness, inborn and evident.

In his *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley defined holiness, not as achieving sinless perfection, but as having one’s heart fully fixed on God, setting aside all other affections—’perfect love.’ . . . His was no extreme ascetic holiness, however, mortifying the heart as well as the flesh. Rather, Wesley taught that True Christianity fulfilled all of a person’s deepest, truest desires, making the Christian a happier, more productive person. When pressed to define “the character of a Methodist,” he answered, in a 1742 tract of that title: ‘God is the joy of [a Methodist’s] heart . . . He is therefore happy in God, yea, always happy, as having in him ‘a well of water springing up into everlasting life’, and ‘overflowing his soul with peace and joy.’⁷⁰

Paralleling the emergence and development of Methodism in the United States, influenced by the widespread popularity of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*, and supported by late 18th century family ideals, a new era began in the history of children. Especially for those with the means to do so, children, seen as inherently good, were enjoyed in families linked by bonds of affection. At Yale University’s art gallery, a display of miniature portraits of children from 1770 through the 1850s, chronicled the preciousness of children and celebrated their childhoods.

With a growing awareness of the transience of each phase of child development, adults treasured the uniqueness of the moments in

⁷⁰ Chris Armstrong, “How John Wesley Changed America,” *Christian History and Biography*, June 20, 2003, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/newsletter/2003/jun20.html> (accessed May 28, 2006).

portable portraits that tenderly recorded their son's or daughter's love for a favorite toy or pet . . . In Goodridge's portrait, Julia plays with a kitten and a toy, possibly a whistle, from her perch on a low stool. Rather than emphasize the size disparity between adult viewers and her child sitter, Goodridge draws us down to Julia's level, where we meet the sober toddler's gaze directly. Around this time, play and pets came to be recognized as important factors in child development . . . Although mothers enjoyed new respect by the late eighteenth century for their role in nurturing children, fathers were also cherished in the increasingly affectionate environment of the modern family.⁷¹

In 1847, renowned Christian Educator pastor and theologian, Horace Bushnell published a little book entitled *Discourses on Christian Nurture*. Though he did not identify "holiness" as inherent in children or the desired outcome of discipleship, respect for children and their connectedness with their Holy God was central to his work. He understood the importance of nurture, of mutual teaching and learning, acknowledging their inherent value. In opposition to those who believed that young children had no ability to comprehend the holy, were fatally flawed and in need of conversion, Bushnell often cited the following scriptures: "And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children." (Isaiah 54:13 King James Version) and "Fathers, do not make your children angry, but raise them with the training and teaching of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4 New Contemporary Version).

Scholars like Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), whose roots were in Moravian pietism, understood the relationship between head and heart and named religion as a feeling of absolute dependence. While he did not consider theology from the point of view of children or their holiness, his wholistic approach to religion left room for

⁷¹ *Yale University Art Gallery*, "American Miniatures Of Children," http://www.artgallery.yale.edu/pdf/perspect/miniatures_guide.pdf (accessed May 15, 2006).

young ones. His theology, which included the subjectivity of faith, influenced Rudolph Otto (1869–1937), a later scholar whose ideas were also broad enough to include children. A German Protestant theologian, he published *The Idea of the Holy* in 1917. Otto, trained in biblical languages, was aware of the various connotations of Hebrew, Greek and Latin words for “holy” and “holiness.” He embraced an understanding which extended beyond what which could be intellectually analyzed and explained. According to Anderson, he “coined the word numinous to describe the peculiar character of the religious object’s impact upon the believer.”⁷² His use of the words “*mysterium tremendum*,” a way of speaking about God, illustrated childhood experience of God’s Holy presence. Otto believed that the core of religious experience was non-rational. In was within this sphere that Otto, as well as children, lived comfortably with, “a sense of awe, majesty, and energy.”⁷³

Community

Community, defined by the quality of relationships developed within, is foundational.

The Kindergarten children were a close knit group because their teachers made caring, compassion, and cooperation high priorities in the classroom. Tammy was mildly autistic and also subject to petit mal seizures. All year a pall of discomfort would descend upon the class when Tammy, quietly and non-disruptively, would “go away” for awhile, even as she sat in her seat. The little girl was a valued member of the community and the other children desired that she be fully present with them.

⁷² Anderson, and Diesslin, *A Journey Through Christian Theology*, 163–166.

⁷³ *Christian Word Book*, 144.

Community is “a group of people living in the same locality . . . having common interests . . . and forming a distinct segment of society”⁷⁴ known too, as *koinonia*, a Greek term meaning “fellowship” or “communion with,” used particularly when speaking of the early Christian communities which sprang up in the years after Jesus’ resurrection. This kind of community was spoken of, for example in Philemon, verse 17, when Paul asked the church to welcome Onesimus, as they would Paul himself. It was referred to also in Acts 2:42–47, about which more will be said later.

In Deuteronomy, it is said of the king to be appointed as leader of the Israelites, “. . . he shall have a copy of this law . . . it shall remain with him . . . so he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the *community* nor turning aside from the commandment.” (from Deuteronomy 17:18–20)

The voices of various communities, over long periods of time, made up the disparate orally transmitted laws, stories, histories, worship elements, and poetry, of the Hebrew Testament. Around the time of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple (515 B.C.E.), after Cyrus’ release of the Hebrews from Babylonian captivity, these materials were gathered into the body of scripture known to Christians as the Old Testament.⁷⁵ Communities were sustained and strengthened by their transmitted culture, experienced, read and heard.

⁷⁴ *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. “community.”

⁷⁵ Bernard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 510.

The stories of the Old Testament witnessed to the communal nature of the Jewish faith. God covenanted with Abram, calling him to leave his home and travel with his family to a far country. In Genesis 17, God spoke to Abram, “As for me, this is my covenant with you . . . No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations . . . As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations.” (from Genesis 17:4–9)

This covenant of God with the Hebrew people was not abrogated even though time and again the Hebrews were forced off their land into widespread dispersion. At the time the Babylonians were besieging Jerusalem (around 588 B.C.E.), the prophet Jeremiah prophesied about God’s future for God’s people, when the “New Community” would be established. Remembering the rupture in the Covenant Community with the separation of Israel from Judah, Jeremiah spoke of the people becoming one again, loyal to the God who had redeemed them.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31–34)⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Ibid., 419–423.

This often exiled community of men and women and children were enabled to continue to be the “Israelites” by following communal guidelines and rituals such as those found in the Ten Commandments and the Levitical laws. Thus, though dispersed across the Middle East, some retained their particularity and did not become fully subsumed in the cultures where they found themselves; they remained communities.

In *Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands*, Johanna Bos noted that by chapter four in the book of Ruth, the two women who had made for themselves a small isolated family upon arriving in Moab, were now surrounded by community. “There is the community of the past, called on by the witnesses at the city gate (7–12); there is the community of the present, made up of those at the gate and the women around Naomi (13–17), and, finally, the last words of the story and the genealogy point to the community of the future.”⁷⁷

The characters in the story lived in various states of community where self care went hand in hand with concern for others, and where the community provided the support and strength needed in times of travail.

The Israelite peoples evolved into the Jews who practiced Judaism, with tradition and ritual central to their identity. Children participated in the religious life of the family and community. By Jesus’ time the festivals of the Jewish people served to bring them into relationship with other Jews, not only in the family and geographic community, but in disparate places. Going to Jerusalem was a way of reminding the followers of YHWH that they were made up of God’s chosen people from all over the ancient world. It was an

⁷⁷ Johanna Bos, *Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, undated), 38.

opportunity to share the distinctive stories and celebrations, worship and food of a peculiar people, living in a hostile and alien world. It was a practice of the community, in which children were expected to participate from their youngest years.

Jesus, who grew up in the agrarian Jewish subculture, most likely was influenced little in childhood by the surrounding urban, individualistic Greco-Roman world of the area's rulers. His education and upbringing were thoroughly Jewish and scripture attests to his participation in the Passover Festival at the age of twelve.⁷⁸

Later Jesus went to John for baptism, not in private but as part of a community event where many of the followers of John were gathered. As his ministry developed Jesus stretched the boundaries of community and family. He lived in a communal culture, but one which was very stratified. Romans had become to a great extent, in the midst of the Greco-Roman culture, a utilitarian people. The community was made up of those who were useful to the ruling class. At times this understanding of usefulness became so extreme that infanticide was widely practiced.

Jewish communitarian culture was more welcoming of children and accepting of others, as long as they practiced their belief in Yahweh in accordance with custom. But, there were vast numbers of people who were outsiders, including lepers, the lame and blind and others called unclean. The Samaritans, though practicing a form of Judaism based on most of the same tenets as the Jews of the time, were looked down upon and not accepted.

Into the community which grew and flourished around Rabbi Jesus, were invited all those who were unwanted in any surrounding culture, Roman, Greek or Jewish.

⁷⁸Luke 2

Children, included as representatives of God's kingdom, were often the most marginalized of the people on the edges of society and Jesus' inclusion of children, therefore also meant a welcome for all the others who were less than useful, less than pure. In his ministry, practiced within a particular gathered community, but excluding none from the surrounding cultures, Jesus practiced a radically hospitable restatement of what it meant to be a New Covenant Community

To illustrate, an example of Jesus' teaching about those who were "righteous" can be used. "The righteous" were those who followed the purity system, and "sinners" were those who did not. Though the word sinners had a range of meanings in first-century Palestine, it was not understood to include everybody, but rather particular groups of people, the worst of whom were the untouchables. The effect of the purity system was to create a world of sharp social boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.

In the message and activity of Jesus, was an alternative social vision, a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by that of compassion. There was something boundary shattering about the *imitatio Dei* (imitate God) that stood at the center of Jesus' message and activity, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate. Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes. For Jesus, compassion had a radical sociopolitical meaning. In his teaching and table fellowship, and in the shape of his movement, the purity system was subverted and an alternative social vision affirmed. The politics of purity were replaced by a politics of compassion."⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York: Harpers, 1994), 51.

Koinonia community thrived amidst relationships which were strong and enduring as was the case with the New Testament church. Children were at hand in many of the stories of the Bible, though their presence was often implied. By the time the history of the Christian Church was being written, children were less often acknowledged, but because the community of the early church included whole families (defined to include servants and slaves as well), children would have ordinarily been in attendance during worship, prayer, breaking of bread and outreach.

Many prophets and teachers traveled the roads of Galilee and Palestine in the first hundred years on either side of the beginning of the Common Era. Each had disciples and followers. Most withered away when the leader was gone. Yet, the New Testament church grew in the face of persecution and oppression. To a great extent this was due to the experiences of Jesus' followers after his crucifixion and resurrection. Strong communities developed as believers spent much time together, pooled all things and gathered for breaking bread. For years, they practiced the radical hospitality that was modeled by Jesus and empowered by the Holy Spirit on that first Pentecost.

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2: 42–47)

These included whole “households,” which encompassed slaves and clients as well as immediate family, as in the stories of Stephanas (1 Cor.1: 16), Lydia (Acts 16:

15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33), Crispus (Acts 18:8) and Peter's baptism of the Gentile Cornelius and his *oikos* (household) in Acts 10.

House churches and larger assemblies sprang up around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond, due to the missionary zeal of the followers of Jesus. Some grew into substantial bodies of believers. Some stayed small. Each attempted to be faithful to the teachings of Paul, Peter and others. Some were torn by dissension, such as in the church in Corinth. Others were weakened by an inward focus, which did not extend the radical hospitality of Jesus nor work to build relationships among the believers.

Over time, *koinonia* community continued in some places, even with the spread of the church and change of political climate which culminated in the imperial state church under the rule of Constantine, in the early fourth century.

As years passed, the Christian Church became an institution, with creeds, confessions, doctrine. Some of the earliest doctrines of the church inferred the importance of children as part of the life of the Christian community. Irenaeus (140–200 C.E.) made an obscure reference to infant baptism in his defense of the faith, *Against Heresies*. Though no direct references to the baptism of infants had been made before 185 C.E., by the sixth century infant baptism had become the common practice because of an almost universal acceptance of Augustine's doctrine of original sin. Parents and others desired to see to it that the young were saved from consignment to hell.

Discussing the development of beliefs about initiation into the Christian faith and the Body of Christ, James White writes, in *A Brief History of Christian Worship*,

Initiation followed two quite different trajectories in East and West . . . In the East, initiation was held together at all costs as a single occasion. Our oldest text for the Byzantine rite is the *Barberini Euchologian* from about 790. But it is redolent of the language of

John Chrysostom himself, linking it to the late fourth century. It contains prayers for naming infants on the eighth day after birth. Then on the fortieth day they are ritually made a catechumen and exorcised, water is blessed as is oil, candidates are anointed with the oil of gladness, baptized, and they receive anointing with the sign of the cross and the words “the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.” Then the Eucharist begins and the newly baptized receive communion . . . The whole process varied little whatever the age . . . The pattern of the West was far less consistent. It is a story of slow but irreversible division of the process of initiation into three occasions . . . the 1566 Catechism of Trent (states) ‘Until children shall have attained the age of reason, its [confirmation] administration is inexpedient. If not, therefore to be postponed to the age of twelve, it is more proper to defer this Sacrament at least to that of seven years. All Protestant groups that retained confirmation inherited the same expectations.’⁸⁰

Though Miller-McLemore finds in John Calvin, one of the fathers of the Reformation, an affirmation of children as integral to the faith community, Calvin too accepted the western idea of Christian initiation in stages according to the intellectual maturation of the catechumen.

In practice, the Protestant church, especially as part of its reaction to the excesses of the Roman Catholic institution, became more and more word oriented, with the Word preached and the sacrament rigidly administered, becoming the primary locus for community life. Many Christian communities became less and less welcoming for children in worship (though they continued to be present) and therefore less sustaining of their needs.

There continued to be theologians whose focus was upon the formation of the youngest Christians in the midst of the community of faith. An early example was Comenius, introduced in an earlier section of these papers, who put great value on

⁸⁰ James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 80.

children and upon their education. His understanding of the nurture of children, which included schools for them, was inclusive of family, schools and the church as communities, in which to rear the followers of Jesus.

Catechisms were developed after the Reformation for the purpose of instructing older children and new adult converts in the faith. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, for example, included questions which presupposed that children were a part of the community of faith.

While it may be tempting to make broad sweeping statements about the exclusion or inclusion of children in the community of faith, that would do an injustice to the realities of the “church” in different times and circumstances. The community of faith, the Body of Christ, had always existed in the midst of rapidly changing society, in the East, in Europe and in America. In truth, it had never been a unified Body. The cultural norms of the Middle East, of Rome, of England differed. City and farm upbringing, education and the lack of, times of health and prosperity, of disease and war, affected families and children and the ways in which children were understood. Yet we know that theological battles being waged far from the kitchen hearth impacted childrearing practices.

From what can be gleaned of the art and writing of the times, the children of the community were seen as miniature adults during the Middle Ages. In *The Child in Christian Thought*, Richard Heitzenrater notes that Phillippe Aries, in *Centuries of Childhood* (1962), found that children, as distinct from adults, were discovered in the eighteenth century. Heitzenrater states, “If the previous view put unnecessarily great

expectations on young children, the new view gave them very little credit for any good possibilities.”⁸¹

They, too, were linked to the changing understandings of women. According to the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, the Enlightenment brought with it some transformation of the position of women. “As women rose to consideration, their children accompanied them. Once treated as little adults incapable of fulfilling their adult obligation, they came to be regarded as complete personalities in their own right.”⁸² Rousseau, influenced as he had been by Comenius’ work, was the architect of this new understanding of children which influenced Europe and America. Children often accompanied their parents in evangelizing tenement dwellers. They were among the worshippers at revivals and they were by their mothers’ sides at the new Missionary Societies which began in the 1800s.

The separation of children from full incorporation in the community of faith was both a recent occurrence and less than a universal reality in the Christian faith. For example, many Roman Catholics communities continue to celebrate their Catholicism, as parishes and households. Children, from their earliest years, in Bushnell’s words, “know themselves as no other,” than Roman Catholic. Patrick’s words, which follow, illustrate this sense of knowing oneself from an early age as a part of a particular group of Christians.

Patrick, who was just three, sat in Chapel and listened to the leader say, “Jesus might have gotten mad sometimes at his brothers and

⁸¹ Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, 280.

⁸² John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 297–298.

sisters.” He raised his hand and commented, “Jesus didn’t have any brothers or sisters. The children in his village were just called that.”

Patrick had already absorbed a Roman Catholic understanding of his faith, which taught that Jesus’ mother remained a virgin and those called his family comprised the village in which he grew up.

Strange as it may seem, as the needs of children became better understood in the last 150 years, there was been a disconcerting rise in the separation of children (and youth) from the practicing community of faith. It might have been expected that the church as Body of Christ would have embraced this new knowledge and, as *koinonia* community, wholeheartedly adapted its life to be inclusive of all. Instead, more and more often worship became an adult hour; stewardship no longer a family-wide practice, mission and service were age segregated, study relegated to children as a way to keep them occupied during worship.

Yet some continued to look at community in a way which included all. *Koinonia* community, according to Emil Brunner, “signifies a common participation, a togetherness, a community life,” as the Body of Christ, which is “the fellowship of Jesus Christ,” (from 1 Cor. 1:9)⁸³ Steven Doughty, in *Discovering Community: A Meditation on Community in Christ*, wrote that in Christian Community “my own stage in life meets the stages of so many others both older and younger than I, and it is where I at last can

⁸³ Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 10.

pause in my business and see the stunning beauty of all the stages of life God has made.”⁸⁴

In *Welcoming Children*, Mercer states, “The Spirit brings faith not merely as an individual phenomenon but as the Spirit of God works in and through communities to engender children’s faith. Such learning happens through children’s participation with and apprenticeship in the church as a community of practice, whose ways of believing and acting in the world both reflect and produce its alternative identity. The same Spirit is similarly at work to engender the wider community’s growth in faith through the participation of its children.”⁸⁵ How else, Horace Bushnell might have asked, would a child grow up to know herself/himself as no other than a Christian, if she/he never was a part of the radical hospitality of the koinonia community of Christ? It is good to remember Paul’s words which include all, young and older: “Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 6:23)

Sabbath

Sabbath as a way of living, honors a cycle of renewal in creation, in communities and in individual lives.

Honoring Sabbath has an ancient history in Judaism and Christianity, being first found in Genesis.

⁸⁴ Stephen V. Doughty, *Discovering Community: A Meditation on Community in Christ* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1999), 167.

⁸⁵ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 180.

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created. (Gen. 2:1–4)

There were various intentions for Sabbath as a particular time of rest stressed in the Old Testament. When honoring the Sabbath became codified in the Ten Commandments, the example of a day modeled after God’s rest remained prominent. During the exodus, observing the Sabbath day had become a part of what it meant to be a member of the Hebrew nation. The people wandering in the wilderness were prohibited from collecting manna on the seventh day, “with the implication that the Sabbath is to draw a boundary around the acquisitive urge.”⁸⁶

The Ten Commandments found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy reflected both implications of Sabbath: 1) Remember God and keep the Sabbath and 2) Keep the Sabbath and remember God.⁸⁷ Theologian, Dr. Donald McKim noted that the Hebrew, “*Shabbat*” means time set apart for worship and rest. The Hebrew people, as they came to be a unified nation, adopted the idea of a regular Sabbath observance, a practice referred to first in Numbers 28:9–10; then later in Ezekiel 46:4, 12 and Isaiah 66:23.

Sabbath, the sign of the covenant God had made with Moses, was one of the identifiable marks of the followers of Yahweh, from the time of the Babylonian exile.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed., s.v. "Sabbath."

⁸⁷ One might fruitfully explore this commandment further, for it introduces justice for the marginalized, which includes children.

⁸⁸ Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 536.

When Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, he assigned Nehemiah to govern Jerusalem. According to Gottwald, when Nehemiah took over, the city was unfortified, thinly populated and lacking in piety. The governor compelled strict Sabbath observances to counteract a prevailing ethic of agricultural and commercial work taking place seven days a week.⁸⁹

Sabbath, while best known for its association with the seventh day of the week, was also used in the Old Testament to refer to festivals and to the seventh year, where the land was to lie fallow (Leviticus 25:1–7).⁹⁰ Many of the festivals noted in the Old Testament became a part of the codified religion of the Jews during the time of Nehemiah. It was fortunate for the children of this time that Nehemiah brought reforms to Jerusalem, in line with the Judaism which had developed in the Babylonian and Persian exile, for some of those reforms benefited the impoverished peoples who were losing their children because of massive debt.⁹¹

Beginning in the Maccabean period, increasingly strict regulations about honoring the sacred nature of the Sabbath, plus concern about its desecration, came to hold a prominent place in the theology of traditional Jews, who resisted those desiring a Hellenization of the faith, especially the Temple leadership. By the time Jesus was growing up, Sabbath observance had too often become an act of limitation rather than freedom. It was to those who applied the law as a cudgel rather than a cool cloth that he spoke sternly and with whom he had heated arguments. Jesus and the Pharisees were

⁸⁹ Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 433.

⁹⁰ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 281.

⁹¹ Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 433.

often at odds because of Jesus' understanding that the day was to bring healing and wholeness to people, not further their privation.⁹²

The most child friendly understanding of Sabbath, as a part of Jesus' tradition, was that of festival celebration and of rest. For on *Shabbat*, with work being left undone, the children were able to play and enjoy the company of older people, who were relieved for twenty-four hours of the regular responsibilities of daily life. Festivals provided opportunities for families to travel and to concentrate on celebrations of their faith.

It is also easy to imagine the delight of children following Jesus through their villages or city streets, as he claimed the Sabbath day for the kingdom of God. The model of ministry presented in the Gospels as the way of Jesus, was one of Sabbath living each day. Jesus was not pictured as hurrying or constantly working; though the crowds pressed around him with their needs, he took himself off to a mountain to pray. He listened to those who spoke with him, engaging in dialogue and caring conversation. He was a keen observer and he had time for the children. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* notes that Sabbath in the Gospels "is a day which fittingly frames the recreative work of God's kingdom as Jesus heals and brings wholeness to human brokenness. The idea of Sabbath as a day set apart for religious activity rather than daily work is assumed in all these references."⁹³

The New Testament church's approach to Sabbath time revolved around the gathering of the faithful for breaking bread, sharing scripture and doing good deeds. Children, as part of the household of the faithful, were included in Sabbath observances.

⁹² McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*.

⁹³ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 748.

As the church became an institution of power and authority over the common people, some Christians were called to live apart from the world, in order to dedicate themselves to their relationship with God. Daily Sabbath-keeping became an activity of the monastery, where adults lived; though in some cases orphaned children were a part of the community. Ordinary Christians honored church law by attending mass, but there was little underlying sense of Sabbath-living for those who worked every day to provide for themselves and their families. A sense of Sabbath rest and respect for God's good creation seemed missing also from the upper classes, whose privilege could have led to a use of time synchronous with that of creation and in touch with God's presence.

Somewhere around 1200 C.E. the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral was built near Paris, France. The labyrinth took the place of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was also walked for repentance; it could well have served as sacred recreation for children who were brought to daily mass by their pious caregivers. Sabbath keeping, as a day set aside for worship, continued, but most written sources focused upon rule keeping and rigidity, rather than Sabbath as holy practice, proclaiming freedom and the love of God.

Since the reformation, "Christian practice has been to observe Sunday as a day for worship in celebration of Christ's resurrection."⁹⁴ Among the writings of the theologians of the Reformation were affirmations of Sabbath as a way to keep the law and a day of worship, it was also a way of life. Short portions of writing from Luther, Calvin and Comenius illustrate this.

Martin Luther (1483–1546 C.E.) wrote about the Sabbath:

⁹⁴ McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*.

But to grasp a Christian meaning for the simple as to what God requires in this commandment, note that we keep holy days not for the sake of intelligent and learned Christians (for they have no need of it [holy days]), but first of all for bodily causes and necessities, which nature teaches and requires; for the common people, man-servants and maid-servants, who have been attending to their work and trade the whole week, that for a day they may retire in order to rest and be refreshed. Secondly, and most especially, that on such day of rest (since we can get no other opportunity) freedom and time be taken to attend divine service, so that we come together to hear and treat of God's and then to praise God, to sing and pray. However, this, I say, is not so restricted to any time . . . for in itself no one day is better than another; but this should indeed be done daily . . .⁹⁵

For John Calvin (1509–1564), writing from Geneva, Switzerland, Sabbath was first and foremost an opportunity. Then it was an obligation. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, he noted,

First, under the repose of the seventh day the heavenly Lawgiver meant to represent to the people of Israel spiritual rest, in which believers ought to lay aside their own works to allow God to work in them. Secondly, he meant that there was to be a stated day for them to assemble to hear the law and perform the rites, or at least to devote it particularly to meditation upon his works and thus through this remembrance to be trained in piety. Thirdly, he resolved to give a day of rest to servants and those who are under the authority of others, in order that they should have some respite from toil . . . the Sabbath [Col. 2:16] was 'a shadow of what is to come, but the body belongs to Christ' [Col. 2:17], that is, the very substance of truth . . . This is not confined to a single day but extends through the whole course of our life, until, completely dead to ourselves, we are filled with the life of God.⁹⁶

Jan Amos Comenius (b. 1592), introduced in an earlier chapter, was known as the father of universal education. A Bishop of the Brethren/Moravian church, at the time of

⁹⁵ *On Doctrine*, "The Fourth Commandment by Martin Luther," <http://www.ondoctrine.com/2lut0907.htm> (accessed May 22, 2006).

⁹⁶ Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 395–397.

the Reformation, he wrote many books including *School of Infancy*. In this text, he set out the necessary instructional components for children's first six years. Though nothing was said specifically about the atmosphere of the household in which children were being reared, it was clear from his words about instruction, that time and attention, listening and modeling for children, were critical. Modeling took time and the practice of 'presence', both of which were important aspects of paying attention and characteristic of Sabbath life.

Unfortunately, understanding and practicing a Sabbath way of life continued to diminish over time. The Industrial Revolution and the mechanizing of society, along with the influence of the Puritans in England and then in America, worked to detract from the grace and gift of living according to God's rhythm of time. Robert Raikes' Sunday School movement, begun in England, took the one nonworking day children had, a day for doing whatever they liked, for resting and re-creation, and made Sunday yet another long day under the watchful eye of adults, as they were being schooled in basic skills and the Christian faith. Honoring Sabbath came to be equated, for most people, with keeping certain rules.

By the mid-twentieth century, there two camps of Christians seemed to have emerged in this country, the "observant" and "non-observant." Children of those for whom Sabbath-keeping was part of the family and congregation's culture; whether as a way of life, or even as a day of worship and non-activity, tended to remember this time fondly, offering stories related to "the cold mashed potatoes we ate"⁹⁷ and the clandestine games made up while sitting quietly in Grandmother's parlor. Others, members of more

⁹⁷ William Kyle, interview by author, October 1997, verbal narrative.

liberal congregations, shared tales of Sunday rides in the car or walks in the park with family. These were the fortunate ones, for other children, poor and rich alike, whose Sundays were like every other day of the week, full of busyness and individualized activity, missed out on the formative and sacred nature of Sabbath times.

Listening

Holy Listening is mindfulness; being fully present one to another, understanding that God is equally at hand.

It was the summer before Katy began Kindergarten. She was home one afternoon with her mother, in the sunny kitchen making cookies together when Katy stopped dipping out oatmeal raisin dough and said, “Shhh, Mommy, listen.” Her mother replied, “What, Katy?” “Shhh, listen, Mommy!” the child insisted. “What am I listening to?” asked Mom, stopping her busyness also. “If you are quiet and listen, you can hear God talking to us.”

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah stood in the entrance of a cave, having experienced wind, earthquake and fire, yet finding that God was not in the great and strong wind nor in the mighty earthquake. Neither was God in the fire. The LORD *was* in the still, small voice that came to Elijah as he stood at the mouth of that cave. God reminded Elijah that he was not alone. It was the same with all of humankind; God left no one all alone, for God was present when all else and all others seemed to have vanished.

“*Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.*” (Deut 6:4 NIV) In Deuteronomy, Israel was beseeched, commanded, cautioned over and over. Often the writer used “Hear” to introduce the admonitions of Yahweh, the Covenantal God. Deuteronomy, the last book of the Old Testament Torah, was written as though it recorded the words of Moses to the Israelites, but was actually a much later book. It was

said by Boadt to be a call to a return to “covenant love between Yahweh and the people”⁹⁸ and could be called the book of the “ear.” For the ancient Hebrews the ear was a synonym for the heart, the mind; it was an organ of cognition. In Deuteronomy, Israel was admonished over and over to hear the words of God and to listen with heart and soul, as well as ear. Deuteronomy offered hope, reminding the people of God’s unfailing love. It called for an equal return by the Hebrew people to the commitment of love God had made with Israel. Though not called a process of Holy Listening, of careful listening for God, with and to others, the idea occurred time and again.

The Shema was repeated three times in the Torah.⁹⁹ It was a foundational creedal statement for the Jewish people. Shema, translated from the Hebrew “לארשי עמש,” meant “hear” and the full text properly comprised a repetition of a statement of belief for Judaism.¹⁰⁰

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Two direct commands to “listen” were given to children in Proverbs, who were learning the precepts of God. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible included 280 instances where “listen” and nineteen times “listening” were used, from Genesis to

⁹⁸ Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 350–351.

⁹⁹ Deuteronomy 6:4–9, 11:13–21, Numbers 15:37–41

¹⁰⁰ *Judaism 101*, “Prayers,” <http://www.jewfaq/prayers/shema/htm> (accessed June 10, 2006).

Revelation. The primary focus was on listening and hearing as ways of learning to follow God and forewarning for what would happen to those who did not listen.

Yet listening was also an act of prayer and a way of deepening spiritual understanding. The Psalms, the poetry and songbook of the Old Testament, often spoke of hearing the voice of God, listening for God, asking God to listen, for example:

I call upon you, for you will answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words. (Psalm 17:6)

Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me, for I am poor and needy. Preserve my life, for I am devoted to you; save your servant who trusts in you. You are my God; be gracious to me, O Lord, for to you do I cry all day long. Gladden the soul of your servant, for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul. For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on you. *Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer; listen to my cry of supplication.* In the day of my trouble I call on you, for you will answer me. (Psalm 86: 1–7)

O come, let us worship and bow down, let us kneel before the Lord, our Maker! For he is our God, and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand. O that today you would listen to his voice! (Psalm 95:6–7)

A number of useful examples in the Old Testament of listening and hearing, helped develop understanding of the vertical and horizontal connections of Holy Listening, where God was present in the listening encounter between people. Some of these include:

- The Elijah text quoted at the beginning of this paper was an example of a prayerful listening, an educational moment for those reading the text and imbedded in the text a teaching opportunity by God directed toward Elijah.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ 1 Kings 19:8–13

- In 1 Kings 8:22–53, Solomon pleaded with God to listen and to hear his prayer on behalf of Israel.
- Samuel and Eli shared a Holy Listening moment when Samuel, hearing but not comprehending God’s call, asked Eli for the third time if he had spoken his name. For the third time, Eli said no and then responded out of a new perception, if God “calls you, you shall say, ‘Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.’” Samuel and Eli both heard God’s voice and together perceived the call by God to Samuel.¹⁰²
- Poor Job felt unheard by God throughout most of his suffering, for God was silent. Yet Eliphaz, Zophar, Bildad, and Elihu, who were listening, but not hearing, made matters even worse as they lectured and agitated, yammered and explained, doing what too many do today. They attempted to fix Job, to make Job accept as due punishment his afflictions; they excused God and exalted themselves as truth-bearers. His friends did not listen and share Job’s burden. They further isolated Job and made his misery worse. Elihu’s words though, in Job 34:16, were unwittingly wise. “If you have understanding, hear this; listen to what I say.” For true hearing does involve listening and understanding. If only Elihu had listened to his own words in this story, Job would have had a companion on the journey through the valley of the shadow of death.

According to the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, “unlike other ancient religions that sought revelation through the eye and through visions, biblical people primarily sought revelation through the ear and hearing.”¹⁰³ Jesus’ words, “Let anyone with ears

¹⁰² 1 Samuel 3:3–10

¹⁰³ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “ear, hearing” 223.

listen!” were repeated in Mark 4:9, Matthew 11:15 and again in Luke 14:35. The great Rabbi Jesus, who held the Shema in his heart, called the people to listen with their hearts to his words. In Matthew 13:15, the author quoted Jesus as saying one reason he spoke in parables:

For this people’s heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and *listen* with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them.

Jesus was clearly a listener to God and to others. According to the Gospel writers, there were times that he went away to be alone and pray. The reader does not know what happened during his times alone with God, yet it is reasonable to assume that Jesus sought communion with God, that he was quiet and listened for the “still, small voice” he knew, which would give him the blessings of strength and courage and endurance. While the scriptures do not say “Jesus listened to the people,” he clearly did just that. Intently, with full attention, he heard beyond the words of those who came to him. One needs to be aware all the time, when seeking to know Jesus and his ministries, that he was a Jew. For his people hearing was a serious matter, encompassing the whole self in attention and response.¹⁰⁴ In the Gospel of John 5:24, Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life . . .”

As the nascent church was coming into being, Luke spoke of Lydia, in Acts 16:14. She was, he wrote, already a “worshiper of God.” Through her listening, her heart was opened to the words of Paul, which led to her baptism as a new follower of Jesus.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Richardson, editor, *Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 104.

In 2 Timothy 2, Timothy, a young leader of the Jesus movement was reminded that the faithful “are to avoid wrangling over words, which does no good but only ruins those who are listening.”¹⁰⁵ In other words, listening to those who were tearing each other down also had the effect of destroying growth in faith, for observers and also for the ones speaking. To truly listen was to hear behind and beneath the words themselves.

What happened to the importance of listening, found in scripture? Books on the history and theology of the Christian Church are mostly silent about this. Understanding then is critical when working with ideas which have vanished 2000 years after the church came into being. Robert L. Wilken writes,

Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God . . . Who was this Jesus? The earliest testimonies to Jesus arise out of the charismatic and enthusiastic religious fervor provoked by the Resurrection. Events were moving fast, and Jesus’ followers did their thinking on the run-or more accurately, while doing other things. Early Christian beliefs do not arise out of theological enclaves; they were formed in disputes between Christians and their adversaries, in the setting of a cultic meal, while explaining their convictions to a new convert, or in telling tales about Jesus to the young. Christian beliefs grew out of situations in life (*Sitz im Leben*) in which early Christians regularly found themselves. There were no set beliefs agreed upon by all; nor were there any ground rules on how to determine what to say or think or do . . . They had to make up their own minds as they understood their own situation and the memories they brought with them.¹⁰⁶

The Christian Church, its doctrine and creeds, its institutions and divisions were in flux since the beginning. It was helpful to find what was missing from the recordings of church history and the reflections of theologians, as well as what was found. This short

¹⁰⁵ 2 Timothy 2:14b

¹⁰⁶ Robert Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1961), 164–65.

reflection upon the role of “listening” for Christianity did not begin to uncover the richness of the various strands of tradition grounded in scripture. So what follows are a few examples of people and movements where listening was most likely given credence and also where there was room for the ears and souls of children.

Origen of Alexandria, (185–254 C.E.) was considered one of the greatest of all Christian theologians. His *On First Principles* was written during a time of oppression; when doctrine was beginning to be formulated, though, as noted above, no consensus existed among the various church leaders and people.¹⁰⁷ Origen was an early proponent of universalism “the eventual restoration of all souls to a state of dynamic perfection in proximity to the godhead.” Origen reflected upon “receiving little children” in Mark and Luke and accepted Jesus’ words as pointing to real children.¹⁰⁸ He spoke little of listening other than, for example, in his arguments found in *Contra Celsus*, where Origen argued that the Greek writer should have listened more clearly to the words of Moses, Elijah and other Old Testament voices. Yet, in even engaging Celsus, Origen gave an illustration of careful listening to another’s voice. More than a thousand years later, Origen’s thought became important in the Enlightenment for those thinkers who found in scripture and the early church fathers grounding in God’s love.

During the Middle Ages, Christian mysticism flourished. Intellectual understanding and abstract thought took a secondary role to the “experience of union with God by the bond of love that is beyond human power to attain and that brings a

¹⁰⁷ *The Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*, “Origen,” <http://www.iep.utm.edu/o/origen.htm> (accessed June 9, 2006).

¹⁰⁸ Origen of Alexandria, “Origen's Commentary,” *19 The Parallel Passages in Mark and Luke. Anti-Nicene Father, vol I*, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/ecf/009/0090460.htm> (accessed June 9, 2006).

sense of direct knowledge of and fellowship with God centered in Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁹ Dominican monk Meister Eckhart’s (1260–1328 C.E.) legacy continued to have an impact as people sought to understand God’s relationship with humankind and individuals and each one’s relationship to God. Eckhart’s metaphor for describing this relationship was “God’s ground and my ground is the same ground.”¹¹⁰ Defined as “*grunt*” in *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, metaphor’s “function is . . . pragmatic . . . meant to transform, or overturn, ordinary limited forms of consciousness through the process of making the inner meaning of the metaphor one’s own in everyday life.”¹¹¹ Parallel developments of this understanding were found in the *hesychast* movement which grew out of Eastern Christianity and Symeon’s¹¹² writings on his direct conscious experience of the Holy Spirit. As noted earlier in this paper, Eastern Christianity acknowledged only three theologians. Symeon was one.¹¹³ The following is a quote from St. Symeon on Spirituality,

Do not say that it is impossible to receive the Spirit of God. Do not say that it is possible to be made whole without Him. Do not say that one can possess Him without knowing it. Do not say that God does not manifest Himself to man. Do not say that men cannot perceive the divine light, or that it is impossible in this age! Never

¹⁰⁹ McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 181.

¹¹⁰ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001) 38.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹² Kallistos Ware, “Eastern Christendom,” *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 147–49.

¹¹³ Of him is said, “He is one of three great Fathers whom the Orthodox Church has granted the title of ‘Theologian’, because he is one of a few, in the history of Christianity, to ‘know’ God. St. Symeon was born in Galatia in Paphlagonia (Asia Minor) in 949 AD. *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia*, “St. Symeon the New Theologian,” <http://home.it.net.au/~jgrapsas/pages/symeon.htm> (accessed June 10, 2006).

is it found to be impossible, my friends. On the contrary, it is entirely possible when one desires it (Hymn 27, 125–132).¹¹⁴

Adult mystical experience of God, through direct apprehension, is akin to the way children know the divine. Because of their inability to think abstractly and their openness to imaginative thought, children and the mystics of medieval times have much in common.

Toward the end of the Reformation Era, Pierre duMoulin, a French Calvinist spoke of Christ as “our eternal friend; and it is a law of friendship that friends support each other.” Holy Listening implies friendship and commitment and support, like that of duMoulin’s friendship in Christ, friendship through Christ.

The other strong Reformation movement became the Lutheran Church. The Pietist response to Lutheran orthodoxy, under the leadership of Johan Arndt (1555–1621), changed justification to sanctification and opened the door for new interaction between believer and Jesus Christ and between believers in Christ. Sanctification was understood as Christ’s indwelling which brought the faithful person to a life of holiness; a life progressively conformed to the will of God. Images sometimes illustrated unarticulated ideas, as in 1827, when the Quaker artist Edward Hicks rendered Isaiah’s “peaceable kingdom” as an attentive girl among the beasts of creation.¹¹⁵

The Society of Friends, better known as Quakers, originated in 1668. They stressed “Inner Light” as superior to scripture and church tradition, “A sense of the divine

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ McManners, *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, 388.

and the direct working of God in the soul.”¹¹⁶ Silence was an important aspect of corporate worship, as members sat in “holy expectation before the Lord.” The classic pattern of worship began with listening silence, until a member of the congregation was moved to speak. This was an intergenerational practice continuing in some Quaker communions today. When one was nudged by God to offer a word, all others listened. Children were taught until the 1970’s the practice of listening for God and to each other through books prepared especially for them.

During the Enlightenment there was a return to Protestant spirituality and to demythologizing the Bible, which was both blessing and curse. In the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, it was said of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), that he systematized liberal thinking of the day and “the necessity of qualifying all doctrine by the paramount assertion that God is love; the rule of interpreting all scripture in the light of God’s nature and not as a quarry of information, even about spiritual things, the acceptance of the limitation of our knowledge of God to what is morally necessary—light enough to live by.”¹¹⁷ By the end of the century Schleiermacher (1768–1834) had defined the human relationship to God, as “our response to God’s saving love, the feeling of ‘absolute dependence.’”¹¹⁸

Yet even within the openness of liberal thought there was little attention given directly to “listening” as spiritual practice. Only very recently, in the last 50 years or so, was there a return to “listening” and it came from the discipline of counseling. The

¹¹⁶ *Oxford Dictionary of Christianity*, s.v. “Society of Friends.,” 529.

¹¹⁷ McManners, *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, 283.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

journal *Pastoral Psychology*, vol. 15, number 141, February 1964, had an article on listening as a technique of pastoral care. The suggestions were applicable to the particular ministry of pastoral care, but also to the full ministry of care and compassion in the church as a whole. “To listen—really listen—one must be able to concentrate, to accept the speaker, to be unfailingly honest and transparently real, and be willing to enter an experience from which he, the listener, may not return unchanged.”¹¹⁹

Particularly in western society, the pace and speed of the world is such that Holy Listening is an out of the ordinary act not generally encouraged by the theology of the Christian Church, nor by its life together.

Worship

Worship, a way of being more than a weekly act, is the work of all God’s people.

Hayley is seven. An active child, she squirms throughout worship. Except, that is, when music plays and the people stand to sing. Then she is transformed. The child, usually dressed in a swirly skirt, slips out of her pew and begins to move to the music. She dances as David did, praising God, unrestrained and full of life. She is in the process of healing from an abusive home situation with each step.

The act of worshipping God too often became entombed in the wall of churches, relegated to a particular hour of the week. Yet from the beginning of time human beings worshipped that which is greater than humanity. From the beginning of life, people were compelled by awe and reverence to worship.

¹¹⁹ Don Rogers, “A Note on the Technique of Listening,” *Pastoral Psychology* 15, no. 141 (February 1964).

Worship, the work of the people, as old as time, transcended religious affiliation. Jewish and Christian worship practices were grounded in the Bible. From Genesis, acts of worship were carried out, beginning with our mythic ancestors Adam and Eve who lived in perfect harmony with God, in the Garden of Eden. Their sons, Cain and Abel, made sacrifices to the LORD. In Genesis 4:26, formal acts of community worship were mentioned: “At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord.”

Even before humankind began to worship, creation worshipped. Walter Brueggeman, in his interpretation of the book of Genesis commented, “The time pattern of the liturgy (there was evening and morning . . . God saw that it was good) itself comments upon the good order of the created world under the serene order of God.”¹²⁰

As noted in a previous section of this paper, children were part of the assembled community from the beginning of the Bible. In 1 Samuel 2:18, “Samuel was ministering before the LORD, a boy wearing a linen ephod.” Here, early in the Hebrew scriptures was an example both of worship and of a child in leadership in the Temple.

An explanation of worship as homage, an action of honoring God, in *The Dictionary of Biblical Literacy*, included reflection upon the acts of bowing down and kneeling. Bowing down was “a position of listening, of ready obedience.”¹²¹ Jubilation, extravagance and sacrifice were also actions of worship. “Miriam and the Israelite women worship God for (God’s) faithful deliverance at the Red Sea by dancing . . .”¹²²

¹²⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation*, 30.

¹²¹ James Wilhoit, Leland Ryken, and Tremper Longman III, eds. “worship,” in *Dictionary of Biblical Literacy*, ed.

¹²² *Ibid.*, s.v. “worship.”

In Psalms praising God was done with words, with song and dance and instruments. Instruments may have been tambourine or lyre, hands clapping and waving. Processions of musicians and choirs were mentioned also. “Even eating can be part of expressing reverence for God, as in the care of observing Passover (Ex. 12:18). These actions make up part of the worship of God; they symbolize externally an internal attitude of devotion and enthusiasm to honor God.”¹²³

Old Testament extravagance was evident in incense, a “constant fragrant offering”¹²⁴ and in sacrificial offerings, such as was found in 1 Kings 8:63, “Solomon offered as sacrifices of well-being to the Lord twenty-two thousand oxen and one hundred twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the people of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord.” In the Hebrew Scriptures as part of an act of worship, sacrifice confessed both the holiness and the grace of the life-giving God. “The OT clearly recognizes the temple, sacrifice and all the special times of worship at the temple that give testimony to redemptive events (Ex 23:14–19) are images that express the worshiper’s faith in giving homage to the sovereign God.”¹²⁵

When seeking room for children in worship, threads continue to be found which wind back into antiquity. In Genesis and Exodus the people were admonished to worship God wherever God had appeared. One may assume that meant the people, all the people, whether wandering in the desert, or settled in Canaan. Eventually these sanctuaries syncretistically adopted local pagan religious practices and during King Josiah’s reign,

¹²³ Ibid., s.v. “worship.”

¹²⁴ Ibid., s.v. “worship.”

¹²⁵ Ibid., s.v. “worship.”

(640–609 B.C.E.), worship was declared a national act, not one of a tribe or family and was to be offered only in Jerusalem (II Kings 23:8). Synagogues and prayerful worship came into being to satisfy the religious longings of people who could not get to the Temple.

As illustrated above, the conception of worship developed and changed through the course of biblical times. In Jesus' day, there were opposing forces in the religious leadership, with some understanding worship as a ritual of sacrifice, while others, especially those who adopted the teachings of the prophet Jeremiah, conceiving of worship as spiritual service to God. In addition, the traditions and rituals of the Pharisees and the centrality of the Temple, with its combination of commerce and worship illustrated some of the tensions present in the Jewish community during Jesus' ministry.

The annual festivals of Passover, Weeks and Ingathering were part of the national worship of the Jewish people. As noted earlier children were expected to be a part of these festivals. Music continued to be a part of worship, with the song and poetry of the Psalms included in synagogue and Temple worship. Because of the appeal to the emotions made by music, it would have been another aspect of worship that drew the children.

In Matthew 21:15, the children's shouts of praise in the Temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David" were an act of worship. Gospel stories of exuberant crowds welcoming Jesus in Jerusalem, with waving palms and cloaks spread along the road, highlight another worshipful time in which children were probably visible and could have had a leadership role. It is easy to see them dancing along, singing and shouting with excitement. While they may have had no better understanding of Jesus' role in salvation

history than any others, the children would have, at these moments, been representing the Kingdom of God on earth.

While the religious leaders were busy keeping people, including all the marginalized, the group to which most children belonged, out of the Temple and away from the ritual and traditions of the faith, Jesus was turning the tables, literally and figuratively. For example, his understanding of table fellowship included the most outcast of outcasts and therefore it is not out of the realm of possibility that children may have taken part in the rituals of breaking bread, with Jesus and later with older people in the house churches of the followers of Jesus.

This author found a continuing place for the presence of children in the worship life of the communities which came to know themselves as the Body of Christ.

In the time of the New Testament writings, children would have been baptized along with the adults in the converting Jewish or Gentile household. It can be supposed that this practice continued for many years, as Christianity came into being and the church was heavily oppressed by the rulers of the times. Jesus, an observant Jew, had transformed the landscape of class and culture and along with that worship and rule keeping. His first followers were joined to the cult through that process of baptism, which signaled at least for converts of Paul, “an extra-ordinarily thoroughgoing resocialization, in which the sect was intended to become virtually the primary group for its members, supplanting all other loyalties.”¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 56–63; quoted in James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.

The new Church celebrated the Lord's Supper in the context of a meal, until late New Testament times (see Jude, verse 12). Jewish habits of the practice of time probably continued to influence the Christian communities; with daily prayer, a weekly focus on Sabbath and yearly festival celebrations. Leadership, music, preaching and architecture began to develop clearly as Christian. With more and more worship life taking place in the churches, children would have found their richest food in the festivals of the church along with continuing traditions and rituals of family life.

Following Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E., Christianity became the state's religion. Most of the material written about worship during these times was silent about children, except upon the subject of infant baptism. The baptism of babies became a battle ground and Tertullian railed against it in his *On Baptism*, written about 200 C.E. Theological developments, many attributed to Augustine's thought on original sin, which grew out of Paul's "desperate" theology, served to make infant baptism a normal practice in the Christian church, though, for a millennium.

Augustine was also greatly responsible, positively, for the inclusion of children in the Eucharist. Along with his argument for original sin and the necessity of infant baptism he also wrote, "Christ's flesh, which was given for the life of the world, was also given for the life of the little ones, and if they have not eaten the flesh of the Son of Man, they will not have life either."¹²⁷ Children therefore continued to be able to see and hear, taste and touch, in worship.

¹²⁷ Jerome, *Epistle, 107.7*; quoted in O.M Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005) 250.

John Chrysostom patriarch of Constantinople, stressed parental responsibility in forming children to live a life consistent with Christian ideals. He assumed families would attend church together. Bakke noted that this fact was attested to in a number of sources from the mid-third to the end of the sixth century; with the family remaining the primary context in which children would receive Christian teaching, as separate from worship. He wrote that there were a few sources which spoke of children singing specific liturgical responses, acting as members of choirs and serving as lectors.¹²⁸ They also often had special roles to play in prayer, since young children were believed to be innocent and closer to God than older persons, therefore their prayers more efficacious.

Worship in the earliest New Testament churches was essentially domestic, in that it included whole households and was most often held in the homes of wealthy members. According to the article “Children and Worship” in the *New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, “the shift from ‘domestic’ to ‘public’ worship in the early Christian centuries did not basically disturb the inherited situation.” Children remained a part of the worshipping community until the Reformation sowed the first seeds of the separation of children. There was a shift in emphasis in worship to intellectual exposition of the scriptures, where sermons went for an hour or more, and prayers became didactic and lengthy, uttered by clergy, without room for the participation of the congregation. In addition, there was a concomitant concern that the congregation learn and understand, through this form of worship, which led to fewer ways for children to be fully part of the worshipping congregation. “Yet where the Reformation posed questions most acutely (especially about the need to put worship emphasis on the ‘word’) it also provided the

¹²⁸ Ibid.

apparently satisfactory answers. Without ceasing to be public, worship again became domestic. The church became a community of families, with each *paterfamilias* a high priest presiding over daily family worship.”¹²⁹

The industrial revolution, for families in the cities and for those whose male parent traveled to the city for work, had a lasting impact on the family and the ability of families to be the domestic church. Eventually the local congregation became the place where the spiritual life of the child was to be nurtured and worship to be attended. At this same time the success of the Sunday School movement meant that children’s needs were being assessed educationally rather than liturgically. Developmental psychology also came into prominence. Both led to greater and greater separation of children from careful incorporation into the worship life of the church.

Yet also by the mid-twentieth century, Baptism became a focus for those who sought to understand the Sacrament in new ways. Even though Baptism for the remission of sins remained strongly linked to the baptism of the young, another strand of thought was reclaimed from scripture and history; that which stressed the sacrament as symbolic of God’s gift of grace and the congregation’s welcome of a new member of the church family. Elizabeth Caldwell wrote,

The sacrament of baptism marks an important day in the life of a child, the child’s family, and the child’s family of faith gathered in worship. Another journey of faith has begun, and all who are there, all who witness the welcome with water, are partners with this child as she or he grows in faith. The nature of the household of faith has been changed forever because a new one has been welcomed, and this child shall lead them.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ J.G. Davies, ed. “children and worship,” in *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, 161.

¹³⁰ Caldwell, *Come Unto Me*, 31.

In the Presbyterian Church (USA) today, the Directory of Worship, part of the *Book of Order*, states “Baptism is the sign and seal of God’s grace and covenant in Christ.”¹³¹

Author Neville Clark asked probing questions about the theology of worship and liturgy; one of which was particularly pertinent to Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and Children’s Chapel: “If corporate worship engages the deep places of the heart and lures and menaces the human will, on what grounds should the children of the church be debarred from exposure to that engagement or denied the possibility of appropriate responses to its claim?”¹³² He asserts, the child “must be able to come not as an intruder in a strange land with an alien tongue but as an heir claiming an inheritance the contours of which have been long familiar and hauntingly experienced.”¹³³

Blessing

Blessing is the affirmation of God’s presence.

We must laugh and we must sing,
 We are blessed by everything.
 Everything we look upon is blessed.
 -From Yeats’ poem “A Dialogue of Self and Soul”

Blessing is also God’s gift of enabling vitality. Though many and varied, the definition of blessing which best fits the work of those in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is that of Walter Brueggemann. Brueggemann understands the creation narrative as a statement about the blessing God has ordained into the processes of life. “The delight

¹³¹ *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*, vol. Part II, *Book of Order* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 2003/2004), W-2.3003.

¹³² *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, 162.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 163.

in the goodness and blessing of life is asserted against the view that life is neutral or hostile and that God is an outsider to it all.”¹³⁴

The first blessing of humankind came in Genesis 1:28. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” Walter Brueggemann’s interpretation of this was that God, in this blessing, “provides the enabling vitality.”¹³⁵ This “enabling vitality,” the presence of God throughout life, provides for each person, the ability to take the next step, to make it another hour, to grow in faith, to become more and more closely aligned to God’s desires for that person’s life and for the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Brueggemann wrote, in *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*,

The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis I is a song of praise for God’s generosity. It tells how well the world is ordered. It keeps saying, “it is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good.” It declares that God blesses—that is, endows with vitality—the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind. And it pictures the creator as saying, “Be fruitful and multiply.” In an orgy of fruitfulness, everything in its kind to multiply the overflowing goodness that pours from God’s creator spirit. And, as you know, the creation ends in Sabbath. God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says, “I’ve got to take a break from all this. I’ve got to get out of the office.” . . . The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. The baptismal service declares that each of us has been miraculously loved into existence by God. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us. In the words of St. Paul, neither life

¹³⁴ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 36–38.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

nor death nor angels nor principalities nor things—nothing can separate us from God.¹³⁶

This definition of “blessing” is consistent too with the work done by Claus Westermann on the topic in 1968. He gave full consideration of the biblical approaches to “blessing” in a book entitled *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, translated from the German by Keith Crim. Before turning to Westermann, it is useful to explore how other sources approach “blessing.” This is such a critically important theme for Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture that finding out who says what about the word helps orient this particular approach to ministry on the theological landscape.

Blessing meant a lot of things in the Bible. Both the way the word was used in the original text and the theological orientations of those who wrote about “blessing” affected the considerations of “blessing.” It is not possible to completely explore the word in this paper. Over the years, “blessing” came to be understood by some in the Christian tradition as a less than important biblical concept and/or one which had been hijacked by the proponents of the prosperity gospel. Therefore it did not even appear in some recent theological and exegetical works. *The Christian Word Book*, published by Abingdon Press in 1968 does not include a reference to “blessing” and the *Harper’s Bible Dictionary*, published in 1996 has “see curse” next to the word “blessing.” That ended its consideration, other than cursorily under a discussion of “curse.” Yet God’s blessing of humanity and humankind’s return praise of thanksgiving was integral to the scriptures which formed Jesus and continue to form and inform people today. The “circle of blessing is completed when man blesses God . . . it is reciprocated by the Church’s

¹³⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), 72.

response: ‘Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (see 2 Cor:1.3, Rev. 7:12).”¹³⁷

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, noted: “The Bible abounds in pictures of blessing—blessing sought, blessing promised, blessing conferred, blessing received.”¹³⁸

While people often pronounced a wish for God’s blessing to be upon others; blessing was always and ultimately from God. The Bible differentiated the way toward “blessing” from acts that led away and the referenced article indicated that the things that made for blessedness ranged from the physical to the spiritual, from the earthy to the heavenly.

Three images of “blessing” were found:

1. God’s “blessing rests on creation and he blesses various aspects of creation through or by means of the creation.”¹³⁹ Psalm 104 gave praise to God for God’s blessings on and through creation and through that creation to the human race.
2. Fathers’ blessings in the Old Testament upon their son’s as the fathers approached death, “in some sense . . . were efficacious in bringing about what the patriarch conferred.”¹⁴⁰ It was noted that by Deuteronomy 33, Moses extended this family blessing to include the whole nation of Israel.
3. Blessing tied to the Covenant. In Genesis 12:3, God blessed those who bless Abraham. “Covenant from here is connected to blessing.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Richardson, *Theological Works of the Bible*, 33.

¹³⁸ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. “blessing.”

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

This same article in *Biblical Imagery* found five motifs connected to covenantal blessing:

1. The promise of God to bless the keepers of the covenant.
2. The conditional nature of the blessing which is dependent upon the obedience of the nation of Israel (see Deuteronomy 28–30, I Samuel 12, also the later oracles of judgment).
3. Blessing as an award for obedience.
4. Grace as a balance for reward. According to the article’s author, God’s grace, not human merit, caused blessing. The reader was sent to Deuteronomy 7 where Moses explains the special status of Israel—“God’s blessing is solely a result of (God’s) love.”
5. The opposite of blessing is curse (see Deuteronomy 28).¹⁴².

In the New Testament, blessing became less a thing of substance and more a spiritual state for those who belonged to God’s kingdom; “a chosen nation is no longer the locus of God’s blessing, but individual believers are.”¹⁴³ An assumption that the New Testament scriptures related to blessing, especially in the Gospels (see the Beatitudes), referred to heaven was read back into the scriptures from later theology. Jesus may just as well have been bringing a Hebrew understanding of community, speaking corporately rather than to individuals.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

In the *Oxford Dictionary of Christian History*, blessing was called “the authoritative pronouncement of God’s favor.”¹⁴⁴ Instances cited were Isaac’s blessing of Jacob rather than Esau in Genesis 27 and the prayer of Balaam (Numbers 23). Noted too, were liturgical blessings of the priests in the book of Numbers. (See the blessing of Aaron and his sons in Numbers 6:22–27).

The Christian use of blessing in the liturgy was noted in the article, especially the liturgical practice of blessing the Eucharistic elements. “It has been suggested that use of the word Eucharist (Greek for *berakah*) . . . arose from the fact that the eucharistic prayer was a Christian adaptation of the Jewish *berakah* which was recited over a cup of wine.”¹⁴⁵ The blessing of the people at the end of worship did not occur until the Middle Ages, though individual blessings were frequently given from the earliest time in the Roman Catholic Church by bishops or priests as part of the Mass or confirmation and also by the same ordained men, as well as parents, to children.

The *Oxford Dictionary* noted more references to blessing under the heading *berakah*. In this use of the word it referred to blessing as a praise of thanksgiving offered to God. The use of blessing (Greek ‘*eulogetos*’) this way carried over into the Christian Church and could be found in II Corinthians 1:3 and I Peter 1:3. It was suggested in this article that “blessing” used this way was a parallel to that of the Eighteen Benedictions for daily prayers in the synagogue.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ *Oxford Dictionary of Christian History*, s.v. “blessing.”

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ed., s.v. “berakah.”

An understanding of “blessing” primarily as the “active outgoing of the divine goodwill or grace which results in prosperity and happiness among men”¹⁴⁷ was noted in *A Theological Wordbook of the Bible*. While blessings were to be found in material things and in the richness of life itself, in Wisdom literature “the chief result of divine blessing” was wisdom itself.¹⁴⁸ Finally, the article stated that later apocalyptic authors of the Bible found blessing to be marked by the coming of righteousness and peace.¹⁴⁹

Walter Brueggemann wrote in his commentary on Genesis, that blessing was mentioned in the creation narrative; used of living creatures (1:22), of human creatures (1:28), and of the Sabbath (2:3). “. . . the world itself is the vehicle for the blessings God has ordained in it as an abiding characteristic.”¹⁵⁰

Claus Westermann, in his book *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, said this about blessing. “When the Bible speaks of God’s contact with mankind, his/her blessing is there alongside his deliverance.”¹⁵¹ When the nation of Israel changed from a nomadic to a settled life, one saw that “the God who saves is the one who comes; the one who blesses is the one who is present.”¹⁵² Genesis and Deuteronomy were concerned with the concept of blessing bestowed by God upon God’s people. The words *bless* and *blessing* occurred more frequently in these two books than anywhere else in the Old

¹⁴⁷ Richardson, *Theological Word Book of the Bible*, 33.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 36–37.

¹⁵¹ Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 4.

¹⁵² Ibid., 8.

Testament. To help explain blessing, Westermann referred to the writings of Johannes Pedersen. Part of Pedersen's understanding of blessing was tied into the Hebrew *nephesh* "soul," which expressed a person's total state of being alive. "This vital power, without which no living being can exist, the Israelites called *berākhāh*, 'blessing.'"¹⁵³ Vitality equaled blessing and blessing manifested itself in differing ways. The usual meaning for blessing in Genesis and the Old Testament was associated with fertility and the survival of the family. Abraham's promise from God was that his descendants would be multiplied as were the stars of heaven. Another Hebrew word used for blessing was *shālōm*. While *berākhāh*—blessing was vertical and passed from generation to generation, *shālōm*—blessing was horizontal, the well-being of the community.¹⁵⁴

Blessing was significant in the act of worship for Israel. When the newly built temple was dedicated in Jerusalem, the first act performed in it was a blessing of the king on the people . . . Westermann quoted Signund Mowinckel on that significance of blessing: "The purpose of the cult is to secure blessing for the community and for the individual."¹⁵⁵ The pagan neighbors of Israel also used their temples as the source of blessing for their people and land. The uniqueness of Israelite worship consisted in the fact that for it, history, in which God dealt with God's people, played a decisive role.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Ibid., 18.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 29

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 36.

There was no doubt that the bestowal of blessing was important to the Israelites and this blessing was related to God's activity as the one who blesses.¹⁵⁷ The priestly blessing, found in Numbers, continued from its origin with Aaron and his sons, from the worship of ancient Israel, the postexilic temple, synagogue worship, through the early Christian church into continued worship practice today.¹⁵⁸ Westermann identified four distinctive features of the blessing offered in worship.¹⁵⁹ These, listed on the next page, were considered in developing the understanding of blessing used in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture:

- God is the initiator of blessing, even though it occurs through the action of a human being.
- Blessing involves both word and rite.
- Blessing evolves from God's friendly approach to those to whom the blessing is offered. Its meaning is discovered in the contexts that present God's actions of bestowing blessing.
- The appropriate place for blessing is at the end of worship when the community is dismissed. The blessing goes with those who receive it, out into their lives in the world.

Westermann also explores work done by other scholars on the gospel texts where Jesus blesses the children. He concludes that the authors of the synoptics regarded Jesus' blessing of the children to need no justification because it was part of Jewish traditional practice. Jesus blessed children which indicated Jesus' activity was not limited to adults,

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 36.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 43.

though their growth and maturing was central to his teaching. Westermann notes, “That is precisely what blessing means—growth, and maturing, the health and well-being of children.”¹⁶⁰

Though Westermann presented the most complete exegetical work on blessing which was available in English, this author sought continued growth in understanding ‘blessing’ through the history of Judeo-Christian culture. Blessing was used liturgically before Holy Communion by the end of the fourth century, as an “encouragement and preparation.”¹⁶¹ According to the *New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* the rite was omitted by Rome from around 500 C.E. and does not exist at all in any Reformed denominations. A blessing at the end of the eucharist had become common by the end of the Middle Ages; most likely “derived from the blessing by the bishop of his flock as he went out (see Westermann).”¹⁶² This blessing has been retained in the churches which grew out of the reformation with the exception of the Zwinglians.¹⁶³

Theologian John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, speaks both of blessing God and the blessings of God, especially in the prayer sections of Book III. He does not weave a theology of blessing though and often seems more concerned with reminding his readers of the potential curses of disobedience than of affirming God’s gracious love and beneficence.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 84–85.

¹⁶¹ *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, s.v. “blessing.”

¹⁶² Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Matthew Fox, author of *Original Blessing*, reminded readers that the theology of “original blessing” was much older than the newer concept of original sin. “The fall/redemption theory is not nearly as ancient as is the creation-centered one. The former goes back to Augustine (354–430 A.D.) . . . The creation-centered tradition traces its roots to the ninth century B.C., with the very first author of the Bible, the Yahwist or J source, to Psalms and wisdom books, to much of the prophets, to Jesus . . .”¹⁶⁴ He described “the Universe itself, blessed and graced,” as “the proper starting point for spirituality.”¹⁶⁵ Along with Brueggemann, Fox asserted, “The God of the Covenant is the God of the Blessing,”¹⁶⁶ promising wholeness, abundance and good things to God’s people. In his description of each new life, Fox exclaimed, “We enter a broken and torn and sinful world—that is for sure. But we do not enter as blotches on existence, as sinful creatures, we burst into the world as ‘original blessings.’”¹⁶⁷

Judaism has retained its respect for ritual and the power of offering God’s blessings. In an article entitled “Blessing of Children,” Kohler and Philipson discussed the background of a Sabbath blessing of children, noting that while no one knows how old the custom is, it was first found to be mentioned in *Brautspiegel* written by Moses Henochs in 1602. They go on to say that by the seventeenth century the custom was a regular part of Jewish life.¹⁶⁸ Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a respected Jewish

¹⁶⁴ Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1983), 11.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁶⁸ Kohler and Philipson, *Jewishencyclopedia.com*.

theologian, often was quoted as saying, “Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy.”¹⁶⁹ In the simplicity of his theology, is a reminder that life itself is a blessing and those who have been given life, are blessed.

The blessing of children through a Service of Dedication, in worship, became a common act in Baptist and other Protestant churches which practiced believer baptism. The Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches continue to include blessing prayers and litanies for corporate and household worship time. These, as well as Jewish blessings for home and school, faithfully retain the underlying understanding that while people may invoke a blessing, it is God who blesses.

Evangelical Christianity with its emphasis on family and the father’s priesthood as head of the home has placed much importance upon the upbringing of children. In 1990, Rolf Garborg wrote *The Family Blessing*, a book which described and encouraged “a simple parental act that will help your children feel loved and cherished.”¹⁷⁰ In the beginning of this book he included a Jewish Sabbath Prayer from the play *Fiddler on the Roof*, offered by the parents of three daughters:

May the Lord protect and defend you, May He always shield you from shame; May you come to be in Yisroel a shining name. May you be like Ruth and like Esther, May you be deserving of praise; Strengthen them, oh Lord, and keep them from the stranger’s ways. May God bless you and grant you long lives, May the Lord fulfill our Sabbath prayer for you. May God make you good mothers and wives. May He send you husbands who will care for you, May the Lord preserve you from pain; Favor them, oh Lord, with happiness and peace, Oh hear our Sabbath prayer.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ *Think Exist.com*, “Abraham J. Heschel Quotes,” <http://en.thinkexist.com/quotation/> (accessed June 18,2007).

¹⁷⁰ Rolf Garborg, *The Family Blessing*, 15–16.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

And so we come around to where we began, with the original blessing of God's enabling vitality, given to each person. Jurgen Moltmann connected blessedness and children in his book, *In the End—The Beginning*:

Children are close to the kingdom of God not because they have characteristics which adults have lost—innocence, perhaps, or purity, or naivety. It is rather that the kingdom of God is close to them because God loves them, embraces them and blesses them. Anyone who experiences the nearness of the living God in the fellowship of Jesus becomes like a child: life is born again and begins afresh.¹⁷²

In conclusion, a few words are in order about Clark Williamson's *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology*. This book is a reminder that "blessing" is not about individuals, it is about transformation, about community, about working with God to be a provisional exhibition of the Kingdom of God. Williamson wrote about the importance of memory, story, and connectedness in creating a communion of blessing and wellbeing: "The church was created by the Holy Spirit, the giver of life and wellbeing." He spoke of this communion of love and blessing, the church, as movement of "companions on the way."¹⁷³

And finally, in the *Elusive Presence* (1979) by Samuel Terrien, he urged that we might usefully distinguish the ethical and the aesthetic in the faith of Israel

. . . this aesthetic sense pursues wholeness. God stands not over against, but alongside and in friendly continuity with the world. In the aesthetic perspective, the distinction of God from God's creature is not nullified. But the friendly disposition of God toward the world is affirmed. God is satisfied that the world he has evoked in love is attuned to his purposes. This theology of blessing is not

¹⁷² Moltmann, *In the End*, 14.

¹⁷³ Clark A. Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 240.

derived from ancient Near Eastern texts. It has emerged out of the faith of Israel . . . it may be offered as ground for sanity and survival in our time.¹⁷⁴

A way back from the devastation wrought by adult humankind upon itself and the rest of creation may be found, in small ways, within Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and the pillars upon which the practices rest. Children, born in holiness, imbued with *imago Dei*, accepted as the original blessings they are, carefully nurtured within communal Sabbath-lives, by those doing Holy Listening; when offered times of worship, prayer and blessings, may be enabled to grow strong and whole, strengthening their connection with God, with creation, with one another.

¹⁷⁴ Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODOLOGY

This author's act of ministry was predicated upon the hypothesis that children's spiritual growth can be effectively nurtured if they are carefully prepared for and regularly offered a chapel time experience which embraces community, Sabbath-living, liturgy, sharing and listening, prayer and blessing. Therefore, the researcher chose to study the elements of an established day preschool Chapel time program, to explore the children's responses to and interpretation of their Chapel experience and to gather data from adults, which would help establish a baseline for the spiritual growth taking place through the Chapel time program.

The Preschool at Memorial Presbyterian Church in Xenia, OH, had been working with a Chapel program for three years, reflecting upon and refining it along the way. This writer was responsible for the spiritual nurture component of the Preschool, designing and implementing the Chapel time beginning in 2002. Over the years, teachers, parents and other leaders became more and more committed to the importance of the Chapel program. As they participated with and observed the children's happiness in their Chapel time together, in sharing and praying, teachers commented that they became more prayerful themselves and more able to pray aloud. Parents and teachers experienced their children deepen their abilities to listen carefully to each other and show compassion, not only for friends and family, but others, including strangers. The yearly gift offering for babies at a Birthday Party for Jesus reflected the children's growing generosity, while in

every day classroom life they seemed to be more aware of and in tune with each others' needs. Parents comments that their preschoolers listened better at home, that they brought prayer requests from children's Chapel to family prayer time and that they shared concerns about friends. Weekly adult participants and visitors watched the delight on the young one's faces at receiving God's blessings at the end of Chapel time.

When an opportunity arose, this writer, in cooperation with the Preschool and church leadership and others, decided it could be helpful to the field of spiritual nurture and Christian formation to gain a deeper understanding of what happened in Chapel, what were necessary preparation and classroom environments for a successful Chapel program and what components were both important and not important to the children and the process, and may be ultimately transformative.

A study of the program was undertaken, beginning formally at the start of the 2006–2007 school year. Because this researcher brought a strong and long term commitment to the Chapel time program, it was imperative both to admit this and to provide a sufficient number of points of triangulation to offset the subjectivity on the writer's part.¹ Using triangulation allowed a combination of research methodologies to be employed which perhaps compensated for the intrinsic biases both of the researcher and others involved in this project. The following types of triangulation were used: data triangulation involving time, space and persons; investigator triangulation which made use of the observations of Context Associates, Teachers and others; methodological

¹ John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1994), 174.

triangulation, consisting of writing and drawing projects, surveys, interviews and observations by the researcher.

Qualitative research was chosen and the decision was made to do an ethnographic study,² including as noted above field observations, interviews, written stories and pictures, as well as surveys of and interviews with adults. According to Dr. Donald Ratcliff, on his Qualitative Research website, this fits Judith Preissle's definition of a kind of research capable of uncovering important components of the Preschool which encouraged the children's spiritual formation. "Qualitative research is a loosely defined category of research designs or models, all of which elicit verbal, visual, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory data in the form of descriptive narratives like field notes, recordings, or other transcriptions from audio-and videotapes and other written records and pictures or films."³

Research of this nature was flexible enough to encompass the thoughts and understandings of children, to welcome data informally gathered and the input of interested "outsiders," people who offered important observations based upon their own experiences of the children's Chapel program.

The writer's Context Associates were sent copies of the Parent and Teacher *Survey of Children's Spirituality* and a timeline for the field work and interviews, as well as the stories and drawings the children would do under the oversight of their teachers. Because of the busyness of the school, adjustments had to be made periodically in the

² Ibid.,11.

³ Donald Ratcliff, "Qualitative Research Methods," *Don Ratcliff's Qualitative Research Website*, updated January 21, 2006, <http://www.drattcliffs.org/> (accessed July 15, 2006).

schedule of Chapel time observations, surveys went out in October rather than September and the children's pictures of and stories about Chapel time were done at times convenient to the school rather than to the research timetable. When flexible scheduling guidelines had been agreed to by the Preschool Director and Assistant Director, the study outline was introduced to the Preschool Board of Directors and submitted to the writer's Candidacy Review committee for approval.

When permission had been received from these groups to conduct the study according to the parameters set out above, the church's Pastor and its Session were notified that this would be happening and they gave their approval. The researcher and Preschool Director began to gather pertinent materials, including earlier Chapel time photos and a DVD, children's stories and pictures, as well as testimonies⁴ shared by parents and teachers about the effect of the Chapel program upon the culture of the school, which would add to the accessible body of knowledge related to Children's Chapel.

The researcher met with families as the school year began, so they would know who was observing and interviewing their children and asking for information related to their children's spirituality. All the parents filled out *A Multimedia Release* form as they registered their children for the educational year, both for their children to participate in the study and to be photographed/taped (see Appendix B).

Over a seven month period of time, research data was gathered from:

- Memorial Preschool students, ages three through five, in five classes

⁴ Myers calls these "found" materials. William R. Myers, *Research in Ministry* (Chicago: Exploration Press, 2000), 49.

- Eight of the nine teachers in the preschool
- Twenty four parents of students (32% of families responded)
- Six of seven members of the researcher's Context Associate group
- Four members of the community who had observed a group of children in Chapel

Data collection instruments used and the ways in which they were employed:

SURVEYS:

- A survey with six open ended statements, entitled *Children's Spirituality*, was given to all families and teaching staff between August and October 2006. The statements to be reflected upon were:
 - I think of children's spirituality in this way
 - I've seen the spiritual side of my child/the children in these ways
 - This is how I understand a child's connection to God
 - Experiences I've had with children and prayer include
 - When I think about Children's Chapel time I
 - Chapel time impacts my child(ren) in these ways
- *A Parent Survey Follow up: Memorial Preschool Chapel Program* again of an open ended nature, given to parents who returned the original questionnaire and to the teachers, which asked them to consider specific ways Chapel Time and then the Preschool itself impacted the children's spiritual growth over the last six months.

FIELD NOTES:

- Field notes taken from observations of three groups of children in the Preschool, during the 2005–2006 school year.
- Field notes on observations in the fall and again after Christmas of all five groups of children during Chapel time, during the 2006–2007 year.
- Field notes gathered in the fall of 2006 from observations of preparation for Chapel in one of the three year old groups, a class of four year olds and that of the oldest preschoolers.

In keeping with qualitative research possibilities,⁵ the researcher's observations included children's body language, eye contact and behaviors, in Chapel and the classroom. Particular behaviors of the children watched for were those which were out of the ordinary and those repeated over and over. These included quiet calmness, attentiveness, listening behaviors, sharing choices, praying behaviors, patience and blessing responses. Adult Chapel behaviors noted were those repetitive acts which were familiar and helpful to the children and any out of the ordinary activity by the adults which interfered with the Chapel process.

These notes were handwritten during the observation process, then put into the computer. Each set of observation data was then coded according to meaningful categories, both of which emerged and which were associated with the pillars of this Act of Ministry.⁶ The themes were then summarized on handwritten charts, as the researcher

⁵ Creswell, *Research Design*, 5.

⁶ Margot Ely et al., *On Writing Qualitative Research: Living by Words* (Philadelphia: Routledge Falmer, 2001), 162.

sought to discern patterns and subject matter that occurred again and again throughout data collected.⁷

A two and a half hour period of time was spent in the Older Preschooler classroom, where interviews of children were to take place, talking with children as they approached the researcher and allowing them to become comfortable with her presence. This enabled them to talk without shyness about Chapel time and to behave normally in their class time.

Three ten to fifteen minute periods were spent observing and taking notes during the preparation of a group of three year olds, one of fours, and the oldest children before they went to Chapel.

INTERVIEWS:

- Interviews with five girls and six boys in the Oldest Preschool group were taped and transcribed. The children were self-chosen and seemed to be those most willing to stop their play for a few minutes to talk with a person they did not know well. The transcriptions documented everything each child said, except for the few times when one would lose focus and begin to talk about something else going on in the room.
- Conversation starters used in the interviews included the following statements and questions, with the statements used before any questions were asked. The questions came, if the researcher wanted to try to engage the child in more talk about a particular aspect of the Chapel service.

⁷Ibid.

- “I wonder if you can tell me about Chapel.”
- “Can you tell me what you do in Chapel?”
- “Will you tell me about sharing and praying, please.”
- “What happens at blessing? Can you tell me, because I can’t hear what Mrs. Beam says.”
- “Tell me about your favorite part.”
- “Will you tell me about God?”
- “I wonder where God is at Preschool.”

The wondering statements and questions were adapted to fit the flow of the children’s talk.

- A taped and transcribed group session with Context Associates, at the end of 2006, where the spirituality of children and impact of Chapel time upon their development were discussed. This was a partial transcription of a very busy and wide ranging conversation, which was interrupted numerous times by the arrival of a child, a dog, a husband and three phone calls. The material transcribed was that which covered topics emerging as themes in the ongoing observations and other data collection. These included, prayer, sharing times in Chapel, children’s listening to each other, compassion, trust, hospitality, Chapel atmosphere and preparation, Chapel behaviors and instances of things learned in Chapel moving from that time into the classrooms and homes of the children.

OTHER DESCRIPTIVE MATERIAL:

- Children’s art and stories of Chapel Time; done in the classroom, led by the teachers, for a group of Threes and the Oldest Preschoolers.

The Three Year Olds dictated answers to statements related to Chapel time.

The Oldest Preschool group colored pictures about Chapel time and included a title for each drawing, in January 2007. This was followed by a Chapel Free Writing exercise in April, where the children dictated answers to four sentence starters (see Appendix D).

- Found material in the form of other Chapel time drawings and stories, earlier observations and testimonials from parents and teachers following time they spent in Chapel with children.

These included email and oral story telling by parents and the contents of a *Making Memories at Memorial Presbyterian Preschool* scrapbook, given to the researcher when she was no longer going to be leading Chapel.

- In addition, a set of writings was submitted, from another group of children, the Fours and Fives, who were younger than the Oldest Preschoolers.

The material was part of the data coded for its themes and the parts of Chapel which were important to those students. The teacher composed statements and questions for the children’s responses. The statements and questions used by the researcher were:

- “So tell me about Chapel time”
- “What is the lamb for?”
- “Today you shared your joy/concern . . .”

- “Tell me about blessing time.”
- “What does Mrs. Beam say?”
- “What do we do at the end of Chapel?”
- Finally artifacts such as, narratives, photographs, and vignettes collected by the researcher earlier in the development of the Chapel time program became part of the material which was considered.

More than one hundred pages of typed transcribed research material was collected over a seven month period, which was coded and analyzed for common thematic elements, recurring images and words used by the children and by adults to describe the Chapel time experience and which gave evidence of the spirituality of the children. As described by well-known researcher of children’s spirituality, David Hay, “. . . the researcher is not a neutral sounding board . . . It is a matter of holistic awareness.”⁸

These materials were sifted and interpreted as the essence of what was important was sought.⁹ Findings related to significant elements of the preschool’s culture, as well as the rituals and tangible items of Chapel time were discovered, as were noteworthy understandings about expressions of preschool children’s spirituality. Along the way, the researcher kept in mind at all times, words from Arthur Miller, quoted by Hay and Nye, “A child’s spirit is like a child, you can never catch it by running after it; you must stand still, and, for love, it will soon itself come back.”¹⁰

⁸ Hay and Nye, *The Spirit of the Child*, 90.

⁹ Harry F. Wolcott, *Writing Up Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001), 18.

¹⁰ Arthur Miller, *Crucible*; quoted in David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount, 1998).

The material gathered through observations, surveys, and found materials will be explored in Chapter Five: Field Experience. In the course of the discussion, interpretations will be drawn based upon both the wisdom of the children, as shown in their behaviors, their stories and artwork, and the depth of observation and listening shown by teachers and parents.

CHAPTER FIVE
FIELD EXPERIENCE



Fig.1 Children's Chapel

One morning, Jody's mother entered the kitchen where she was playing with the family's German Shepherd. The three year old, a participant in the chapel services for pre-school children, had her dog in a gentle head lock and was running her blessing balm up and down its furry head, repeating, "God made you, God loves you, God blesses you," just as she had experienced at the conclusion of each chapel service.

Along with others, this researcher pondered what it was about the Children's Chapel experience that had such an effect upon the young ones and upon the school. As a visitor said once, following Chapel time, "It was when the children first came down the aisle that I felt changes in that sanctuary. I have no words to really describe it. It was calming, it was peaceful, it was a cool sacred reality that God had arrived and was there. I

have never felt such a closeness to God before. When the children left the chapel God went with them . . . ”¹

Comments such as this one from a person not intimately associated with the school, along with observations of and reflections upon the evolving preschool Chapel program, and continuing changes in the culture of the preschool itself, led to this research project.

Preschool children had been attending the weekly Chapel program since early in 2002. They never complained about having to stop a beloved classroom activity to go to Chapel. Each week, even over a full two years spent in the preschool, the boys and girls went with gladness to the sanctuary. Visitors were moved by their encounters with Chapel time; United Theological Seminary students and others had been intrigued enough to video tape and photograph the communal worship time; the children themselves had produced stories and pictures which gave expression to their own experiences of Children’s Chapel.

Parents spoke positively about the effect Chapel time had on their children. Some said their children talked a great deal about Chapel, others, that their preschoolers, some as young as three, prayed for the concerns which had been shared in Chapel time. One told the story of her daughter’s trip to a home improvement store, “We were looking for light fixtures, while she enthusiastically serenaded the other customers with *Jesus Loves Me*, using the words she learned in Children’s Chapel!”

¹ James DeWall, Xenia, OH, to Jacqueline Nowak, 2003.

This researcher was struck by the words of a girl who was just two years and nine months old, when it was her turn to share joys and concerns in Chapel, “My brother is not in school today. He is sick.”

From the beginning years of the Chapel program, there was little disciplining needed. Some of the most difficult students were able to calm down, to listen, to fully participate in their twenty minutes of Sabbath worship, sharing and listening. Children had an intuitive sense of who was in special need of touch by the adults during Chapel time; the teachers also brought with them careful attention to the frame of mind of each of the students. Two children, a girl and a boy, who were disruptive in the classroom and demanding of adult time and attention, thrived in Chapel. The girl sat quietly each week on the leader’s lap and was able to share, time after time, her concern about her bad dreams. The teachers were troubled that the child was monopolizing the leader’s lap, but the other children seemed to understand her need. Instead of insisting on lap time, they cuddled up, those who needed to, on either side of the Chapel leader. There was never any conflict, for each week the children seemed to know who most needed to be closest to the leader, or to one of the teachers, who were also present.

The four year old boy would later be diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. He was often in trouble with teachers and other students, in the classroom. During his time in Chapel, he was engaged in the process, listened to the other children and showed compassion in his sharing time. He once dictated to his teacher in an *I Am Thankful* writing exercise, “I am thankful for Chapel time because I like praying.” Four years later his mother and this researcher came across each other at a local fitness center. The child’s mother said that her son’s Chapel experience had been extremely

significant during their very difficult preschool years and that to this day he talks about the Chapel leader. “If ever you want me to share a testimony about the program,” she said, “just let me know!”

The development of The Act of Ministry research itself started with assembling a group of people as Context Associates who were familiar with the work of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. They were parents, teachers and others with a commitment to blessing ministries and particularly to children. Most believed in the holiness of children and their connectedness to God. All were members of Christian churches, which included in their traditional beliefs an Augustinian theology of original sin.

The eight women provided feedback and triangulation, based upon their observations of Memorial Preschool children, sharing their understandings of what happened in the Chapel experience, the classroom and at home. One served as a Chapel leader, adding a new component to the research, which had not been initially anticipated. In addition, all offered insights along the way about the spirituality of the children with whom they worked and lived.

A remarkable number of parents contributed to the project by filling out the initial Parent Survey and one which followed. Without exception, the parents all gave permission for their children to be observed and interviewed for the purposes of this research.

The project was heavily dependent upon the openness of the school’s teachers to visits in the classrooms and at Chapel and their willingness to provide opportunities for the students to create stories and drawings about the program. Their cooperation was necessary for observations and interviews to successfully take place. In addition, they

made every effort to be sure each family received the initial *Parent Survey: Children's Spirituality* and gave of their time by completing their own *Children's Spirituality* surveys.

Research began with an introduction to parents and teachers at the annual Parent Open House which kicked off the 2006–2007 school year. At that meeting, those in attendance were told about the project and its components. They were encouraged to take part by completing the parent or teacher survey (Appendix E), filling out the Parental Permission form (see Appendix B) and asking questions along the way.

The research methodology was communicated to the Context Associate group and the teachers in the Preschool. Arrangements were made for the researcher to begin the project by sitting in with the oldest children, during their early morning classroom time, so they would be comfortable with her before the interviewing began later in the research process. Negotiations took place, which changed the plans for the teacher led children's writing and drawing projects and resulted in one set of drawings and two of written stories from the oldest preschoolers and one compilation of sentences about Chapel from a three year old group in the spring of the school year.

The Parent Surveys

Not all families took surveys with them following the school open house. The rest of them were sent home by the end of the first month of school, with a request to return them as soon as possible. By mid-November twenty three surveys had been returned; all but two had been filled out by mothers. These families were provided another series of statements upon which to reflect in a *Parent Survey Follow up: Memorial Preschool*

Chapel Program, early in 2007. Eleven of these were returned, while two other parents shared their thoughts through conversations with the researcher.

The parents who responded to both surveys placed a high priority upon the spiritual development of their children. In response to the first two statements, “I think of children’s spirituality this way” and “I’ve seen the spiritual side of my child/children in these ways,” most understood children to have some sort of connection with God, which adults either do not have or must work hard to sustain. Parents spoke of their children’s spirituality using terms such as “pure and innocent,” “open” and “naturally closer to God than adults.” They said children exhibit their connection with God through “empathy,” by an “other orientation,” “interaction with their peers,” “having an understanding of God’s love.” Some parents believed that spirituality in children is shown through prayer. They remarked upon their children’s prayer lives, using words such as: “comforted by praying,” “accepts that God hears prayers,” “natural ability,” “uninhibited,” “praise for others.” One stated that children’s spirituality is an “inner belief in God’s love and presence,” while another noted that “Children are examples to adults, they are very trusting and accepting of God.” Asking questions about God and Jesus was another way children exhibited spirituality, as was acting with “true kindness.” A mother remarked, “(his) capacity for compassion is amazing, given he is at the bottom of the ‘food chain’, as the youngest of four boys.”

The parents reflected upon children’s connection with God, using words and phrases such as “openness,” “unwavering,” “absolutely natural.” In speaking of her own child, one said, “when I hear my daughter talk about and pray to God, sing songs about God, or ask questions about God, I know she is connecting to God in her own individual,

personal and special way.” Another noted, “With my children it is listening to them pray and talk about God. It is hearing them comment on what God has done and made in the world.” The most profound statement of all was

I really don't understand much about it but I know it's simple and pure and deep. The Bible tells us that God wants all of us to come to him as little children. As we grow we drift away from Him and no matter how hard we work at it through prayer and study, I don't think we are ever that close again, at least not in this life.

Three parents were notably hesitant to attribute an innate connection to God by children. One said, “. . . children's spirituality reflects that of parents and other adults involved in their lives.” The other two noted the potential children have to learn spiritual things: “Children can learn about God and Jesus at a very young age” and “If you can instill the importance of being spiritual at this age, they have a great start.” These parents put the emphasis on *learning* about God, on the need for children to be taught the faith before being able to know God.

The survey question about praying indicated a wide range of prayer activity in family life, from regular mealtime and bedtime prayers to sporadic praying to intentionally stopping and offering a prayer when an ambulance or medical helicopter was noticed. All the families who returned surveys did some praying with their children.

Parents showed greater interest in children's spiritual lives than had been expected, and they took a great deal of care in answering the statements. That close to a third of the families returned the initial survey and half of these filled out the follow-up one were welcome surprises.

Two of the survey questions dealt with the Preschool Chapel time. “When I think of Children's Chapel time, I . . . ” and “Chapel impacts my child(ren) in these ways . . . ” Answers indicated that most of the parents responding to the survey were not new to

Memorial Preschool and its Chapel time. They all showed great regard for the chapel program and gratitude for the opportunity it gave their children.

Coding both sets of Parent Surveys was a helpful exercise, for when the themes which emerged were triangulated with data from Context Associates and other parent stories, the researcher gained insight into the impact Chapel time was having upon the parents of the school's students. The data indicated that the children were incorporating their Chapel experience into the whole of their lives, a sign of effective spiritual nurture.

Children's Chapel, called by a father, "a small spiritual doorway for (children)," was written about with great enthusiasm. Parents wished they could hear or see what their children were doing in Chapel (though all were aware that the experience is always open to parents), while commenting also about benefits such as praying and worshipping in their school context, being able to be open with peers and teachers, having trusting relationships outside of the family and validating the child's connectedness with God. One mother, whose initial responses about children's spirituality and relationship to God indicated that she did not believe in any innate connection, said she greatly valued "that someone else cares for her (the daughter) enough to bless her." "I get a little teary that (my son) gets the opportunity to do it every week . . . glad he gets to pray with his friends and hear what others pray about," commented another. Chapel time as a safe place for children to share their innermost feelings was written about by yet another parent.

I believe it is a wonderful way to teach children about God, especially those who don't have a background, and for children to be able to express happy, sad feelings when mom and dad are not around. An example for me is when last year my husband's dad died and I know (my son) felt comfort in sharing his feelings about Paw-Paw. After talking with him at home it made us realize that we needed to remind him and encourage him to talk to Jesus/God

even when we weren't around and tell Him how he felt (which he did at Chapel).

Parent Survey Follow Up, Memorial Preschool Chapel Program

Eleven of the twenty three initial parent respondents reflected in focused ways on these forms upon the effect of Chapel on the children and the preschool. This simple form was devised and used for two reasons. The researcher had planned to ask parents to fill out the Children's Spirituality survey a second time, after they had been in the school for at least six months, but the results of the first survey showed a clear familiarity with and devotion to Chapel time. Very few families were new to the Chapel program at Memorial Preschool. Therefore, it became more desirable to have willing respondents reflect in the ways noted above. In addition, initial plans to interview parents and teachers about Chapel were changed when the researcher's health challenges became a center of attention during the last half of the study.

Themes which had been emerging throughout the research, related to the pillars of this Act of Ministry, were noted in the words of both the parents and those of two Context Associates, both intimately connected to the preschool. A mother said of her daughter, "She likes the sharing and listening to her own thoughts as well as (those) of others." Themes related to Chapel, which emerged, were:

- Trust in the Chapel Leader and Teachers
- Listening and sharing with one another, building community through these acts
- The acceptability of feelings being shared, whether of joy or concern (a facet of living in community)

- The importance of the regularity of the time together and the amount of time taken to listen to each person (children valued as spiritual beings)
- The ritual of Chapel time, along with each child's increasing familiarity with the worshipful act of prayer
- The blessings of God's presence within a loving and patient community

Ways in which Chapel time affected the life of the Preschool were commented upon by all thirteen who returned the form. Some of their insights:

- "Foundations have spread into the classroom; they talk more openly about God's love . . ."
- The children "feel safe, can solve (their) own conflicts in a positive way."
- The classroom teaches "kindness and love for one another."
- Giving to the needy is part of the curriculum.
- "God's love is shown through everyone who works there. My child is shown . . . love, compassion and genuine caring for what is going on in her life and in her family."
- "Being in a school that can openly discuss, pray and sing about God helps make God a priority. It becomes second nature that they have a support stronger than this world."
- "We are so grateful to this preschool program, it is so sad to us when they move on to kindergarten because it is so different."

The commitment parents had developed, over the years, to the Chapel program appeared to correlate closely with the integral nature of Chapel time to the school itself. Some of the support grew out of regular participation in the school, much of it seemed to

grow out of what students took home with them. Two parent reactions to the program serve as examples of this. The first story is from 2003, when Chapel was fairly new to the school and the second occurred in 2006:

Susie began at Memorial Preschool at three. Her parents attended the Preschool Orientation where they heard the Chapel leader introduce the program. Agitated, they approached her at the end of the evening. Susie's mother was a lapsed Protestant and her father an atheist. They were concerned that their daughter would be "excluded" or made to feel "different" by participation in the Chapel time, though they really wanted her to attend the Preschool because of its excellence in serving the needs of the whole child. Both the Chapel leader and Preschool Director assured the parents that Susie would be completely accepted by the other children and the staff. They were free to observe and to raise concerns about anything their child reported which made them uncomfortable. Susie was at the school for three years and when she moved on to Kindergarten, her sister had already become a student.

Today was Thanksgiving Feast, a day of bread and circuses. Three classes of four and five year olds were split into six groups, with two or three helpers to move them around to interest centers during the morning. One center was Chapel and the kids got the opportunity to have their prayer and worship in a smaller than usual group. The (parent helpers) were moved by Chapel, to the extent of one saying she'd been transformed by her experience. It was "the most moving thing to ever happen to her." Almost all came up for blessing and there were many tears. The children were thankful for so much and the parents there (twenty in all) were emotional about the gratitude their children showed. One father, a missionary who really doesn't look at kids like the preschool does, received blessing from Nancy, seemed to take it in deeply and then squeezed her hand and thanked her. Dixie almost cried and Nancy spent much of the morning weeping; they took such joy in this and look forward to continuing comments from parents.²

² Debby Smith, Thanksgiving Feast, e-mail message to Jacqueline Nowak, November 17, 2006.

Mrs. Dixie Szalejko, Mrs. Debby Smith and Mrs. Nancy Beam are three of the teachers at Memorial Preschool. The first two both teach and administer the school and the third became Chapel leader in the fall of 2004. Two following stories related by Mrs. Beam embrace her evaluation of the Chapel program, children's spirituality and the impact of Chapel on the life of the students.

She and her two young children adopted the practice of blessing one another at bath time. One evening, her six year old, who had graduated from the Preschool and gone on to elementary school, said, "Mom, when I grow up I want to be a region teacher." She had gotten very involved in gymnastics and her mother thought maybe a "region teacher" was related to her new interest. When she asked what a region teacher was, the child said, "You know Mom, a region teacher, like Miss Jackie!" Miss Jackie had been her Chapel time leader for two years in the Preschool.

Mrs. Beam's other child was three when he began at Memorial Preschool. His language skills were not well developed by the end of his first year and so he began speech therapy during summer break. When he returned in the fall, he had made great strides, but was shy about speaking and very quiet. In December, his class went to sing for residents of a local nursing home. As they prepared for the trip, the young boy asked if he could give blessings to the people. Of course, his teacher replied, wondering if this very retiring child would really follow through. He did, rolling blessing balm upon hand after extended hand, saying, "God blesses you," each time.



Fig.2 Child blessing others

Teacher Surveys

The *Children's Spirituality* survey had been given to all ten teachers and aides as school began. All but two were returned in a timely manner. The reflections came from people who had worked in the Preschool for at least a year. Five had been with the school since the inception of Children's Chapel. The responses of the newest teachers contained the most traditional understandings of children's spirituality. These will be shared below, but with this caveat: since the fall of 2006, two of these three newer teachers (the third has left the school to take another job) referred to above have continued to grow in their understandings about children and their connectedness to God. This was borne out in a class they attended, taught by this researcher, in July 2007. Their participation was invaluable as they shared insights about chapel time, children's prayerfulness and connectedness to a God who is with and blesses God's creation.

Teacher commitment to both the chapel program and to integrating insights from it into the culture of the school was obvious both in their survey answers and in their general support of the pillars of the Act of Ministry. As will be shared, this dedication was there, regardless of the adults' theological understandings of children and their spiritual nature or of their beliefs about their holiness and innate connection to God.

The Director noted that children's spirituality, which now infuses her work with young people, was not something about which she gave much thought before she agreed to incorporate a chapel program into the preschool day. Her initial motivation was to be helpful to a church with diminishing numbers of children in Sunday School and worship services. She wrote that years ago, before Chapel, she'd have called children's spirituality a "sense of Christian well-being." Today, she knows "without a doubt children are spiritual (born that way), born with a closeness to God. Young children exhibit all the time their undeniable acceptance of God." Others defined the spirituality of children in words such as "inner belief that God loves them" and "a complete . . . connection with God which requires no rules or explanation, it simply IS."

More orthodox understandings included, children "interpret and understand God in concrete ways," and "are so open to learning about God." One touched upon the Community pillar when she said that children "show their spirituality in the way they interact with each other and adults."

As they reflected upon the second question which asked about ways children exhibit their spiritual nature, this same woman, who teaches young three year olds, said that "they show love and concern when one is absent or hurt." The compassion or community connection was noted by most of the teachers. Included in their responses was the fact that children "are eager to pray, to share prayer requests" and that spirituality is exhibited when "they speak not of material things but of their families."

In the midst of the research for this project, the writer entered the busy Older Preschoolers classroom one morning to find eight children around the art table, all abuzz.

When asked what they were doing, the leader, a child of five, responded that they were making cards for Joe, who was sick and in the hospital.

Joe was a high school friend of her father's who had had open heart surgery. The children were busy making brightly colored cards, full of rainbows and sunshine, flowers and smiling children, for a man they did not know. This same compassion and warmth was shared by children throughout the preschool later in the school year, when this writer was diagnosed with cancer and began a series of debilitating treatments. The rest of the school year, she regularly received in the mail, the work of three year olds, fours and fives who drew pictures which included hearts and upraised hands, reaching out with the purity of intent of which only a young child is capable.

When asked how the teachers understood children's connection to God, the replies all included a belief in a bond between God and children. While some readers might wonder how anyone could say otherwise, this researcher had recently been asked by a fellow adult seminarian to explain her belief in that innate connection. "You know I have been taught that we come into the world disconnected from God and must be brought to Christ," he said.

The teachers used phrases such as "innocence and trust" and "pure, real, reachable, beautifully age appropriate" and "they know God loves them." One told of her own two and a half year old who "wants to pray for people hurt or sick . . . People who share God's word with my child are representatives she can see and touch." Other answers were echoed in that of one, "I feel children come into the world with a connection to God. They don't seem to question the fact that his spirit is with us."

Statements related to Chapel time were woven throughout the teachers' survey forms, with the last three statements drawing the most explicit answers. Most of the teachers reflected upon times in Chapel and the classroom when asked about experiences they had with children and prayer and one answer sums up all the others: "At very young ages children can share their lives with God." When asked to think specifically about Chapel time and also about its impact upon the classroom environment, the teachers' responses echoed those of parents. The Director said that "When I think about Children's Chapel I think about a life changing program that has positively affected our children's lives, as well as the lives of the adults involved."

The Sabbath quality to and worshipfulness of Chapel time was lifted in most of the answers. When thinking of Chapel time, one thought of peace, another called it peaceful and relaxing, "one of the best parts of the week." One of those who began at the preschool, like the Director, without having ever given much thought to children's spirituality and nurture, wrote of Chapel as a "quiet time when the children, even the three year olds, are reflective of joys and concerns in their lives. They look forward to this time."

How to gauge effective spiritual nurture of children was a concern of the researcher. One of the things she sought in this study was whether or not there was any effect upon the children outside of Chapel time. Parental responses indicated that there was, as noted in an earlier portion of this chapter. The influence of the Chapel program on the school's culture and the behavior of both students and teachers came through strongly in the Teacher Survey. Seven of the eight teachers noted student behaviors they attributed to Chapel including, "the children are kinder and gentler with each other when

playing,” “sense of mutual trust, caring and love between the children,” “. . . joy for each other.”

Adult modeling of this way of living together in community was said by five teachers to be an important outgrowth of Chapel, where nurture was extended not only to children but adults, also. The Director commented, we “use the ideas of love to handle situations in the classroom, helping one another, handling differences of opinion. Chapel has helped adults be more centered on children’s well-being.” A teacher raised the “wonderful opportunity to take a break” to focus upon “things of true importance” in a quiet, yet joyful time, where “it feels like we are resting from our busy routine.” She said, “these things spill over into the classroom as well.”

Chapel time also allowed each class to listen carefully for the feelings and emotions brought by each student, encouraging adults to pay attention to the whole child, an attitude which became, according to the surveys, part of everyday life together. In conclusion, according to the Assistant Director, “Chapel makes us all more aware of God and helps us be happy for others, their joys are ours, too!”

The insights of adults related to children’s spirituality and Children’s Chapel, implicitly, sometimes explicitly, echoed the pillars of this Act of Ministry. Time spent among the children in the classroom and especially at Chapel seemed to confirm both the importance of the Chapel Program and its formation around the pillars of children as spiritual beings connected to God, imbued with holiness, living at times in a Sabbath-quality community, where regular, consistent listening, worship and blessing took place. During the researching of this Act of Ministry another facet of a critical nature surfaced, which was also explored: the necessity of careful classroom preparation for Chapel.

The Classrooms

Each of the school's classrooms contains Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture elements. Some teachers have a Spiritual Nurture corner. Others scatter nurture items around the room. Each class has a Chapel Leader whose job it is to put out the candle after chapel time and, if they are used, to brush classmates' arms with Calming Feathers (see Glossary) before Chapel. There are large wooden prayer beads (see Glossary) hanging on the wall, which children use to list the things for which they are thankful when it is their turn to pray at snack time. A Prayer Bear sits on the floor or on a bookcase in some classes, ready to receive children's prayers. Comfort Lambs (see Glossary) are available for those who need a quiet moment with God. A class Chapel Basket holding a Sharing Lamb, Blessing Balm, Calming Feathers, and maybe more Prayer Beads, is always at hand for the children. In some classrooms this basket is also where the Children's Bible is stored.

Because this researcher had been involved for years at Memorial Preschool, she was aware that while all children were nurtured by the Chapel Program, some classes were better able to connect to the Chapel experience, to sit and listen to each other, to reflect and live out their nurturing, than others. Conversations with the school administration led to an understanding that while in each classroom Bible stories were taught, opportunities were provided to show compassion through giving to others, there were spiritual nurture items and teachers were offered instruction in preparing their children for Chapel, the ways in which classroom nurture took place and chapel was incorporated into daily life were dependent upon the particular teachers. It is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into the differences between those children who were

carefully equipped and those who were not. But the important role of preparation for Chapel time was assumed and therefore examined.

Two classrooms were observed during circle time, from which the children left to go to Chapel. The three year old group of fifteen children, eight of them boys, was visited once. The oldest Preschool class, with eleven boys and nine girls, was visited for an extended period one morning, as well as for two other shorter times.

Teachers set up their rooms so children were able to enter directly into the day's opportunities upon arriving. While one teacher in the classroom might speak to a parent, the other would be engaged with welcoming children, helping them hang up coats and put belongings away and generally oversee the room.

This school's Director intentionally trains her teachers and most classes are led in this manner. That fact was clearly evident the morning this writer visited the three year old classroom. The head teacher had had to leave to take her own children to school, so only the assistant was present, along with a parent aide. The children were playing in the sandbox, building with blocks, making believe in the housekeeping corner. Two or three were engaged in a coloring activity at the art table, one was in the bathroom with his mother and a couple more were just arriving.

After five or ten minutes, the Teacher returned to the room. She began to sing a song which the children recognized as the signal to gather on the rug for Circle Time. No other words were spoken; no disciplining or reminding had to take place, even though this was only the children's fourth week in school. The students left what they were doing, enthusiastically joining each other and their Teacher on the rug. The Assistant picked up a few toys which could impede later movement to Chapel and came over to sit

with the children. As noted, it was early in the program year and most of these children had not attended school before. There was some generalized settling which needed to take place. Teachers helped a few of the students understand that sticking their legs out made it difficult for others to find a place and sweeping those legs back and forth across the floor interfered with their classmates by bumping them again and again. It wasn't long before all were quiet. Their teacher read them a couple of pages from *Old Turtle*, the book of the day.

Then she began to instruct them in the elements and movement of the Chapel time to which they would be moving shortly. This would be just their second time in Chapel, so the Teacher took great care to explain terms such as “joy, concern” and what would be happening in Chapel. “When you have the lamb it will be your turn to share and all the rest of us will listen,” she said. “If you don't want to share a joy or a concern, that's fine, you can just give the lamb a hug and pass it on. You can share with me when you come up for blessing.” There was a little wiggling during this time and she kept her instructions short and to the point. Soon it was time to go to the door and stand “hip to lip” (see Glossary) for Chapel.

Lining up and going from the classroom to the church sanctuary “hip to lip” is an integral part of both preparation for and Chapel time. The act, modeled by adults, almost without exception each time, helped the children move quietly through the halls and keep their hands to themselves. In addition, it is a part of the Memorial Children's Chapel Program ritual, familiar to all associated with the school.

This same preparatory activity was engaged in with those children who were soon to begin turning five in the Oldest Preschoolers classroom, where the researcher observed

three mornings. One of these was an early fall day when the class was not attending Chapel. The children were busy at play, moving easily from one area to another. A group of boys was playing in the Block Corner building houses and corrals and other enclosures for stuffed and vinyl frogs. The space easily held three children, when a fourth child joined in the play it appeared that at any moment someone would get frustrated or overly enthusiastic and a block building might come tumbling down. There was quite a lot of checking with one another.

“Is this your frog?”

“Yes.”

“Is this yours?”

“Nope.”

The questioner then took the unclaimed frog.

Many times one child would ask another, “Is this your block?” The play got more and more energized as the number of available blocks diminished and the center got crowded, with the addition of a fifth boy. While there were some fast movements and voices were raised at one point, nothing untoward happened. No one hoarded or knocked down another’s building. The boys’ ability to talk with each other, to negotiate space and for blocks seemed to have the desired effect of keeping the cooperative play activity truly cooperative.

Because the researcher was visiting in order for the children to be comfortable with interviews to occur later in the year, she was drawn into the block play and asked to help watch the corral one child had built, while he went to the Lego Center to hunt for a truck. The boys who stayed in the block corner had smiled at the visitor but otherwise

ignored her presence and did not seem to be influenced by her, as they left the corral untouched, waiting for its builder's return. The child got distracted though and moved off to other play. Only after a period of time had gone by, did one, then another of the boys still playing there, move to take apart the corral in order to use those blocks for their frog houses. It was remarkably accommodating group play by the boys, without need for adult intervention.

The next observation in this class was in October when Halloween excitement was building. The energy and noise level in the room were greater than usual and some children were in costume. A close scrutiny of what was occurring showed that the teachers, along with a volunteer, were aware of what was happening throughout the three contiguous rooms that make up this particular class space. Teachers did not raise their voices to get a child's attention, over the ninety foot span, they walked across the space. Two boys who were playfully punching each others' arms were reminded to use their Preschool manners.

The routine which the children had come to expect began with their Gathering Song. "We've been waiting for you to come to this place," sang Mrs. Szalejko. Twenty children got comfortable on a gaily patterned rug. The Assistant Teacher positioned herself near some more exuberant ones.

"Take a deep breath, a calming breath. Think for a minute about what you want to share with Mrs Beam, a joy, a concern." The teacher then asked the children for their definitions of "joy" and "concern."

Of "joy" a girl said, "It means you're happy," while a boy added that a concern means, "you're sad." Mrs Szalejko expanded upon these definitions in a conversational

way and ended with, “Think in your head about what you want to share with Mrs Beam in chapel.”

The children lined up with a minimum of jostling and the Chapel Leader brushed each child’s outstretched arm with Calming Feathers while they assembled at the door. Both adults modeled the quietness asked of the children as they went down the hall, everyone with a finger to their lips and a hand on a hip.

As would be expected, the Preschool groups varied according to children’s ages and personalities and their teachers’ styles. While each class entered the chapel experience out of different classroom environments within the Preschool, all were able to settle into the Sabbath atmosphere of worship, listening and being listened to, praying and singing and hearing the affirmation of God’s blessings. Though the maturity level and preparation of the children affected their listening behaviors, each group was a cooperative community of people who cared deeply for one another.

Children’s Chapel Observations

Ten observations of Children’s Chapel took place during the 2006–2007 school year. In addition, three transcripts were available of earlier observations by the researcher, two from 2005 and one from 2006. All five classes of children at Memorial Preschool for the program year in which research took place were observed during the formal study process. Four were observed twice, once shortly after the school year began and one later time. The observations done in the 2005–2006 school year were one each with a three year old class, the fours and the oldest preschoolers, those who were mostly five. These observations took place as the school began thinking about its part in this

Doctor of Ministry. They were transcribed for purposes of triangulation and used in data coding, as themes were revealed.

The 2006–2007 groups were as follows, identified by the ages of the children comprising the classes:

- Young Three's A
- Young Three's B
- Fours
- Older Fours and Young Fives
- Oldest Preschoolers

The "A" group of three year olds had sixteen children in the class, eleven girls and five boys. They were observed the second day they had ever been in Chapel and again five months later.

The Young Three's B class also was observed during its second Chapel time experience. In this class, which was taught by the Chapel Leader, there were eight boys and three girls. The second observation occurred five weeks later.

Seventeen children were in the class of Fours; nine were boys. Some were in their first year at Memorial Preschool, others in their second. They were observed only once; again their second time in Chapel for the school year.

The Older Fours and Young Fives group had nine boys and four girls in attendance, the first observation period, which took place after the children had been attending Chapel weekly for a month. At their second observation, four months later, there were nine boys and two girls. The first Chapel time was led by the primary Chapel Leader. By the end of the fall 2006, it was clear to the school's administration that in

order for Chapel to take place every week with each group of children in the Preschool, another Leader had to be found. One of this researcher's Context Associates, who had been leading a Closing Prayer and Blessing Time each week in Sunday School at the church, became the Chapel Leader for this group of children and contributed to the triangulation of data collected and interpreted.

The Preschool Director and Assistant Director led the Oldest Preschoolers class and were involved as well with this research as Context Associates. This group of children, all of whom were in their second Memorial Preschool year, varied the most in its numbers. At the first observation, in October 2006, there were eight boys and eight girls. A week later, when the second took place, eleven boys and nine girls, a total of twenty children, along with their two teachers, participated in Chapel time. It might have been expected that twenty-two people would significantly change the dynamics of the experience, but that was not the case. This will be explored later in Chapter Six.

Usually when the children went to Chapel they were accompanied by both of the classroom teachers. Because the Chapel Leader taught one group of the Threes and was an assistant with the Fours, there was only one teacher with these groups during their Chapel time. When observation data was compiled and interpreted, the researcher expected to find that having only one adult, in addition to the Chapel Leader, with a group of lively children would have a detrimental effect upon the experience. This turned out to be true, but was less of a difficulty than was anticipated.

Observations in all the groups focused on:

- children's appropriation of the liturgy, including the songs sung
- listening

- sharing during joys and concerns
- interactions between members of the group, throughout Chapel time
- responses to Blessing
- group behaviors during transition times

The researcher took field notes on particular members of each class randomly selected during each observation. Annotations were taken of behavior which repeated and that which was out of the ordinary. The early fall observations provided a baseline for subsequent field notes written during later observations in the school year, as well as data from the three transcriptions of groups observed during the 2005–2006 year.

Most teachers prepared the children for Chapel during Circle Time, beginning in the fall. This weekly preparation continued all year, though it diminished in length and depth. The Chapel Leader rehearsed the movement of Chapel time and its elements during the first few times each group attended Chapel. First year, younger children, were extensively and patiently trained for what was to happen before Chapel began and what was occurring during this time. Before Blessing time, this element of Chapel was carefully reviewed, for it meant a move from a group to an individual experience.

One teacher did not see, to the extent the others did, the importance of careful, regular preparation for Chapel nor the critical nature of the movement itself from active classroom to Sabbath-like Chapel time. These children came into the sanctuary in a less orderly manner than the other classes and it took a little longer to get them settled. The assistant teacher, a Quaker, interacted quietly with the children as they got into their circle. The head teacher used more words, though quietly. She also allowed behavior the other teachers did not, including allowing children to sit on a step rather than on the floor

and to whisper rather loudly during Blessing. The Chapel Leader needed to do more reminding of the class, during Chapel, about listening and staying still. While this made the whole experience somewhat less peaceful and calm, the children's receptivity to Chapel did not appear to be affected.

As noted above, with two of the groups of children, there was only one teacher, since the Chapel Leader served in a teaching role within each of these classrooms. One of these groups had nine children, the older one seventeen. These young students had little experience with Chapel. Their behavior was appropriate for their age. The lack of one more lap and two more arms meant that the children farther away from an adult wiggled and whispered more, which could not be quashed by a simple hand on a shoulder, gentle back stroking or a change of position in the circle.

The Chapel Leader compensated by adding gentle instruction for the whole group such as, "Remember to put on your listening ears when someone is talking." Then directly to the misbehaving child, "Sadie, dear" (here the Leader who had gotten Sadie's attention, tapped her own ear and Sadie stopped talking to her neighbor). She also shortened the corporate prayer and/or eliminated a song or even two, if children began to lose focus and attention.

While maturity level to some extent dictated the length of Chapel time, most groups sustained attention for a full fifteen or twenty minutes. Reflections upon the preparation of both classes observed during their Circle Time, and surmised about the most unruly group, indicate the necessity of calm teachers who are fully present with the children. Teachers distracted by other adults did not attend to initial acts of behavior

which ended up being disruptive. Nor did they model the focus and attention necessary for the best Chapel experience.

An observation near Thanksgiving was the best indicator of this. This group of Fours struggled to pay attention on the best of days, since there were seventeen of them and only one teacher, plus the leader. They entered Chapel time excited about the canned food gifts they were bringing to the Associate Pastor, who was adding them to the Youth Holiday Basket project. The Pastor had his eleven month old son with him, who he handed to the class teacher, when he joined the group (rather loudly, joking around with children and teachers). Being held by the teacher was fine with the baby. His vocalizations attracted the attention of many in the group and those near him wanted, naturally, to touch and play with him. After the Pastor had accepted the children's food offerings, he left with the cans and boxes, leaving his son with the class. He returned and took the baby with him after about ten minutes. The Chapel Leader continued to take the children through an abbreviated version of the Chapel service, without two of the three songs, and with a very short prayer. Blessing time occurred as usual. While the teachers were embarrassed by the children's distracted behavior, it was clear that the Pastor's lack of understanding about chapel and its purposes, adults talking with each other while Chapel was going on and the presence of the baby, were the distracting elements. Even though the time did not go optimally, Blessing was the same as usual. The children waited patiently for their turns, receiving the affirmation of God's love with most of the intensity shown on a "normal" week.

Child and Adult Behaviors in Chapel

The Gathering

Most groups came into Chapel quietly, hip to lip. They gathered in a circle around the worship center (see Appendix C) and sat down “criss cross applesauce” (see Glossary) with a minimum of fuss. Children behaved well in Chapel, even those who moved around more than others or engaged in whispered conversation did so mostly without disrupting the group. Predictive of the most relaxed, quiet, calm behavior by the children were the presence of two adults along with the Chapel Leader, preparation time before Chapel and the season of the year. The one class which operated philosophically in a less structured manner than the others, tended to need more guidance in settling down each week and more instruction by the leader throughout Chapel Time. Halloween and Christmas were times when the children’s excitement bubbled over and it was more difficult than usual to be still and listen to one another.

Expectancy marked the children’s group behavior as they entered into one of their favorite weekly activities. The children quickly learned the opening Candelighting Liturgy and two songs, *Jesus Loves Me* and *Seek Ye First*, the activities with which Chapel began. Older children remembered the Chapel time elements and sequence from their previous school experience and were “experts” at Chapel early in the new school year. Singing was tentative at first, especially by the younger children; it got more certain and confident as the year went on. One older child was seen on a DVD of Chapel Time to be swinging her bright red hair in time to the tune of *Seek Ye First!*

Sharing

Three year old children had a tendency to speak out if the one holding the lamb said something particularly of interest. The Chapel Leader patiently reminded the interrupters that they needed to have on their listening ears while just the one child was speaking. Sometimes it would take two or three reminders before the group stopped chiming in. The older preschoolers almost never interjected during Sharing time.

Sharing got deeper as children became used to Chapel Time and as they matured. The youngest students were thankful for their toys, their pets, their homes and families. Later they began to add concerns for fears they had, for sick relatives, parents who were away, brothers and sisters, and sometimes for friends, especially those in the Preschool. Surveys and observations indicated that older children seldom brought only thankfulness for their belongings or activities in which they were the center of attention. Their joys were primarily for families and friends and the things they were doing or going to do with them, while their concerns were broad ranging, encompassing moving away, fears of the dark and nightmares, concern for sick pets, mothers, fathers, siblings and other relatives. They spoke of the death of grandparents and dogs; about divorce and new houses.

Children looked forward to sharing time, as was noted in the data gathered from parents and teachers and as will be seen later in this chapter when the children's Interviews, writing and drawings are explored. When given time, even shy ones eventually would share a special joy or concern. The second Chapel Leader told a story during a Context Associate meeting about a little boy who never had a word to say, who finally did share one day when the Sharing Lamb came to him. It took him all year, but he did speak a concern when he was ready.

Every once in awhile a child tried to take more than his fair share of time with the Lamb. Once it was when a five year old boy had “seven things to say.” The Chapel Leader allowed this, though his teachers felt he was grandstanding. The joys and concerns were minor until he got to the last one; “we are going to move and I won’t have any friends.” It took patience on the part of the whole group to allow him to get to deep sharing. The teachers were pleased he had not been shut off; the children did not pick up on his many sharings and insist that they too had to have the floor for an extended period of time.

A boy in the younger Fours group began to share one day when this researcher was observing. He simply would not let go of the lamb, nor stop talking about his family. He went on and on, with the Leader attempting to help him come to a conclusion, but to no avail. Finally she firmly put her hand on the Lamb to which he clung and said in a very firm, but quiet, tone, “Percy, you may continue to share with us when we get back to the classroom. Now is it Margot’s turn.” It was clear that Percy thought about ignoring Mrs. Beam but he gave in, handed the Lamb to Margot and listened well the rest of Chapel time.

Sometimes the one whose turn it was with the lamb had nothing to say, at least to the group. This often occurred with the younger children and was not uncommon in the older classes. Each child was given some time to think about what to say and if he or she indicated there was nothing, the Chapel leader asked the boy or girl to give the Lamb a hug and pass it on. There was never any problem giving up the lamb, after early in the development of Chapel time, when a frightened boy did not want to pass the Lamb.

Another one was found and used for sharing that day and Comfort Lambs became a part of the tangible spiritual nurture items in each classroom.

An older girl was heard to declare, "I have nothing to say," but usually there was just silence when a child didn't have a joy or concern to share with the group. The researcher watched for private sharing behavior during blessing and noted that in each class there might be one child who needed to give a joy or concern just to the Chapel Leader. There were only a few times when Chapel was observed by the researcher, Context Associates, teachers, visitors, that anyone noted overtly out of bounds behavior during sharing. Once, an overly excited boy, after announcing that his birthday party was coming up soon, tossed the Sharing Lamb to the person next to him and another time, two boys teased each other until they were separated by a teacher.

Prayer

Prayer time showed the most variation of behavior, though the actions of the children were seldom in need of correction. Some students would fold their hands and bow their heads; others looked around; a few rolled themselves into balls or lay down on their backs; some did all of this during the prayers. A few of the youngest children seemed perplexed by the prayer behavior, at the beginning of the year. Later on most had adopted some sort of body language for prayer, which they used in Chapel. The children chose behavior which was modeled by the teachers or Chapel Leader, some they picked up from church and home instruction. Because the Chapel Leader's oral prayer ended the same way each week the children eventually learned it well enough say it along with her while they prayed. Depending upon the day and the class, there might be a low murmur

of prayer from the children during the Leader's praying. One child was heard to pray, "for my daddy." When the worship time had gone longer than expected or the children were less attentive than usual, the Leader would compress the prayer which followed Sharing Time, but she never skipped it.

The groups increasingly bonded the longer they were together and as they got older, with children paying focused attention to one another. Some added concerns raised by others during Chapel to their home prayer time. Teachers noted that after Chapel time children would take extra care with a shy or sad child in the classroom. One morning a child returned to his classroom after Chapel and told his teacher, "we need to pray for God's mother!" The Chapel Leader, Mrs. Beam, had shared in Chapel that her own mother was in the hospital and she was worried about her.

Transition to Blessing

As the school year progressed the children's attention span increased and they were able to take part in longer Chapel times. The third Chapel Time song, *Friend Jesus Be Our Holy Guest* (see Appendix C) would be sung, as well as the earlier two, some children would say their own prayers while the rest of the group prayed with them, and there would be little to no impatience evidenced by the students while they sat quietly before their own Blessing or as they stood in line waiting for all to receive God's Blessings from the Chapel Leader.

Blessing Time

The Blessing Time was of particular interest to this researcher because of its power. One regular observer of Chapel over a period of years commented that, “It is in their eyes. This elusive, yet convincing data comes from the eyes of the children in the chapel service when they are named and told of God’s blessing. Many seem to be in a moment of intense concentration. Their eyes seem slightly out of focus as if looking into a dimension of reality that is somewhere beyond. It seems a holy moment that they experience in a charmingly grateful manner.”³

Teachers learned to receive blessing also from the Chapel Leader, just as they learned the power of sharing their own joys and concerns during Sharing Time and asking for prayers. While it was initially in order to model desired behavior, soon most of the teachers who came forward were seeking the same thing being offered the children, an affirmation of God’s love. They accepted blessing with calm joy, their spirits lifted by hearing the words of Blessing which ended always with “God blesses you.” Visitors were sometimes brought to tears, a not unusual phenomenon when they first heard the words of Blessing pronounced: “(Name) God created you, God loves you, God is with you, God blesses you.” This was followed by offering blessing balm (see Glossary) to be put on an arm or hand in the sign of the cross, combined with words like, “Go now and be a blessing to others.”

The children though responded differently. They accepted the blessing as a welcome affirmation of something they already knew. It allowed them to internalize the

³ Don Rogers, blessing time, e-mail message to Jacqueline Nowak, October 15, 2003.

blessing from trusted adults who also were saying, “yes, God is indeed present and loves you and blesses you.”

That which is to live most deeply in human beings needs to be put in front of people, especially children, even infants and toddlers, with consistency, integrity, regularity and even urgency. Children need trust and nurturing relationships through which they are validated as children of a God who is with them. Blessing Time in Chapel does this for each child.

The body language, behaviors and eyes of the children offered solid indications of the effect Blessing had on them. As children walked one by one up the steps to the Leader, they often were preparing themselves by pushing up their sleeves, holding out their arms, bouncing a little, if having to wait. Delight continued after the Blessing was received. Some made intense eye contact with the Leader; others watched her put on the balm. The boys and girls smiled, some broadly, they left contemplatively; sometimes a little face would be gazing at something unseen. The Leaders got hugs, whispers and every once in awhile, Blessing Balm offered by a child. As the children went back down the Chancel steps after Blessing, there was a great deal of consistency in the ways they held themselves. Most extended the arm with the balm on it; sometimes offering a friend, a teacher or a visitor a look at the sparkly cross, or to have them smell its scent. They continued to hold their arm in this special way at least until they got into line and sometimes until they left the Sanctuary.

In a less orderly group one morning, the children waiting in line to go back to the classroom were saying, “Smell mine! Smell mine!” offering others a bit of what they had

received. They did this, using quiet voices which did not interfere with the Blessing going on in the Chancel.

In the formal Observations and informal conversations related to Blessing Time, there were a few instances noted where a child was less than comfortable with the Blessing. No child was ever coerced to participate and they were all free to line up at the back of the Sanctuary if they did not want Blessing. This happened twice, with two different children, in the five years Chapel has been taking place. While taking Field Notes the researcher noted two younger children who appeared uncomfortable with Blessing Time. The leader very sensitively handled any discomfort. One older child had had enough waiting and sitting and was ready to leave, so though he came up for Blessing, he indicated that he wanted it to be quick. The Leader, with good humor, compressed the ritual into a very short process. "George," she said, as she made the sign of the cross on his hand, "God loves and blesses you!" George was satisfied.

The Children Have a Say

The school Administration had originally agreed to have each class do a writing and drawing project in which the students would tell about Chapel. The researcher did not set strict guidelines about how this would be done or what guidance the adults would give the children. In the spring of 2007, a class of Three year olds, with some becoming four, dictated sentence to their teachers about Chapel. The sentences began "I like"(about Chapel).

In January 2007, the Oldest Preschool Class produced pictures related to Chapel with titles on them that the children dictated to their teachers. This same class wrote

stories in the spring using prompts written by Mrs. Szalejko, the Preschool Director and a Context Associate. The prompts were:

1. Chapel time is . . .
2. We do . . .
3. Mrs Beam's job is . . .
4. My favorite part is . . .

Also in January, this researcher interviewed eleven children about Chapel during their class time. The questions, which had to be used flexibly, are found in Appendix D.

Two other sets of materials produced by Memorial Preschool children came to light during the study process. In the spring of 2006, a new teacher of Fours and Fives composed a set of questions to which her children responded in a writing exercise. They are included in the Appendix D and were used as "found material" during the formal process of triangulation. A notebook called "Making Memories," was a compilation of stories and pictures done by the oldest preschool group in 2004, when the original Chapel Leader was leaving the church. These too served to provide additional sources of triangulation.

The researcher found in the children's material themes which did not arise with the adults. It must be remembered that young children process the world differently than adults. They are poets and artists and mystics.

The Interviews

The interviews with children produced less in the way of insight into their Chapel experiences than expected. It may be that they understand their time in Chapel as just part

of what they do and do not assign the deep spiritual importance to it that adults do. When asked to “Tell me about Chapel,” all but one of the children said it was a *prayer time*. “You pray to your mamaw ‘cause she died,” said one. Interestingly, another child said almost the same thing, “Pray. We pray to God, we pray to my mamaw ‘cause she’s dead.” This was said in a very matter of fact way and then she went on to talk about lighting candles and liking to play with her friends.

The child who did not mention prayer picked up on the other primary theme when asked to talk about Chapel. He said, “(We) get to hold the lamb and tell him things, whatever you want; sad things, bad things, happy things.” Chapel as *sharing time* was raised without prompting from the Interviewer, by nine of the children. All eleven volunteered that the Sharing Lamb was part of Chapel. The lamb, “makes sharing easier,” “we pray on it.” The children did not see much difference between sharing and praying. For them the *sharing time* was *prayer time*, as indicated by this comment made by a boy, whose favorite part was “when we walk in and sit down and praying and the lamb.”

“The lamb?” he was asked.

“Pass it around to people and whoever gets chapel helper gets the lamb and begins to pass it. People get to tell the best stories; can say anything they want. Then prayer with Mrs Beam.”

Six children talked about the candle, which is lit to begin the liturgy of Chapel time. Eight talked about the songs they sang and two said singing was their favorite part.

Blessing time was the favorite part of Chapel for two. It was mentioned independently by seven children, three of whom then said it was their favorite part.

When prompted by the statement, “Tell me about blessing time,” two more said they liked that ‘stuff’ best.

“Mrs. Beam says, ‘God loves you’,” reported one.

One boy commented that “Blessing makes me feel good, but sometimes it is too long.” Because Blessing comes at the end of Chapel it can mean that children are sitting quietly for more than twenty minutes, which is a very long time for a five year old boy!

Some children noted the listening time. “We listen to the lamb holder very quietly,” a girl said.

Another told the Interviewer, “I like the quiet.”

A short conversation with a boy gave rise to questions which might have been answered by more times of observation of him after the interview and/or a conversation with his teachers:

“Tell me about Chapel,” the researcher said.

“Prayers,” he answered.

“What do you do?”

“I just sit and keep quiet.”

“What do you hear?”

“Music stuff.”

“What do you share?” asked the researcher.

“Sad stuff.”

“How do you feel when you share?”

“Makes me feel sad.”

“Do you give it to God?”

“Yeah and to my friends . . . I do some blessing.”

It is from statements such as these, that the preschool leaders get indications of children’s well-being which may need to be given more attention.

One child ended his interview with, “God makes my paw-paw feel good because he still has all his teeth and he is very old.”

Three Year Old Writing Exercise

The three year old class led by the Chapel time leader, dictated answers to their writing prompt. There were sixteen children in this class by April 2007, when the writing took place. In response to “I like,” two said singing, three mentioned the candle, seven talked about the lamb, three said sharing. “Sharing makes me happy,” remarked one. Two children liked blessing and one said praying. She said, “I like praying about (my brother) when he can’t find his stuff for basketball.” One more talkative girl noted that she liked to “sit down in chapel and singing and having the lamb.” Two notable themes which emerged were the numbers of children talking about the Sharing Lamb and the relatively few mentions of Blessing.

Children’s Art by the Oldest Preschoolers

Fourteen children drew Chapel Time pictures, some titled and with a dictated descriptive caption. Significantly, this project uncovered the importance of the adult leaders in the children’s Chapel experience. Six of the pictures included references to the Chapel leader or to a teacher. Six of the drawings were of or had as part of the picture, the candle which was lit to begin each Chapel service. Half of the pictures were of the

child and others in Chapel time, indicating an appreciation of the communitarian nature of this experience. Smiles, outstretched arms and descriptions such as, “Mrs. Beam makes me feel happy!” filled the drawings. Twelve of the pictures were of the service or components only found in the Chapel time, such as the Sharing and Prayer time or the candle. One picture included the children being walked to Chapel led by a singing Chapel leader, while another placed the child and the Chapel leader smiling, with arms outstretched, outdoors in the bright sunshine. Within the fourteen pictures were the elements of the Chapel Time experience felt by adults to be most important: ritual and its tangible symbols, the candle and lamb; community and hospitality; listening, sharing and praying; singing and finally blessing. What appeared in this part of the data collection that did not in other pieces was the vital importance of the leader, which shall be discussed more in the summary section of this chapter and in Chapter Six.

Oldest Preschooler’s Writing Exercise

These same children participated in a spring writing exercise, which was done three months later. Ten girls and nine boys took part in this portion of the research. As noted in the Methodology section, the children were asked to respond to four sentence starters: “Chapel time is,” “We do,” “Mrs. Beam’s job is” and “My favorite part.” Again in this exercise, the lamb appeared regularly. It was mentioned twenty-five times, followed by prayer, which was referred to nineteen times. The candle, an important expression in the children’s drawings, was brought up five times. Listening, sharing and praying were talked about more than any other elements of Chapel, with fifty-seven

mentions made of this part of the experience. Blessing was raised seven times and singing six.

The leadership by adults became part of the children's reflections only with phrase three, "Mrs. Beam's job is." No other leaders were mentioned and the most often occurring answer was that her job was to be sure chapel took place, with praying coming in a close second.

Responses to "Chapel time is" reflected a common understanding by the children that this time together was primarily about praying and sharing with those topics raised ten times. Chapel time as candle lighting and sharing the lamb were written about by six children, singing by one and one child said that, "Chapel time is when we do stuff."

When asked for their favorite part of Chapel, it was no surprise that the lamb was noted as a favored part of Chapel by ten children. The next most mentioned aspects as "favorite" were blessing and sharing, those were listed three times each and singing was the favorite part for two students. One child said, "Everything!" was her favorite.

Summarizing and Interpreting the Data

The pictures which emerged from the themes growing out of data coding and interpretation indicate that Children's Chapel is having a beneficial impact upon the students, their school and families. This spiritual formation ministry, stressing the preventative potential of a carefully planned, weekly, worshipful prayer time of spiritual nurture for children and adults, within an overall environment of spiritual nourishment, has become as much a part of the Preschool as academic, social and emotional nurture. It seems apparent that the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture pillars listed below offer a

structure within which to help the youngest of God's people remain aware of their connection with God and the blessing of innate spiritual strength which is theirs.

As Wolcott notes, the "major problem we face in qualitative inquiry is not to get the data, but to get rid of it!"⁴ Particular elements of the Chapel program must be brought to the forefront and considered in this section, for they look to have the clearest and most beneficial impact upon 1) the children, 2) the school itself, 3) the parents/families. These are listed below in subcategories under the Pillars of this Act of Ministry.

The Pillars are:

- embracing the innate *spiritual nature of the child*

1) A majority of the adults leading the Preschool understand children to be connected to God; this connection is encouraged and developed by ongoing nurture. The Children's Chapel Program is as important to the school as is any other part of the curriculum. Practicing acts of listening, sharing and praying in Children's Chapel encourage each child's spiritual formation. The children, who take the reality of a loving, ever present God for granted, have this belief reinforced through their daily interactions at school, with each other and their teachers and specifically in Chapel.

2) Accepting the vital spirituality of each child allows nurture practices of Chapel time to become part of each Preschool day. Teachers noted that they are more attentive to the children's spirituality, more prayerful with them at snack and in times of need, more encouraging of the children as teachers of adults in ways spirituality and each one's connection with God are sustained. The fact that each classroom has a Chapel basket and spiritual nurture items attests to this.

⁴ Wolcott, *Writing up Qualitative Research*, 18.

3) Parents reflected in moving ways upon their children's spiritual nature and their gratitude for a school which affirms children's connection to God. They had great praise for teachers who welcome God's presence in the school, a place where their children can experience this presence, not just in Chapel, but during their entire preschool days. A parent wrote, about the impact of Chapel upon her child's spiritual growth that "love and encouragement are key to his confidence level, developing character, overall well being. He feels safe, that he can solve his own conflicts in a positive way and is better equipped to face whatever comes his way."

- practicing *Sabbath-living*

1) The Children's Chapel Program, and the preparation for this time, are both experiences of Sabbath. Children leave the busyness of a noisy, active, highly visual environment and find the quiet within themselves as they prepare for Chapel time. The calmness of Chapel is appreciated by the children, as one said, "I like the quiet time." Their demeanor changes in Chapel, little wiry bodies relax, faces become serene, movements are mellow.

2) Teachers cherish the Sabbath they are offered in Chapel, for it is a time for them too to retreat from the pressures of all the things which go on each day, to slow down and take a deep breath. A newer teacher said that the Sabbath atmosphere is a wonderful opportunity to take a break and focus on "things of true importance."

3) Parents did not make much comment upon the Sabbath environment of Chapel time, unless they had visited. Then they tended to focus upon moving aspects of the children's prayers and the closing blessing.

- honoring the *holiness* within each person

1) The Chapel leader, and the teachers also, honor each child's holiness; they look for things to praise rather than to criticize; they respect children's developmental levels. This mutual relationship of respect and trust stands out in the students' behavior with their leaders, especially in the Chapel atmosphere.

2) Teachers spoke repeatedly of growing more respectful of the children, of becoming better able to meet their needs. In observations of Chapel time, it was noted that teachers gently and patiently interacted with the children.

- welcoming people into *koinonia community*

1) The children had hospitable behavior modeled for them in Chapel as well as the classroom and they displayed it toward each other and their teachers in Chapel time. Their listening was very focused; they waited patiently for turns to speak; to be offered blessing. The Preschool's children are also given opportunities to grow in compassion, which they show to each other and act upon as they reach out to those who are in need, particularly through the Preschool's Birthday Party for Jesus.

2) The Preschool staff modeled being a welcoming community as every level encountered by the researcher.

3) Parents commented upon their children's acceptance of "the shy child"; their generosity in giving; their growing abilities to solve problems in the classroom with confidence.

- encouraging *worship* practices

1) The rituals which are familiar to the children seem to be integral to its success and were reflected in the comfort level with which all the groups of children engaged Chapel and in their anticipation of its happening. These characteristics are:

- the reliability of a regularly occurring Chapel time
- the liturgy, including the children's three songs, repeated over and over
- dependable movement through the worship experience, with each component coming in its place, in familiar ways
- the tangible items used in Chapel, along with the same Sharing Lamb and the Children's Candle
- closing Blessing.

Children blended the sharing and prayer times together seamlessly. They knew that their sharing was in fact praying, as they told of their joys and their concerns. This was borne out in observation and through the artifact material collected, as again and again the children talked about praying to God about what they shared, about their thankfulness, about "telling stories to Mrs. Beam and God."

2) Through the Chapel time experience some teachers have become more able to pray comfortably in front of children and other adults. Worship in the preschool has infiltrated the classroom and, according to the Director, changed the way adults interact with their students. These changes include more classroom prayer, often led by the children; taking time to be thankful to God for all God has given; sharing the Chapel time songs in parent and community presentations.

3) Parent and teacher surveys and comments bore out the observations of the comfortable way in which children engaged Sharing and Prayer Time. That they like praying in Chapel and at home were mentioned by most adult respondents. One said, "I know my child can go to a safe, loving place to talk to God and feel his love. A reminder he is in all things."

- practicing *holy listening*

1) The children have a trusted adult whose primary task is to lead the Chapel experience; through her they are encouraged to listen for God and to one another. They are helped to discover, with God's help, in relationship with these caring adults who are with them on their journey through life, how they can best thrive, cope and, when needed, heal.

The children mentioned listening in their writing and drew pictures of this in their artwork. One child said, "I like sharing something that makes me happy." And from a three year old boy came, "I like telling about my daddy and my blankie," while a classmate liked telling about her mother. Observations found that most listen attentively to the others in their class.

2) Teachers spoke of the value of listening to the sharing of concerns, for these were more likely to come up in Chapel than in the classroom. One story repeated over and over because of its impact upon the teachers, is that of the girl who sat quietly through Chapel for two months, after her father had attempted suicide. One day, she quietly shared, "My daddy cut himself."

In addition, the teachers distinguished listening as a polite behavior from doing Holy listening in Chapel. There they talk of God's presence and of listening because "we care about each other."

3) The ability to listen and pray for one another was noted by numerous parents, who spoke of the sharing of prayer concerns by their Preschoolers at home, during family meal and prayer times.

- affirming God's *blessings* intrinsic to each person

1) Observations by the researcher and visitors noted an intensity in the children during Blessing time, even if the Chapel experience had been less than optimum. Students were expectant, though not pushy about getting their turn for Blessing. They waited patiently for their turns, smiling as they approached the Chapel leader. Quiet delight seemed to take hold of almost all the children. Even if Chapel had gone longer than expected, the day was exciting, the children's serenity had been strained, they enjoyed their regular affirmation of God's love.

2) Most teachers went forward for Blessing. In their surveys and conversations they announced it an affirmation that adults also need regularly, as well as an important modeling for the children.

3) Parents have been moved to tears both by watching the blessing of their children and from receiving Blessing from the Chapel time leader. Some families have Blessing Balm at home. A story shared by one mother illustrates the importance of Blessing:

“Blessing balm is not a toy at our house and we keep it up high. One day the girls made a tower and climbed up, got the balm down and blessed each other, then put it away. How glad I am I didn't yell (when I saw the tower they had built).”

To summarize, the particular components of the Chapel program which seemed to have the biggest impact on the children's spiritual growth were the candle, the lamb, praying and sharing, singing and blessing.

Young ones took for granted aspects which the teachers found to be particularly important and were more attached to parts of the Chapel time than had been expected by the researcher. Contributions of the children, through the field notes and a careful

observation of Chapel time photos taken over the last five years, lifted the Sharing Lamb to the forefront, along with the Blessing time. Blessing, for the adults most closely connected to the program, tended to be the most important part of Chapel. It was not commented upon as often by the children. It may be that they, who are still aware of their connection to God and God's love for them, were echoing, in these Chapel responses, the words of a three year old, after he received God's blessing from his Chapel leader.

She said to him, "Max, God created you. God loves you. God is with you. God blesses you."

He replied, "Of course."

The candle symbolized God for some of the children, as did the Chapel leader, herself. The tangible nature of the lamb, with its comforting presence, highlighted the importance of using tangible items in spiritual nurture. The lamb also raised an intriguing question related to the work of Sofia Caveletti. Her work revolved around the biblical story of Jesus as the Good Shepherd because she found this story to be the favorite of the children with whom she worked. Is there more involved in the children's fondness of the lamb than that which arises from its cuddly nature? Could it be intuitively representative for them of their safety within the arms of the Good Shepherd?

The researcher found the importance of the Sharing Lamb, along with the Sharing and Prayer time for the children most surprising and very compelling. She hopes at some future date to engage in research that compares the impact of this program on similar dynamics in a school setting where there is no Chapel experience.

The data is less clear about the impact of these aspects of the chapel program and indicate the desirability of more research down the line: the preparation time for Chapel;

ways compassion for the world is impacted by Chapel, the importance of the community setting for spiritual nurture, how spiritual nurture affects home life. In addition, it would be helpful to be able to study whether the spiritual nurture provided the Preschool children has any kind of enduring effect on them when they leave the school.

“Chapel time is when God blesses you and me. We pray and we tell Ms Jackie that God blesses her. Ms Jackie’s job is to take care of the people. I like telling stuff when I get the lamb. Ms Jackie gives blessings to us. She gives me a blessing and she gives me blessing balm.”

-dictated by Emma, 2003

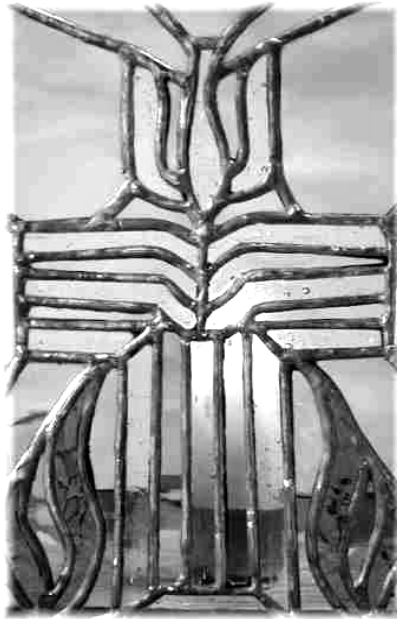


Fig. 3 The Chapel Time candle

CHAPTER SIX

REFLECTIONS

General Comments

This writer's Act of Ministry touched upon productive areas for further study. There appear to be Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices, specifically elements of the Children's Chapel program, which connect to brain and child development, poverty, intercultural and inner-city studies. In the future, the impact of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture with children and youth may be increased by developing connections with social work communities, public and private schools and human service organizations. A gentleman who was in this writer's doctoral cohort group before moving to one more closely aligned with social justice, mused that the affirmation of God's blessing offered regularly to children living in the midst of chaos and poverty has the potential to "change the city."

Fundamentals of the Children's Chapel program are found in newspaper and magazine articles about struggling public schools' attempts to meet the needs of children in the midst of stagnating and enervated environments. Helping children find the quiet within themselves has been introduced through the practice of meditation in some New York City schools; while developing caring relationships and showing compassion are two core goals of a boy's elementary school also in that city. These are two examples of

possibilities inherent in developing conversations with those who care deeply about children's well-being, yet are outside church communities.

Within mainline Christian churches, preschools have long been housed by but not been integrally part of the ministry of the congregations. The addition of spiritual nurture practices such as Children's Chapel to these kinds of preschools could add to the richness of the children's development during early formative years. Only in the life and ministry of the African-American Protestant church has there been much concentration upon spiritual formation practices until recently. What there is today focuses upon adults. Potential can be found in taking elements of Chapel and applying them broadly, for all ages, to education, mission and small group ministries, as well as worship.

Blessing, Holy Listening and Sabbath-living practiced within a church have the capacity to be applicable to every age, encouraging spiritual formation and depth of relationships, sustaining and strengthening members as they share the good news of Jesus Christ in the world, through mission and service. For instance, children are blessings and have the capacity and desire to bless others. This writer wonders if groups of young people raised in school, day care, church or community organizations which affirm God's presence and offer blessing rituals for children and adults alike, freely given to one another, might generate an environment where people might be less likely to turn on one another and be hurtful, hateful or spiteful.

The exploration of foundation resources has been revelatory in the discovery that there *are* those within the Christian tradition who have not been marked by protestant

Augustinian influences, though it is clear that too many children absorb a theology of “original guilt”⁵ from the teaching and preaching of the church, as is seen in this story:

Because of some concern with her pregnancy, my daughter-in-law was scheduled for a fourth ultrasound. Thinking it would be a neat experience for her son (8) and daughter (5), she invited them along. First, the kids were totally “grossed out” with the jelly all over the mommy’s tummy. Then, they expressed their boredom over the whole procedure noting that they couldn’t see a baby in all those black and white lines. The room quieted. The technician kept moving the cursor over the image on the screen. (Brice), our very busy grandson who struggles in school, kept looking intently at the image on the screen. Finally he asked, in a very serious tone, “Can you see the original sin in there?”⁶

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture takes with utmost seriousness this child’s words and the view of God he is developing. It behooves those who want to provide an alternative lens through which to understand humanity and particularly children, to find where those resources are. Tantalizing clues to areas for further study were uncovered in the author’s biblical, theological and historical foundations study and in conversation with mentor and professional associates. The following, which were barely touched upon in Chapter III, could enrich the understandings of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture: the writings of Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons; Eastern Orthodox Christianity, with no doctrine of original sin; various Jewish understandings and applications of ancient writings upon children and spirituality. While the limited nature of the research, made necessary by program and financial constraints, was frustrating, this writer is pleased to have confirmations, revelations and the identification of new issues to explore-someday.

⁵ Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 79.

⁶ Cindy Feltz, Cindy Sez, e-mail message to Jacqueline Nowak, February 8, 2006.

It would be a pleasure to engage contemporary theologians Andrew Park, Marcus Borg, and Walter Brueggemann, with whom this writer has had conversations, in thinking about children with respect to their understandings of oppression and victimization (Park), images of God and thinking about sin (Borg) and blessing and creation (Brueggemann). Continued development of explicitly theological and practical statements related to children and Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture might draw upon dialogue with Matthew Fox, Clark Williamson, Elizabeth Caldwell and Barbara Kimes Myers.

When the book generated by the 2006 Children's Spirituality Conference is published, this author anticipates finding articles theologically consistent with Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. Sections on Churches and Schools, Families, and Unique Populations are of special interest. She has been invited to submit a proposal for presenting her work at this event in 2009 and is looking forward to this opportunity to engage a new group of people in a Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture conversation. Leadership for the conference includes Karen-Marie Yust of Union Theological Seminary, a school of the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the author's Professional Associate, Dr Donald Ratcliff, Wheaton College. In preparation for a presentation, the opportunity to add tables and other visual representations of the data collected in this research project could further interpret the findings as others are educated in the possibilities inherent in a Children's Chapel Time ministry.

Moving somewhat farther a-field into an area which this author believes should be firmly linked with doing spiritual nurture is that of theological thinking and speaking. Most of the church leaders with whom this writer is acquainted are convinced that

theological talk is not something most Christians will do or even want to do. Yet, all people live out their implicit theologies in daily life. Therefore, it seems fitting that teachers and parents might be taught about chapel time and other spiritual nurture programs using biblical and theological images and stories and in so doing help them develop skills for consciously applying theology to life.

One of the pleasant surprises related to the foundational research for this Act Of Ministry was the excellent recent work being done in fields related to the spirituality and theology of children. Though not gone, child evangelism and original sin orientations toward children and the church, seem to be balanced by new books acknowledging the connection children have with God. Writers are taking seriously the words of Jesus about children, as found in Matthew, Mark and Luke. Scholars and professors aware of the potential impact children can have on the life of the Christian church are publishing thought provoking books, which deserve to be more closely studied in the future. Some of these are found in this paper's bibliography.

Chapel Program

Elements of Children's Chapel which could benefit from further study include the role and nature of preparation for Chapel time; the importance of the consistency of the experience; the critical nature of adult role modeling; the function of the community setting in individual spiritual nurture. The fact that data collected showed praying and sharing to be more significant in the Chapel time experience for the children than these were to the adults is worth reflecting upon. Children seemed to find peace and strength in the sharing, even though there was no resolution to concerns they brought. This too is

deserving of further consideration especially in light of commonly held adult beliefs that children see God as a Santa figure and think that praying is akin to magic.

Group size clearly had an impact on the length of any one child's sharing and praying. Experimenting over time, with smaller numbers of children in the groups, might uncover new breadth and depth of sharing and prayer of which the children are capable. The communal nature of Children's Chapel and the surrounding classroom environment seem to help children grow in mutual relationship with others, where "Love God and love neighbor as you love yourself" is given daily expression. Whether the compassion shown to be encouraged and developed by Chapel becomes generalized behavior and whether classroom and Chapel spiritual nurture have enduring effects on children's home lives are also areas for potential future study over longer periods of time than were afforded in this project. Because children have wisdom about what it is they need to grow, heal, and learn, further investigation might find that they flourish in conditions where they can not only trust, but be trusted by the adults who live alongside them through their growing years.

It is pleasing to this author as well to note that the Children's Chapel Time ministry is replicable. As others began leading Chapel Time, she could observe with greater objectivity and could also relax in the knowledge that this program with its elusive subtleties as well as simple procedures can be duplicated. Comparing the impact of this program with similar dynamics in a school setting where there is no Chapel experience could also bring to light helpful understandings. To this end, initiating a relationship with Northminster Presbyterian Preschool in Peoria, Illinois, where a study has recently taken place of children's spiritual development, might be very fruitful.

Pillars Which Might Be Examined In Additional Ways

In an article entitled *Spirituality in the Faith Community*, Hess and Gardner stated, “Unlike much of Western individualism, an awareness is emerging in many denominations that ‘the spiritual life of a human being’ is not an individual venture. Instead, classical Christian spirituality refers to the concrete lives of faith lived by individuals in a corporate body of faith that in turn forms and re-forms its participants.”⁷ A koinonia community of diverse people in intergenerational relationships is the model of radical hospitality to which the Christian community is called; it is the kind of community developed by taking seriously the practices and implementation of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. It is the kind of community which serves children well. What, this writer wonders, would this community look like if children and youth and adults were truly partners on the journey together?

Too often people, including more and more children, of younger and younger ages, have no opportunity to experience Sabbath, on a specific day or as a way of life. In most congregations, the joy of letting go of all that encumbers and opening to God got lost along the way. Today, to live a Sabbath life has become akin to navel gazing for some who believe that making their way in the world or doing the Gospel, preclude calm, centered, playful Christ-like living. Others though, understand.

A Sabbath-keeping community would be a community in which this injustice [of unequal employment] would not occur. When Sabbath comes, commerce halts, feasts are served, and all God’s children play. The equal reliance of all people on the bounty and grace of God is gratefully acknowledged, and the goodness of weekday work is affirmed. Relationships that persist throughout

⁷ Gardner and Hess, *Hungryhearts*.

the week are changed in the process. As the great Jewish scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel said, ‘The Sabbath cannot survive in exile, a lonely stranger among days of profanity.’⁸

Children, of all ages and conditions, need to be encouraged to continue in the Sabbath-living patterns of early childhood. Adults would be well-served too, coming alongside, guiding and providing rituals and traditions for the Sabbath, whether it is celebrated once a week or as part of each day. It would be a delight to participate in an intentional exploration of these possibilities in a congregation committed to such a thing. Blessings might be offered to adult groups, in youth ministry and Sunday Christian Education and music programs. Children in Sunday School programs and Youth Groups who participated in this ritual, as described by those involved in this study, found it to be a moving experience, in which boys and girls of all ages, throughout their teens, would take part. Adults are often moved to tears. More exploration of the possibilities of affirming God’s presence in this way needs to take place.

With Holy Listening, the speaker, listener(s) and Listener become one. Children, who may need years to separate their unique existence from that of creation, often express an understanding of sharing the “same ground” with God and with others. It may be in this communion with the sacred, through the everyday, that compassion takes root and in which true Holy Listening is grounded. More reflection upon and practice of Holy Listening could help members of congregations, of all ages, become better able to listen to each other and for God.

In her book *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood*, Joyce Ann Mercer observes that:

⁸ Dr Donald B Rogers, Sabbath, e-mail message to Jacqueline Nowak, June 2003

. . . a church that so completely welcomes children into its various practices, that strives intentionally to form children in those practices, and that still maintains its missional ecclesiology as a church-for-the-world . . . is a vision from the future, as eschatological community.”⁹

The Personal

I have benefited greatly from the noteworthy quantity and quality of the interactions with my peers, both within my Cohort group and with other students. The conversations on Blackboard and free exchange of insights and resources are education as it is meant to be. I feel as if all of the eight other projects are substantively part of mine, and vice versa. While, at times, it has been a struggle, this group of peers have developed an ability to listen and respond in supportive ways across whole life realities, as well as academic concerns. I am pleased to note that my learning has been aided by but not limited to the preparation of this final document. Peer group times, two intentional retreat experiences and a visit to another place of ministry have all been invaluable in the learning process.

The chance to be in conversation with some of those doing similar research in the arena of the spirituality of children has been a pleasure. Those and the ones who have counseled me in the exploration of foundation resources have been truly my generous teachers.

There is still more to be done: research, training, spreading of the word. I find myself on the cusp of a variety of analogous ministries that are and will continue to be informed by this work.

⁹ Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 243.

GLOSSARY

Blessing Balm. A sparkly, scented roll-on glitter, used to put the sign of the cross on children's hands and arms during Chapel Blessing time.

Calming Feathers. A feather duster used by children and adults to stroke arms. This has a calming effect.

Comfort Lambs. Small stuffed lambs, brown or black or white, which are given to children in need of comforting. The lamb is a reminder of Jesus, the Good Shepherd.

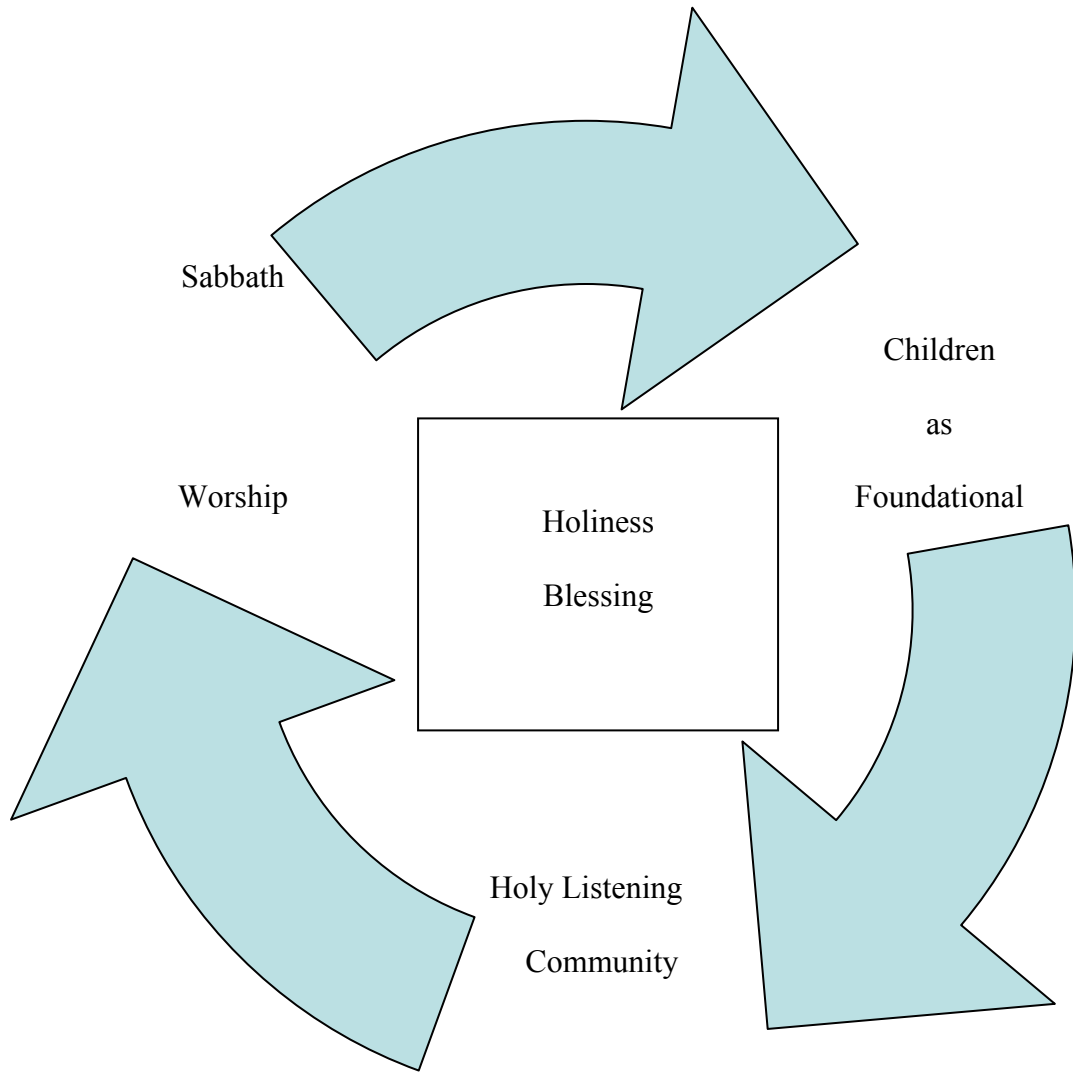
Criss Cross Applesauce. A way of sitting with crossed legs, which signals to the children of Memorial Preschool that it is time to quietly settle down.

Hip to Lip. The way children and adults in Memorial Preschool walk to Chapel. Each child puts a hand on a hip, while he/she holds a finger to his/her lips.

Holy Listening. This is the act of acknowledging the vertical dimension of God's presence, as one person listens to another, with full attention being given by the listener to all that is both said and unsaid, by the speaker. In Holy Listening, the one who listens does so in order to be present, as God is present, for the speaker, enabling her/him to engage problems, to draw upon her/his internal spiritual strength, to become more whole, to heal.

Prayer Beads. Large wooden beads which, when pulled across the thick cord upon which they are strung, help children list their praises to God, at prayer time in the classroom.

APPENDIX A
BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE MATRIX



APPENDIX B
PARENT PERMISSION FORMS

MULTIMEDIA RELEASE FORM MEMORIAL UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Family Name _____ Phone _____

Individual members are:

Purpose: Memorial United Presbyterian Church would like permission to use pictures and videos taken in the course of its ministry work. Please fill out this form and return it to the church as soon as possible.

Yes ____ No ____ I/We may be photographed, videotaped or otherwise recorded during activities and events of Memorial Church, including Memorial Presbyterian Preschool and The Blessing Center. These may be used for such reasons as demonstration activities, public relations, pictures for church, print media, or our website.

Signed _____

(Signature)

(Date)

If this card is not returned, we will assume that you **DO NOT** give permission for pictures to be used by Memorial United Presbyterian Church in publications or by the print or broadcast media or on web pages. This form includes all programs and ministries of Memorial United Presbyterian Church.

August 2006

Parental Permission Slip

*I give permission for my child, _____,
Memorial United Presbyterian Preschool student, to participate in a study of
children's spiritual development as observed through: Children's Chapel,
written story sharing, conversation with school staff, classroom based one-
on-one talks with Jacqueline Nowak.*

Parent's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Contact number or email: _____

Teacher's Signature: _____

Thank you.

Jacqueline Nowak, CCE, MARE

jnowak@blessingcenter.org

Doctoral student at United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH

Director, The Blessing Center

www.blessingcenter.org

APPENDIX C

RATIONALE FOR AND FORMAT OF CHILDREN'S CHAPEL

Preschool Religious Education Chapel Time

Worship, service, fellowship and study make up the components of the religious education program for Preschoolers taught by The Blessing Center.

WORSHIP is a way of being with God. In Chapel we worship God. We always begin by lighting a candle, the light from which reminds us of the presence of God. Sometimes we speak, sometimes we listen. We sing, pray and receive a blessing. The children are taught some of the music of the Christian church. They hear words of Scripture and are given quiet sacred space in which to pray prayers of praise and request.

The BLESSING is our way of sending each child, individually, with an affirming word, a benediction. This BLESSING is a good word about the personal worth of the child, who is called by name, and the love God has for that child. God, Who is present in the sanctuary where we have chapel, is not bound to this place. It is our prayer that God and the safety and nurture experienced in chapel will be felt by each child, as he or she goes out into every time and every place. As God goes with of us, we are enabled to be at peace, to love and serve our God.

SERVICE is a way we live out our faith in God, Who provides every good thing. Preschool children can participate in many of the mission outreach programs of any church. All are opportunities for the children to share some of the wonderful blessings of their lives, which come from God. In addition, they learn to serve one another through their daily lives together.

FELLOWSHIP is faith practice time. Children receive many chances to share and care, help and develop friendships as they live and grow in our preschool. Snack time each day begins with a grace, spoken or sung. Students participate in leadership as they practice being line leaders or the caboos; they keep the rooms neat and tidy by picking up after themselves and helping others; they teach by filling in the weather chart.

STUDY time takes place when a Bible story is heard and wondered about. The Bible speaks to children as well as adults and exploring stories from the Bible provides the children with opportunities to wonder about people, about places, about God. Children love biblical stories told without extra details or moralizing endings—they enter the stories with awe, wonder and amazement. God is revealed through the stories of the Bible and people are invited into relationship with God.

The Holy Spirit, biblical stories and personal experiences interact as children come to their own knowing of God.

Children's Chapel
Narrative

- We settle in on the floor of the sanctuary, around the worship center. The worship center is a white cloth covered platform upon which is set a nice candle, a candle snuffer, a children's Bible, a Sharing & Praying Lamb and Blessing Balm. The worship center is set at the front of the sanctuary by the chancel steps.
- The Leader says: "This is a very special place and you can walk more slowly and talk more quietly here, because some people are talking with God. God is here and we have come to listen for God and talk to God. You can get quiet all by yourself, for the quiet comes from inside you. Let's listen for the quiet."
- The candle is lit with a candle lighter, while the Leader says-The Greeting:
LEADER: "The Lord be with you."
CHILDREN: "And also with you."
- We sing songs, including: "Seek Ye First," "Jesus Loves Me"
- We hear the Word-The Leader shares a very short good Word from Scripture.
- Prayers:
The children share their joys and concerns, as each one holds the Sharing & Praying Lamb. They listen to each other. Individual children telling of a concern are given the opportunity to say the prayer themselves. Then the Leader prays, adding joy for blessings, thankfulness for the teachers, families, classmates, school, the church, etc and concern for that which "makes us mad or sad, worried or scared."
GENTLE REMINDER: Remember to include the faith statement that God is always with us. (Prayer needs to be short; stop when or before shuffling begins.)
- Song: "Friend Jesus Be Our Holy Guest"
- Blessing the children:
Each child comes forward and the Leader whispers a blessing in his/her ear, using the child's name. If the child prefers, speak quietly to him/her while looking at the child. Say: (NAME) God created you; God loves you; God is with you. God blesses you. Each child is offered Blessing Balm, with the words, "(Name) God knew you before you were born. God calls you to be God's own. remember that God is always with you, wherever you are." End with, "Go, be a blessing." as the child leaves you.

About appropriate touch: Touch is an important human connection. Do touch the child's arm or shoulder or hold a hand as you and the child are comfortable. If the child trusts you she/he may lean on you, as you offer God's blessing. Do "let the children come unto" you.

GENTLE REMINDER: There must always be at least one other adult with you during Chapel.

Songs sung weekly in Children's Chapel, by the 3–5 year olds.

SEEK YE FIRST

Seek ye first
The Kingdom of God
And God's righteousness.
And all these things will be added unto you
Allelu Alleluia

JESUS LOVES ME

Jesus loves me
This I know,
For the Bible
Tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong;
They are fragile, He is strong.

Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me;
Yes, Jesus loves me;
The Bible tells me so.

FRIEND JESUS BE OUR HOLY GUEST (to the tune Tallis Canon)

Friend Jesus, be our Holy Guest
Our morning joy, our evening rest.
And may our time with You impart
Your love and peace to every heart

The Blessing Center
2007

APPENDIX D

CHILDREN'S CONVERSATION AND WRITING PROMPTS

The interviewed children responded to the following:

I wonder if you can tell me about Chapel . . .
 Tell me about your favorite part . . .
 I wonder where God is at Preschool . . .
 Will you tell me about the praying part . . .
 What happens at blessing? Can you tell me because I can see but not hear Mrs. . . .

Chapel Time Conversations
 Four and Five Year Old Class

The class teacher composed these questions for the children's responses.

Each child finished the following:

So tell me about chapel time . . .
 What is the lamb for?
 Today you shared your joy/concern . . .
 How does that make you feel?
 Tell me about the blessing time . . .
 What does Mrs Beam say?
 What do we do at the end of chapel?

Teacher prompts for an Oldest Preschoolers' Writing Exercise

The children finished these sentences:

Chapel time is . . .
 We do . . .
 My favorite part is . . .
 Mrs. Beam's job is . . .

Teacher led Chapel Stories for a Three Year Old Class

Each child dictated the rest of the sentence.

I like (about Chapel) . . .

APPENDIX E
PARENT AND TEACHER SURVEYS

**Parent Survey
Teacher Survey
Memorial Preschool
Children's Spirituality**

Please answer the following questions about your children. I will be interviewing some of you during this school year, also, to get in-depth responses to these and other questions.

Use as much space as necessary. Thank you!

Jacqueline Nowak, Doctoral Student, United Theological Seminary

Date: _____

Name/Phone/Email: _____

1. I think of children's spirituality in this way:

2. I've seen the spiritual side of my child/the children in these ways:

3. This is how I understand a child's connection to God:

4. Experiences I've had with children and prayer include:

5. When I think about Children's Chapel time, I . . .

6. Chapel time impacts my child(ren) in these ways:

Nowak, August 2006

Parent (and Teacher) Survey
Follow up
Memorial Preschool Chapel Program

Dear Parent,

Thank you for your careful consideration of your child's developing spirituality. Your words are very helpful for our developing understanding of children's spiritual growth. I have returned a copy of your survey and ask you now to reflect upon what you wrote last fall.

We believe that Memorial Preschool and its Chapel Program have a unique influence on your children's spirituality, which is of benefit to the children, the school and your family. Please think specifically about how Chapel Time (and the preschool itself) impacts your children's continuing spiritual growth, being as specific as possible.

In the space below please share your insights and wisdom.

It will be helpful to me, if you can return this sheet when your child returns from spring break.

God's blessings,

- 1) Chapel

- 2) A day in the Preschool

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