

Cultivating Faith through Storysharing

by

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A project thesis submitted

to the faculty of

The Virginia Theological Seminary in

partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Ministry

March 18, 2016


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Introduction and Chapter 1: The Need to Build up Faith

The tradition of sharing stories is understood to be among the fundamental characteristics that make us human. According to Jonathan Gottschall “Story, and a variety of storylike activities, dominates human life.”¹ Through stories *Homo sapiens* build narratives and make meaning. Joyce Ann Mercer underscores such universality when she states that “Human beings are “storied” people. That is, we both express and shape our personhood through the stories we tell about ourselves and our world.”² Moreover, our human inclination for making and finding meaning through storysharing may be rooted in God’s preference for communicating truth by means of stories. According to C.S. Song “We love stories because God loves them.”³

Story enriches our lives from the time when we are very young. Gottschall asserts how “Story is so central to the lives of young children that it comes close to defining their existence.”⁴ Indeed that is my experience. Since childhood the custom of sharing stories served as a cherished pastime for me and my family. I grew up in a suburb of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where, in my estimation, storysharing was very much a part of Haitian culture. At a minimum, storysharing was an integral part of the culture of my family—my family being of mixed cultural heritage, African and European, and whose members were and are extremely well educated. My family would be considered part of the upper middle-class of Haitian society.

¹ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, 2012) 8.

² Joyce Ann Mercer, *Girl Talk, God Talk: Why Faith Matters to Teenage Girls—and Their Parents* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2008) 2.

³ C.S. Song, *In the Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2011) 4.

⁴ Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*, 7.

I treasure the many warm memories that I have about the days when the extended circle of my family, which, besides my parents and siblings included beloved aunts, uncle and grandaunt, sat together in the ample backyard of our home to simply talk and share stories. It was natural for us to engage in telling a host of wonderfully-interesting personal stories as well as stories that we had heard from other family members and friends. This act of telling our stories was meaningful to me, and echoes this assertion from Mercer: “Storytelling is most centrally an imaginative act of making meaning, a process of making sense of one’s world and experiences, of giving significance to certain relationships and experiences while making little of others.”⁵ I will forever remember how these stories filled my young mind and imagination with vivid images. These stories entertained me a great deal; but they also taught me a number of valuable lessons about life such as the benefit of integrating faith in the midst of daily activities and see God at work every day, as well as the importance of asking and trusting God for providence.

Daily the members of my family spoke with confident faith about the presence of God in our midst. In reference to the doctrine of the incarnation, Michael Frost, who encourages Christians to see God in the ordinary, affirms how “The incarnation, the doctrine of God in human form (as difficult as it is to understand), has sustained Jesus’ followers ever since. Our God is *here*; our God has entered into our experience. Faith is all it takes. The faith to risk living as if it’s true.”⁶

My family and I shared ordinary stories, and many of our stories testified about our seeing God at work in the midst of our everyday lives. For instance, I recall how my mother talked about a dream that she had when our family needed a new car, and how

⁵ Mercer, *Girl Talk, God Talk*, 2.

⁶ Michael Frost, *Seeing God in the Ordinary: A Theology of the Everyday* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 2005), 17.

this dream showed her how God would provide for the means to purchase a new vehicle for our family. My mother integrated faith in her daily life, which included saying prayers to God for her family's needs and trusting God to provide for her perceived and petitioned for needs. This example crystalizes for me how my mother modeled important aspects of the practice of faith in daily life. In this way I learned about the importance of prayer and of the reality of God's answer to prayer in a more tangible way. This story serves as a rich example of how the small circle of my family cultivated faith through storysharing. This story, and many other stories shared in an intimate context, played a significant role in helping me to grow in faith, and in forming my theological outlook from childhood through adolescence. Stories and theology seem to be fundamentally intertwined. According to Song, "Theology, however else you may have known it and practiced it, in the ultimate sense of that word, is story telling and story listening."⁷

The exchange of stories between my family members surely involved a variety of stated opinions and reflections; and our reflections often demonstrated the extent of our awareness of the presence of God in our lives. Perhaps, by means of sharing our stories we unknowingly engaged in an informal approach to theological reflection.⁸ What I know for certain is that the stories shared by various members of my family, as well as the witness of faith they expressed along the way during my growing up years, scattered many seeds of faith in my heart and mind. In fact, I am convinced that I came to readily

⁷ Song, *In The Beginning Were Stories, Not Texts*, 4.

⁸ Theological reflection can be defined in a number of ways, but what I mean by theological reflection is based on the definition that Dori Grinenko Baker offers on page XVIII of her book, *The Barefoot Way: a Faith Guide for Youth, Young Adults, and the People who Walk with Them*. She defines the term in this way: "Theological reflection describes the process of finding the overlap between our story and God's story. Through theological reflection, people discern the actions to which God may be calling them. Usually done in community, theological reflection is a hallmark of groups around the globe who have set out to change the world in order to make it a more faithful representation of God's *shalom* (the Hebrew word for God's vision of wholeness and peace).

appreciate the stories in the Bible on account of the storysharing predilection of my family. The open and honest expressions of faith on the part of the members of my family significantly impacted the formation of my own faith. Such personal experience leads me to affirm David W. Anderson's claim: "Faith is formed by the power of the Holy Spirit through personal, trusted relationships—often in our own homes."⁹

Such a rich and personal background did not exempt me from experiencing some level of difficulty with learning how to formulate and recount my journey of faith. I found it challenging to talk about my faith journey as a teenager and even when I was asked to do so as a young adult in discernment for ordained ministry. It is easy for me to sympathize, therefore, with the teenagers and parents who encountered the same difficulty with speaking about their faith journey in the context of congregational life at St. Luke's, where I have served as associate rector for almost a decade.

The members of St. Luke's are, for the most part, Caucasian. They are extremely well-educated, articulate, and belong to the middle or upper middle class of American society. Most of these parishioners actively participate in the life of the parish. The parents and teens who actively participate in the educational program for youth at St. Luke's reflect the prevalent social profile of the parish. They worship regularly and serve in various ministries of the church. Yet, I began to realize that a number of these parents and teens were finding it hard to recognize and articulate their own stories of faith. For example, I remember how one teenager who was usually responsive to questions during class looked at me with a blank stare when I asked him to talk about God. This struggle

⁹ David W. Anderson, *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith: the Role of the Home in Renewing the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Vibrant Faith Publishing, 2009), 17.

to bring faith to the surface experienced by the parents and teens at St. Luke's is what gave me the motivation to develop a thesis project to address the situation.

This thesis comprises five chapters. In this first chapter I describe the difficulty that a number of teenagers and their parents, who worship at St. Luke's, experience when they are invited to articulate their personal journeys of faith. I also draw attention to the potential benefits that may result if the church finds ways to assist teenagers and their parents in learning how to better grasp and express their stories of faith. In the second chapter, I write about the design of the thesis project as well as about how and why I chose to develop this particular project. In the third chapter, I describe the methodology used to design and administer the surveys used during the project and highlight the themes and learnings that emerged from them. In the fourth chapter, I discuss more deeply the various themes and learnings that have surfaced by analyzing them through the lenses of a number of sources in practical theology and human and faith development. In the fifth and last chapter, I summarize the main points of the thesis, propose a few recommendations, and offer personal reflections about my engagement with the project.

The limited ability to articulate matters of faith on the part of the teens at St. Luke's is an issue that has naturally surfaced in the context of the youth program that I had been assigned to oversee and coordinate at the parish, *The Journey to Adulthood* (J2A) program.¹⁰ The J2A program was introduced to the congregation more than nine

¹⁰ The Journey to Adulthood (J2A) Program is a six-year curriculum that includes three sections: Rite-13, J2A, and YAC (Young Adults in the Church). Each section is meant to be taught over the course of a two-year cycle. This curriculum is designed to help teenagers, in grades 6 to 12 or 7 to 12, acquire the skills that they will need to have as adults, and is rooted in the context of the Christian faith. The curriculum emphasizes four areas of adulthood, namely the areas of self, society, spirituality, and sexuality, and also includes the celebration of rites of passage and other milestones in the life of teenagers. The program also recommends the spiritual practice of going on pilgrimage as a way for teens to deepen their faith. At St. Luke's a new cycle of this program begins every two years for youth in grades 6 to 12.

years ago with the strong support of the congregation, and is now well established at the parish. Before then, the parish had only offered a variety of fellowship activities for teenagers. For this reason, the J2A curriculum has been a favorably received program of Christian education for our teenagers who, for the most part, are already baptized and needed to be engaged in an educational program of their own. In addition, the teenagers who participate in this program are also invited to prepare for confirmation. Preparation for confirmation takes place towards the end of the first four-year cycle of the J2A program when the teens are fifteen and sixteen years old.

In regards to confirmation, one requirement that we ask of all candidates, teenagers and adults alike, is to write an account of their faith journey and to make an oral presentation at a Sunday morning forum. Over the years I began to notice a persistent issue. Most often, the teens encountered difficulty with having to write and speak about their faith journey. And, for a few, this requirement seemed fraught with high anxiety. I also observed that, consistently, a percentage of the teens were not able to make much of a connection between God and their day-to-day lives. I often wondered why several of our teenagers seemed so unclear about their faith when so many of them regularly participate in our worship services and educational programs. Perhaps, the situation that I had encountered at my parish confirms the research findings of Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton in the National Study of Youth and Religion¹¹. They offer the following observation: "Interviewing teens, one finds little evidence that the agents of religious socialization in this country are being highly effective and

¹¹ www.youthandreligion.nd.edu

successful with the majority of their young people.”¹² In fact, a large number of teenagers in the United States experience a similar predicament, a fact which Smith and Denton assert in this way: “...if there is indeed a significant number of American teens who are serious and lucid about their religious faith, there is also a much larger number who are remarkably inarticulate and befuddled about religion.”¹³

In the context of my research, it should be noted that Denton and Smith’s research is limited in scope because it does not encompass ethnographic protocols, which would involve conducting research in the context of the actual settings where the participants worship. Mary Clark Moschella defines the discipline of ethnographic research in terms of “a way of immersing yourself in the life of a people in order to learn something about and from them. Ethnography as a pastoral practice involves opening your eyes and ears to understand the ways in which people practice their faith.”¹⁴ Moreover, she points out how such a method “entails observing people’s actions and interactions, and asking them to share their stories with you.”¹⁵ Hence, direct observation in a social milieu broadens a researcher’s perspective (such as mine) beyond the scope of surveys and telephone interviews.

In terms of religious socialization, Vern L. Bengtson, Norella M. Putney, and Susan Harris affirm how “...parents are the key to religious socialization.”¹⁶ Bengtson and

¹² Christian Smith, with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2009), 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: an Introduction*, (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2008), 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Vern L. Bengtson with Norella M. Putney and Susan Harris, *Families and Faith: How Religion is Passed Down Across Generations*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013), 72.

his colleagues explain that “Sociologists and psychologists use the term “socialization” to refer to the process by which parents and other adults impart to children the knowledge, skills, and values that they feel are important in preparing them for adulthood.”¹⁷

Considering Bengtson’s comments, I must mention that teenagers at St. Luke’s were not the only ones who experience difficulty talking about their faith. I gradually came to the realization that many of the parents did not seem to be well equipped to have conversations about faith with their teenagers. A few parents were even reluctant to articulate their own journey of faith, and others were not able to articulate the basic tenets of the Christian faith. For example, I have occasionally heard parents allude to God’s acceptance of a person as contingent to the person’s goodness, suggesting that the parents did not appear to apprehend the doctrines that affirm the unmerited favor of God towards humanity and the efficacy of the death and resurrection of Jesus in assuring pardon for sin. What is more, parents sometimes admit that they do not engage with their teens in conversation about faith at all. In addition to presenting a significant contradiction with the promises they upheld at the baptism of their children, it is clear that some parents are not well equipped, and are often uneasy, to walk alongside their teens during their journey from baptism toward confirmation and beyond.

The lack of parental preparation to play a vital role in the faith formation of children that I experience is, sadly, familiar in other settings. Anderson describes how such reality became obvious to a particular group of people who had “gathered for a presentation on the vital partnership between the ministry of the congregation and the

¹⁷ Ibid, 71-72.

ministry of the home.”¹⁸ Anderson portrays the reaction of the people in the audience after they had heard a few disturbing statistics about the unchurched status of the generations who came after the very churched generation born between the 1920s and 1940s, and he writes about the reaction of the group in this way:

The pain on the faces of those gathered was evident. A significant reason for the problem was dawning on them: Sunday school, confirmation class, and youth programs were never enough to engage children and youth in the life of the Christian faith and the church. A sense of guilt came over a number of the adults. They had driven their children to congregational activities, but the faith life often was not modeled in their own homes. Many of their grown children no longer were part of the church. One gentleman said with resignation, “But we did what we were told to do, ‘Get them to church.’”¹⁹

During the last three to four decades growing numbers of American parents throughout the church have been, and are apparently, at a loss about how to cultivate the faith of their children. If the work of Anderson, Bengtson and others is on target, then it is vital for the church to find ways to help parents deepen their faith, acquire more religious knowledge, and learn how to articulate and share their faith with their children. In fact, Anderson, in collaboration with Paul Hill, claim that “...if we want Christian kids we need Christian adults ...;” furthermore, “Youth Ministry, properly understood, is spelled *adult renewal*.”²⁰ And I would expand their claim to say: youth ministry, properly understood, involves a circle of youth and adults who are willing and committed to journey together with open hearts and minds, to regularly share their experiences of faith and learn from one another. In other words, youth and adults need to cultivate faith by sharing their stories in community.

¹⁸ Anderson, *From the Great Omission to Vibrant Faith*, 18.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

²⁰ David W. Anderson and Paul Hill, *Frogs Without Legs Can't Hear: Nurturing Disciples in Home and Congregation* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 84.

John H. Westerhoff III believes in the powerful synergy that takes place in community and, for him, interacting in community is crucial for the effective transmission of faith. He calls attention to this vital need for Christian community with the following statement: "There is no way we can say for sure if our children will or will not have faith, but of one thing we can be sure, they will never have faith unless there is a community of faith for them to live in and be influenced by. The community's faith always comes before our own."²¹

The experience of the teenagers and their parents at St. Luke's is obviously not unique to them. The thesis that I formulated and the project that I designed first emerged out of a desire to help the teenagers at this parish, along with their parents, become more at ease with the expression of their respective journeys of faith. My hope is for them, as well as for other teens and their parents in the church who experience the same type of challenge, to acquire a level of comfort in the practice of sharing their faith by telling, listening to, and reflecting on their personal stories. Hence, I state my thesis in this way:

Many Christian teenagers in the United States and their parents have difficulty articulating their personal experiences of faith, finding it challenging to express the degree to which they are aware of the manifest presence of God in their daily lives. I contend that learning how to reflect theologically on the ordinary stories of their lives and learning how to share these stories and reflections with others can help teenagers and their parents grow in awareness of the divine presence in their lives, and help them become more articulate about their faith in the larger context of the Christian narrative. Therefore, I propose that a program designed to assist teenagers and their parents with the practice of talking about and reflecting theologically on the ordinary stories that they experience will help them recognize and name the presence of God at work in their lives.

²¹ John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2012) 48.

The problem described raises a number of possibilities about why parents lack the confidence to express their faith. For example, I have heard several parents directly relate their lack of confidence about talking about faith to their lack of biblical knowledge. It seems logical to assume that such significant discomfort on the part of parents and teenagers alike could be the result of limited discipleship training. A disciple is generally understood to be a person who follows the teachings and actions of a teacher, and for Christians this means following the teachings of Jesus. Hence, I understand discipleship to entail the effort the church makes to share the Gospel with the people who are seeking to know Jesus; to help them experience the presence of the Holy through meaningful worship, and to instruct them in their attempt to know and follow Jesus in their everyday lives. Such worship and religious instruction should be of great enough depth and breadth, and be consistent with appropriate stages of faith development, in order to assist the would-be-disciples of Jesus to grow and be well formed. Formation then is the discovery and knowledge of Jesus on a personal level in one's heart and mind, and the acquisition of a core understanding of the Scriptures, doctrines, and practices of the faith. In this way those who are in the process of becoming disciples of Jesus may stay open to continuing to experience and deepen their relationship with God throughout their lives, through baptism, confirmation, and beyond, becoming ever more committed to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior.

One's growth as a disciple of Jesus is ideally a dynamic process of developing faith that goes beyond knowledge of church doctrines and practices. In the words of Kenneth Stokes: "Creeds and doctrines are the starting point for meaningful faith

development.”²² Stokes, who equates faith to a verb, confidently asserts: “Faith is always a process. Faith is movement.”²³ Furthermore, the development of faith takes place over the course of a lifetime. Thus, Stokes advances “that people of faith, ...strongly affirm the importance of *lifelong faithing*.”²⁴

Other experts in the field of faith development also understand faith as a progression. Faith progresses through a number of stages or cycles, and throughout a person’s life. While a number of faith development theories exist, I have chosen to focus on the theory developed by James W. Fowler in his book, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, in which he proposes a “spiraling” structure of faith development. Fowler’s theory includes six hierarchical, universal, and invariant stages of development: intuitive-projective faith, mythic-literal faith, synthetic-conventional faith, individuative-reflective faith, conjunctive faith, and universalizing faith. Fowler explains how “Each stage...marks the rise of a new set of capacities or strengths in faith.”²⁵ He also asserts that “Each stage represents a widening of vision and valuing, correlated with a parallel increase in the certainty and depth of selfhood, making for qualitative increases in intimacy with self-others-world.”²⁶

Fowler understands faith in terms of the full breadth of life as he indicates by the following definition, “Faith is a person’s or group’s way of moving into the force field of life. It is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and

²² Kenneth Stokes, *Faith Is A Verb: Dynamics of Adult Faith Development* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1989), 5.

²³ *Ibid*, 4.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 8.

²⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and The Quest for Meaning* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995), 274.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 274.

relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose."²⁷ Fowler draws on the work of theologians Paul Tillich and H. Richard Niebuhr to arrive at the conclusion that faith is both universal and is about what we most deeply and ultimately care about and what we most deeply and ultimately trust to give meaning to our lives. Hence, Fowler writes: "Faith so understood is very serious business. It involves how we make our life wagers. It shapes the way we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties."²⁸ He also claims:

Faith, so Niebuhr and Tillich tell us, is a universal human concern. Prior to our being religious or irreligious, before we come to think of ourselves as Catholics, Protestants, Jews or Muslims, we are already engaged with issues of faith. Whether we become nonbelievers, agnostics or atheists, we are concerned with how to put our lives together and with what will make life worth living. Moreover, we look for something to love that loves us, something to value that gives us value, something to honor and respect that has the power to sustain our being.²⁹

Fowler's thoughtful assertions lead me to think how doubly important it is for Christian discipleship to be about helping youth and adults alike experience and see God through Jesus as the most attractive and trustworthy person to rely on as their primary object of trust and of ultimate concern. My thought here echoes one of the ideal objectives of religious education, which Thomas Groome highlights when he observes how religious education "encourages people to interpret their lives, relate to others, and engage in the world in ways that faithfully reflect what they perceive as ultimate in life, that is, from a

²⁷ Ibid, 4.

²⁸ Ibid, 5.

²⁹ Ibid, 5.

faith perspective.”³⁰ Faith development approaches to Christian discipleship formation are ideally about creating ways for people to know Jesus as the Word of God. Ideally, these approaches must also be varied because age and gender, among other factors, often exert influence on the thoughts and perceptions of a person.

In terms of the universality or normal course of faith development the work of Fowler does not stand without critique. Fowler has taken the work of his critics, especially feminist critique, into consideration and has incorporated their findings in his book, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*. In this book, published in 2000, Fowler uses the critiques of his colleagues to clarify and enrich his own contentions. For example, Fowler cites the work of Carol Gilligan to allow the relational logic of women to influence him in adding significant nuance to his theory of faith development. Hence, he affirms: “The most crucial factor differentiating the quality and movement of a person or group’s development in faith, therefore, has to do with the conscious and unconscious availability of that person or group’s potentials for partnership—for synergy—with Spirit.”³¹ In the end, faith development maturity is a matter of the grace of God working in tandem with individuals to the extent that these persons are able to participate and allow themselves to be engaged with the Spirit of God.

Religious education, especially when such education seeks to help people gain deeper knowledge and understanding of Scripture, can allow for further engagement between people and the Spirit of God. The Bible is complex and requires study. Moreover, the Bible offers important truths about God’s nature and will, about human

³⁰ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith: A Comprehensive Approach to Religious Education & Pastoral Ministry: The Way of Shared Praxis* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 11.

³¹ James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development & Christian Faith* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc. Publishers, 2000), 59.

nature and life, and about interactions between God and people. If religious education, as Groome indicates, is about helping people find ways to interpret their lives, then thoughtful interaction with Scripture in the company of others is one of the most important components of religious education.

Religious education is, in part, about religious literacy. Religious literacy, especially for Christians, to a certain extent, is about knowing the content of the Bible. Stephen Prothero, the author of the book, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't*, asserts: “There may have been Bibles in as many as nine out of ten homes in the early republic, and the Bible was *the* book for reading in households and schools well into the nineteenth century.”³² Furthermore, Prothero affirms how “Many children read the Bible cover to cover multiple times before adulthood, and families gathered regularly in the morning or evening (or both) to pray, sing hymns, and read the scriptures which they received as ‘a manual of law, literature, history, and warfare, as well as a primer for reading and, of course, religion.’”³³ It is important for me to note, here, that knowledge of the Bible does not necessarily give Christians, adults and children, the ability to become thoughtful theological thinkers. Sometimes, knowledge of numerous verses of the Bible by memory without appropriate critical reflection can lead to an all-too-literal understanding of Scripture. Nonetheless, there is value in knowing the content of the Bible, and if the scenario that Prothero depicts is accurate, then dedication to such religious learning and spiritual development at home, which was more common in times past, appears to have weakened to the extent of

³² Stephen Prothero, *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn't* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2007), 77.

³³ *Ibid*, 77.

creating a tangible void in the lives of many Christian families. Parents seem to have steadily abdicated their responsibility to be the primary religious educators of their children as they embraced congregation-based programming.

In the effort to promote religious literacy congregation-based programming often involves rote memorization of Scripture and not much age-appropriate theological reflection. Many years ago and when I was a lay person, I remember teaching children in Sunday school to sing songs to aid them in memorizing the names of the books in the Bible, and I remember giving the children regular ‘memory verse’ assignments that was part of the Sunday school curriculum. Yet, participation in Sunday school has apparently not prevented many young adults from leaving the church and joining the ranks of those who claim no religious affiliation, a group that is often referred to as “nones.” In the book, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, with the assistance of Shaylyn Romney Garrett offer this commentary:

Of all nones in the 2006 Faith Matters survey, 74 percent report that their parents had been religiously affiliated, 56 percent report that their family attended religious services nearly every week when they were growing up, and 51 percent say that they attended Sunday school or religious education classes “very often.” Since these figures of religious upbringing are only modestly lower than the comparable figures for all Americans of the relevant generation, inheritance clearly accounts for only a fraction of the recent increase in nones.³⁴

Religious literacy, more specifically in terms of rote knowledge of the content of the Bible, is only one component of discipleship formation. Such knowledge neither guarantees thoughtful reflection on nor helpful interpretation of scripture. Rather,

³⁴ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 126-127.

biblical literacy has the potential to serve as a foundation and a useful tool for effective discipleship formation.

Biblical knowledge alone is not enough in the same way that creeds and doctrines are not enough for significant and fuller faith development. It is the responsibility of the church to help its members become both, scripturally literate and well-formed disciples of Jesus who are able to engage in the practice of theological reflection and are able to testify about their faith through words and other spiritual practices. In this case, the church may have, somehow, contributed to the problem. Thus, these questions must be asked: Has the church been remiss in providing enough relevant structures and processes for study and reflection as part of discipleship formation for families and their children? Has the church offered enough opportunities for thoughtful theological reflection or personal storysharing? Has the church found effective means of keeping pace with the changes that have undoubtedly taken place in our society and the world? Has the church failed to present a compelling narrative?

If the increasing decline in the number of regular churchgoers during the most recent decades is a reliable measure, then the church, in the United States, may have faltered in its mission to effectively form faithful disciples of Jesus. If the fact that the majority of church members are also now older serves as a reliable indicator, then American Christianity is failing to adequately reach and present a compelling narrative to the younger generations. Bengtson and his colleagues summarize a pattern of church attendance decline, beginning in the 1950s:

Involvement in churches increased sharply following World War II, hitting a peak in 1950-1959. Then starting in the 1960s church attendance gradually declined, with the sharpest decrease occurring in the period from 1970 to 1980. Attendance then increased until 1986 but made a sharp

downturn in the 1990s, followed by participation creeping up and then down in the 2000s.³⁵

In addition to the decline in church attendance, Bengtson, Putney, and Harris cite data from a 2012 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life report to highlight the following trend: "...what seems most remarkable is the increase in the numbers of "nones" in American society—those who say they are "none of the above," who claim no traditional religious affiliation. By 2012 the unaffiliated represented almost 20% of the U.S. adult population, having doubled in just one decade."³⁶ Sadly, the number of young adults who participate in the life and ministry of the church seems to be declining even more. A story featured on National Public Radio, NPR, on November 3, 2015 relates the latest data gathered from a poll administered by the Pew Research Center about Millennials, and the data reveals how "The percentage of adults who describe themselves as "religiously affiliated" has shrunk six points since 2007, from 83 percent to 77 percent."³⁷ Such decline in attendance and the shying away from a commitment to participate in the life of the church on the part of so many could be a reliable indicator that the transmission of the foundational knowledge necessary for the making and retaining of disciples for Jesus is not taking place very effectively.

Church attendance is declining and the members of the church are becoming older. There is, evidently, a disparity between the number of older and younger church

³⁵ Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*, 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷ Gjelten, Tom, National Public Radio, "Poll Finds Americans, Especially Millennials, Moving Away From Religion," http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/11/03/454063182/poll-finds-americans-especially-millennials-moving-away-from-religion?utm_source=npr_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20151103&utm_campaign=npr_email_a_friend&utm_term=storyshare (accessed November 3, 2015).

members. For example, a recent report about the growth and decline of the Episcopal Church reveals such disparity:

Episcopal Church members are older on average than the American public. The differences are greatest among the oldest and youngest age categories. Proportionately, we have many more persons age 65 or older and many fewer children, youth and young adults than the general population. This is due, in part, to the cumulative effects of a low birth rate following the baby boom era among a highly educated, predominantly white constituency. But the Episcopal Church has also failed to retain many of the children of its members over the years.³⁸

This generational age gap in the church is likely an indication that, somehow, the church is not offering a compelling and attractive Christian narrative to the younger generation. The church is failing in forming and retaining younger disciples of Jesus. The church has fallen short of its effectiveness in continuing to equip parents to be and to make disciples—disciples who are actively engaged in the church and committed to following Jesus. Hence, many young adults appear to be ambivalent about participating in the life of the church.

The lack of effective discipleship formation, especially the type of formation which allows for honest, communal conversation exchanges, may also be reflected in the disenchantment that a great many young Christians are exhibiting about participating in the life of the church. In a book entitled, *You Lost Me*, David Kinnaman, a researcher from the Barna Group, identifies the reasons why young Christians who grew up in a variety of Christian denominations are leaving the church in droves. Kinnaman identifies six themes, showing how these young people have specific negative views of the church, which are the reasons they often give for walking away from religion altogether. Young adults speak of the church as overprotective, shallow, anti-science, repressive, exclusive,

³⁸ Hadaway, C. Kirk, *New FACTs on Episcopal Church Growth and Decline* (New York, NY: the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society), 5.

and doubtless.³⁹ To the extent that these negative perceptions reflect the actual experiences of young people in the church, their ability to hear a compelling, life-shaping narrative from the pulpits and programs of the church will remain limited. Such a negative perception certainly poses a hindrance to church growth and is a challenging issue in terms of public relations, but, more urgently, such a poor opinion of the church reflects a great lack in Christian discipleship formation, and indicates a pressing need for the church to work toward rectifying such an alarming situation.

The data appears to be undeniable in showing an overall decline in the number of people who attend Christian worship services. Such data indicates that many people are opting to disaffiliate with the church altogether, and they have a negative view of the church. Yet, not everyone agrees that declining numbers is the only meaningful metric to use in determining the health and effectiveness of the church. For example, in relation to the Episcopal Church, Greg Garrett, who wrote the book, *My Church Is Not Dying: Episcopalians in the 21st Century*, sees great opportunity ahead for the Episcopal Church at this juncture between apparent failure in the present and positive success in the future. He and the people who have shared their thoughts with him in the book are of the opinion that “a crisis can actually be a good and necessary thing”⁴⁰ for the Episcopal Church—that “these moments of danger and potential destruction also offer clear opportunities for change, growth, and renewal.”⁴¹ What is more, Garrett believes that the rich tradition of the faithful liturgy and practices of the Episcopal Church are life-giving and can make a

³⁹ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church...and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011), 92-93.

⁴⁰ Garrett, *My Church Is Not Dying* (New York, NY: Morehouse Publishing, 2015), 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

tremendous difference in the lives of those who get to know and appreciate them.

Therefore, he affirms:

What does it mean to be a church (or a Church) in the twenty-first century? That's the most meaningful question we can ask. How we respond to changing demographics, shifting views of faith and spirituality, and new ways of being community—while still remaining true to the mission of the Church—will dictate whether we indeed decline and fall, or whether we demonstrate a meaningful rebirth for however many people choose to be in some way a part of our journey.⁴²

Many voices are joining together to sound a clarion call to raise the awareness of the members of the church about the declining trend that is affecting the church far and wide. A number of these voices are also offering practical suggestions to help the church stem the tide of decline and to be more effective at making disciples. For example, Kinnaman affirms how “Disciples are handmade, one relationship at a time.”⁴³ Furthermore, in terms of the faith formation of young people, he believes we should “...recognize that we have both individual responsibility and institutional opportunity. Our interpersonal relationships matter. We need to allow the Holy Spirit to guide our parenting, our mentoring, and our friendships. Yet the next generation’s faith cannot be addressed simply through better relationships.”⁴⁴ And so, he suggests we “...reexamine the substance of our relationships and the shape of our institutions.”⁴⁵ Thus, Kinnaman is highly recommending a relational approach to Christian pedagogy, which is an approach that others have discovered to be effective. I am also an advocate for a relational approach to Christian discipleship formation, and such an approach includes storysharing.

⁴² Ibid, 4.

⁴³ Kinnaman, *You Lost Me*, 13.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Andrew Root, who wrote the article, “Bonhoeffer as Youth Minister,” published in the February 2015 issue of *Christian Century*, affirms how “Bonhoeffer shared stories of his life so as to create a space for others.”⁴⁶ Sharing stories in the context of personal relationship is a central part of Bonhoeffer’s experience with teaching youth about doctrines of the church. According to Root, Bonhoeffer “was asked by his synod to take over an out-of-control confirmation class in a low-income district of Berlin called Wedding.”⁴⁷ Root goes on further to describe the rowdy quality of Bonhoeffer’s first encounter with these young people, and how Bonhoeffer successfully focused their attention by means of a softly spoken personal story. Then, Root asserts: “In this first encounter, we can recognize the pedagogy and shape of Bonhoeffer’s ministry. He used his own story to create a space for these boys to enter. He shared his life and he promised to share theirs. As Bonhoeffer saw it, if those boys were to learn the catechism, they would have to learn it through sharing in another person’s life. And for this to be possible Dietrich would need to remain composed.”⁴⁸

The principle of seeing our lives within the larger context of God’s story permeates the numerous pages of the Bible. From beginning to end the story of humankind is presented in relation to the story of God. Story after story seems to be crafted to serve as a vehicle for helping people make connections between their lives and the revelation, grace, and action of God. Throughout the Scriptures the invitation goes out to believers to be intentional about looking for the intersection between their lives and the fullness of God’s expressed grace. The numerous parables taught by Jesus as well as

⁴⁶ Andrew Root, “Bonhoeffer as Youth Minister,” *Christian Century*, February 2015, 27.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

the letters of Paul to the many communities to which he wrote are prime examples of such invitation.

Furthermore, the inability of Christians to speak coherently about the narrative of their lives in relation to the actions of God is antithetical to the nature of a faithful, particularly Christian, life. God has commanded people of faith to continually bear witness to God's marvelous interventions in their lives and in the lives of God's people who have lived throughout history. This characteristic of the people of God stands out in Scripture—the ability to speak about the faith that is in them while extolling the wonders of God's mighty acts. The people of God are charged with bearing witness to the world around them as well as to subsequent generations. Thus, the psalmist exclaims in Psalm 145 that “One generation shall laud your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts.”⁴⁹ According to the psalmist, speaking the truth about the person of God seems to be one of the most natural acts that faithful believers should engage in. God seems to expect that believers will naturally be able to bear witness about their experience of faith without hindrance.

God commands people of faith to offer their testimony but God also empowers the people of faith to speak and act. Jesus said to his disciples: “When the Advocate comes whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify because you have been with me from the beginning.”⁵⁰ While testimony of faith is often more about actions related to faithful living than words, the act of testifying is fundamentally also about speaking truthfully. The ability to testify does not stop with the inner circle of the twelve disciples

⁴⁹ Psalm 145:4, NRSV.

⁵⁰ John 15:26-27, NRSV.

of Jesus. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke describes how the Holy Spirit came with power on the gathered community of believers and gave them the ability to ardently speak and, in this way, to testify about the great work of God done through Jesus Christ and about their faith in him. As a result, the testimony of the community became one marked by effective preaching, open and vibrant worship, and uncommonly expressed love and hospitality—and the church grew in number. Another example of the necessity of having the ability to speak about God and faith is also evident in the First Letter of Peter. In this epistle Peter encourages the people of his community with these words: “always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you.”⁵¹

The scriptural statements that I have mentioned up to this point show that there are a variety of reasons why believers must have the ability to readily speak about God and their faith in God. These reasons include the need for evangelism that passes on truth to the next generation—truth about God and about humanity and about God’s work of redemptive love demonstrated through Jesus. Thomas G. Long contends that “evangelism (at least as traditionally understood) is not the only reason, indeed not even the deepest reason, why Christians bring their faith to speech. At the most profound level, Christians talk about faith because it is a truly human act to want to tell the truth.”⁵² Hence, young and old, parents and children, all believers have a need to tell the truth and God is truth. Therefore, the concern that I am describing in this chapter is a concern that strikes deeply at the core of the Christian faith. Believers are meant to have the ability to relate their experience of life to the works of God, not only in their hearts, but also

⁵¹ 1 Peter 3:15b, NRSV.

⁵² Long, Thomas G., *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 5.

through their speech—such testimony is a vital part of the journey of faith of believers everywhere. Thus, the inability of Christians to talk about personal faith suggests a lack of awareness on their part of the presence of God’s life-shaping and worthy-of-sharing truth in their lives.

The inability of teenagers to clearly articulate their journey of faith has also been observed by Smith and Denton:

In our in-depth interviews with U.S. teenagers, we also found the vast majority of them to be incredibly inarticulate about their faith, their religious beliefs and practices, and its meaning or place in their lives. We found very few teens from any religious background who are able to articulate well their religious beliefs and explain how those beliefs connect to the rest of their lives, although Mormon and conservative Protestant teens were sometimes an exception. This pervasive teen inarticulacy contributes to our larger impression that religion is either de facto not that important for most teens or that teens are getting very little help from their religious communities in knowing how to express the faith that may be important to them.⁵³

Sadly, the impression on the part of Smith and Denton about the failure of American faith communities to offer meaningful assistance to teenagers about their faith seems to be on the mark. If it is so, then our faith communities are not adhering very well to the ‘testimony’ mandate that God has given to God’s people throughout history. Long ago, God clearly placed the burden on communities at large, including parents, to pass on the faith of the community to the subsequent generations. Hence, in the Book of Deuteronomy the author relates such divine command with these words which are, otherwise known, as The Shema:

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

⁵³ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 131.

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.⁵⁴

Hundreds of years later, the Gospel reiterates this divine command by having Jesus give the specific mandate to his disciples to communicate the faith through words and deeds. Hence, the words attributed to Jesus at the end of the Gospel of Matthew, words that are most often referred to as “The Great Commission,” serve as a permanent reminder to the people of God of their obligation to build faith in others and to form them as faithful disciples:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.⁵⁵

The Great Commission continues to be a great source of inspiration and motivation to the church to share the Christian faith with others through the power of testimony offered through words, deeds, and sacraments.

Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, whose research focus is on the transmission of faith between generations, have discovered that the role of family members, especially the role of parents as well as grandparents, is essential to the successful transmission of faith from one generation to the next. Bengtson and his colleagues found that successful transmission of faith is higher than one might expect in regards to youth continuing to have the same religious affiliation as their parents. However, they have also discovered that “more than 4 out of 10 youth are different from their parents in faith;” thus, asserting

⁵⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4-9, NRSV.

⁵⁵ Matthew 28:18-20, NRSV.

that “the rate of religious non-transmission in our sample is also high,” and that “In these families, some quite religious, parents and children differ in religious affiliation, participation, and belief.”⁵⁶

The results of the research of Kinnaman, Smith and Denton, and Bengtson, Putney and Harris suggest that faith communities everywhere need to find ways to add substance to their faith formation programs to facilitate personal growth in faith understanding and belief. Such intentional efforts can help people nurture interpersonal relationships at a deeper level, and families can be aided in their efforts to pass on their faith to the next generation. Since for Kinnaman, ‘interpersonal relationships’ seems to be what matters most, and, as Bengtson and his colleagues have highlighted, the role of parents and grandparents in transmitting faith is absolutely vital, it seems to make sense for Christian faith communities to create pathways that can facilitate the deepening of interpersonal relationships between people, especially between parents and their children.

Specific programs designed to help parents and grandparents reflect on their faith could potentially counteract the reluctance that many adults have to share their faith openly with others, including the members of their own family. Many adults, especially those who belong to the main stream piety of the Episcopal Church seem to consider faith to be a very private matter. They often prefer to keep private the expression of their spiritual beliefs and shy away from speaking publically about their faith. Somehow they seem to misunderstand or forget that a part of the promise that they make and often reaffirm through their Baptismal Covenant as Christians is to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ” throughout their lives.⁵⁷ Such

⁵⁶ Bengtson, Putney, and Harris, *Families and Faith*, 132.

⁵⁷ *Book of Common Prayer*, 395.

misunderstanding or forgetfulness may be due, in part, to a gap in the initial preparation of these persons or their parents for the sacrament of baptism. In fact, many parents do not seem to take seriously the vows that they make when their children are baptized; perhaps, these parents are not encouraged to plumb the depth of these vows in order to live into them with purpose. During baptism parents promise to “be responsible for seeing that the child [they] present is brought up in the Christian faith and life,” and by “prayers and witness help [their] child to grow into the full stature of Christ.”⁵⁸ In other words, as Anne E. Kitch succinctly states, “Baptism is about parenting within the context of a Christian life of Faith.”⁵⁹ Yet, even when parents have the best intentions at the time when they request their child to be baptized, many of these parents do not follow through with the promise of raising their baptized children in the companionship of the other members of the church. Somehow the meaning of baptism has become widely separated from the ritual, a phenomenon that Paul E. Hoffman has also observed in the context of his Lutheran community of faith, “What the Church failed to notice was that no one understood the significance of baptism, nor the reasons why a child might be brought to the font. In many cases it was the way things were done, a family tradition, and even if parents brought children under duress to maintain extended family peace, there was at least the good feeling that one’s child was eternally “protected.”⁶⁰

It is, therefore, the responsibility of the church to equip parents and godparents to be informed when they make these promises and to help them live into them more fully. One place to start is with the lived-faith-experience of parents. If the church can influence

⁵⁸ *Book of Common Prayer*, 302.

⁵⁹ Anne E. Kitch, *Taking the Plunge: Baptism and Parenting* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2006), 14.

⁶⁰ Paul E. Hoffmann, *Faith Forming Faith: Bringing New Christians to Baptism and Beyond* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012), 37.

its members to begin to think of telling and listening to personal stories as a natural activity of sharing and building faith, adults (parents) and youth alike will be encouraged to cultivate their faith through the practice of reflecting on the presence of God in their lives (theological reflection) and the sharing of their personal journey of faith with others (testimony).

In response to the struggles I have witnessed at St. Luke's as parents and youth attempt to articulate their faith, and in light of the research on American religiosity, I designed a program to help parents and their teenagers. I envisioned a program that could assist these parents and teens with learning how to tell and listen to personal stories with greater ease, and to locate their stories in the larger context of the biblical narrative. To that end, I focused my efforts on teaching the parents how to engage in a process of theological reflection, and on how to engage their teenagers in the same process at home.

Since, a new cycle of the J2A program was starting at St. Luke's at the time when I was developing my thesis project, I saw an opportunity to create a program that could assist J2A parents and their teens become more confident in telling their stories and to recognize and articulate their awareness of the presence of God at work in their lives. The objective was to engage them in telling and reflecting on their own stories by means of a structured method of theological reflection. Through this process, I hoped for the relationships of the parents and their teens to deepen, and for the parents to become more effective companions to their teenagers during their preparation for confirmation. My highest expectation was for them to grow in awareness of God's steady presence in all aspect of life, and to gain the ability to speak about their journeys of faith with newly-felt ease.

Chapter 2: Storysharing as an Act of Ministry

In response to what I perceived to be an important need in my context, I thought of an intervention that would assist parents and their teenagers with learning to look for and find God's presence in the ordinary events of their lives. While my primary concern was to work with the teenagers, I discerned that a project involving parents and their teens would have a greater impact by allowing for more opportunity for spiritual conversations at home. In the end, I hoped for parents and teens to also gain the ability to look at the stories of their lives through the lens of the larger biblical narrative. Hence, teaching them the skill of knowing how to intentionally think and reflect in a theological manner would be most valuable. As I have already mentioned in the first chapter, theological reflection can be practiced in several ways. In this case, I suspected that a story-based process of theological reflection would likely appeal to teenagers, and, therefore, to their parents.

Dori Grinenko Baker, who is a Methodist minister as well as a well-known practical theologian and author, has developed a story-based process of theological reflection in her book, *The Barefoot Way: a Faith Guide for Youth, Young Adults, and the People Who Walk with Them*. Her model of theological reflection, which I already defined in the first chapter,⁶¹ is designed from the standpoint of "looking for God in unexpected places, starting with a fresh, true story from someone's life."⁶² Since for Baker, "theological reflection describes the process of finding the overlap between our

⁶¹ See page 6 note 8.

⁶² Dori Grinenko Baker, *The Barefoot Way: A Faith Guide for Youth, Young Adults, and the People Who Walk with Them* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), XI.

story and God's story,"⁶³ she offers a blueprint for a story-based style of theological reflection built on four principles, LISTEN, IMMERSE, VIEW IT WIDER, and EXPLORE, or, in short, L.I.V.E.—a method designed to help people, and especially youth, find that overlap.

The first of these four principles, LISTEN, serves as an invitation to the participants to “Pay attention to the nuances, images, colors, smells, and sights in the story” and to “Allow memories, feelings, and associations to come to mind...”⁶⁴ as a way to engage themselves more deeply in the story. The second principle, IMMERSE, offers the participants the opportunity to identify the feelings that may emerge for them while they are involved in the process of listening. During this phase of the process the listeners are urged to pay close attention to any physical reactions that they may experience. The VIEW IT WIDER principle encourages the participants to make connections between the story they hear and other stories, images, or themes that are part of the larger context of faith, such as a story from the Bible, or a theme from a spiritual practice of any faith tradition, or the lyrics of a song, to only name a few. Lastly, the fourth principle of this method, EXPLORE, is meant to inspire the listeners to take action. The intention behind this part of the reflection is to prompt the participants to discover any ‘Aha’ moment or deeper insights that may lead them to take action in the future. Baker summarizes the objective behind her method by stating confidently how “The L.I.V.E. process helps you seek direction from trusted others and to trust the inner voice of wisdom through which God speaks to you.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Ibid, XVIII.

⁶⁴ Ibid, XVIII-XIX.

⁶⁵ Ibid, XVIII.

When I first became familiar with Baker's book, I quickly became enchanted with it because the book contained short stories relating various experiences lived by real people. What is more, the stories were interesting and written by young people or adults who shared tales from their teenage years. I also appreciated Baker's comprehensive and accessible process of theological reflection and her inclusion of a variety of spiritual practices. The short stories as well as the easy-to-apprehend theological reflection process seemed to have the potential of promoting interactive, lively, and meaningful engagement between teenagers and adults. This book inspired me to imagine a project of my own designed to include the use of this model as an aid to parents in learning how to reflect theologically and to repeat the same process of reflection with their teenagers at home. This appealing and unthreatening theological reflection model had the potential of giving practical tools to parents and their teens to enable them to articulate personal stories about their day-to-day experiences and also learn to perceive relevant theological connections in their own lives. Hence, a project based on this model could serve as a catalyst for the teenagers enrolled in the parish's J2A class and their parents to become more proficient at articulating a part of their personal journeys of faith.

The practical benefit of learning how to think and speak from a theological standpoint about personal, everyday-life stories is only one of the discernible outcomes of the project. At a minimum, I would hope for the bridging of the gap between what is considered secular and religious in terms of daily life. Peter J. Paris expands our view of the integration of the sacred and secular in daily life by focusing attention on the centrality of such integration in African spirituality. He writes: "African spirituality is

never disembodied but always integrally connected with the dynamic movement of life.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Frost offers another corrective as he contends:

One of the major contributing factors in the flattening of the gospel’s truth has been the false and clearly simplistic distinction many of us make between the so-called religious and nonreligious categories in our lives. We have been seduced into believing that there are certain of our experience that can justifiably be called sacred, and others that are not. These other experiences have been considered profane or irreligious. At best they are neutral on the religious scale. At worst, they are deprived and evil.⁶⁷

Paris and Frost offer important correctives to the perceived separation between the sacred and the secular.

In addition to narrowing the divide between the sacred and secular perception of life, the invitation to the parents and teens to engage in the process of theological reflection could have an even wider scope of possible outcomes. In part, my invitation to this group would be akin to the admonition of Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore to Christians at large, which is “to understand God’s call to practice sacramental living—living that mediates divine grace in the church and world.”⁶⁸ The desire behind such invitation is the desire for believers to understand their lives, God, and the world in a sacramental way. Moore uses the image of a tree to convey her thoughts about sacramental theology. She unfolds this image as a way of conveying the depth of our connection to the divine by stating the following: “Sacramental theology is like a towering tree, impressively large and bountiful with fruit. What is less apparent is the deep roots that hold the tree in the ground, sending nourishment to its branches. Each

⁶⁶ Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 22.

⁶⁷ Frost, *Seeing God in the Ordinary*, 10.

⁶⁸ Mary Elizabeth Mullino Moore, *Teaching as a Sacramental Act* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2004), 22.

root reaches far under the ground, intertwining with others, as roots are wont to do.”⁶⁹ I discerned that if the participating parents and teenagers in my project could begin to see and believe that God is like this web of ‘roots’ that sustains their lives, then their hearts and minds could potentially be transformed in unanticipated ways.

An important part of the practice of sacramental living includes making connections with the rich metaphors that convey the fundamental traditions of the Christian faith. For example, Terrence W. Tilley explains how the Eucharist, which is “The very sacrament central to the Christian life is an enacted metaphor.”⁷⁰ Tilley further contends that “A second way in which a metaphor enters into the life of a Christian is through the stories in which it is incorporated.”⁷¹ For Tilley stories serve as an essential conduit between the meaning of the Christian faith and the daily lives of Christians. He affirms: “The process of story-telling—especially that of autobiography—provides the bridge for canonical images and metaphors from the community or tradition to the individual. To be a Christian is to use Christian canonical metaphors, to adapt or adopt the stories which carry them to one’s own life, and thus to provide meaning and unity for one’s life.”⁷²

In addition to learning how to live in a more sacramental way the project participants could also come away with a greater sense of the natural and vital power of their own stories and the stories of others to impart wisdom. Lisa Cron, who uses brain science to offer practical advice to writers about story-writing, underscores how “We

⁶⁹ Ibid, 22.

⁷⁰ Terrence W. Tilley, *Story Theology* (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book published by The Liturgical Press, 1990), 4.

⁷¹ Ibid, 5.

⁷² Ibid.

think in story, which allows us to envision the future.”⁷³ Furthermore, she writes: “Story is the language of experience, whether it’s ours, someone else’s, or that of fictional characters. Other people’s stories are as important as the stories we tell ourselves. Because if all we ever had to go on was our own experience, we wouldn’t make it out of onesies.”⁷⁴ Hence, story is intimately connected to our very survival, and story allows us to thrive. According to Cron, “Neuroscientists believe ...that without stories, we’d be toast”⁷⁵ and “...story helps us survive not only in the life-and-death physical sense but also in a life-well-lived social sense.”⁷⁶

The Bible is considered by many to be a great source of a wide variety of stories, which provide wisdom for living life well. Thus, the practice of connecting our stories and the stories found in the Bible has the potential of reinforcing the already existing physical pathway, which neuroscientists are discovering in the human brain. This pre-existing physical pathway, if strengthened, can work in tandem with the exercise of a story-based theological reflection to deepen the awareness of the divine presence in the consciousness of believers. Barbara Bruce highlights such a relationship between faith and brain development. According to Bruce, two different parts of the brain work together when someone tells a story that connects with the biblical story, and she asserts: “Two lobes of the brain come into play and continue to be strengthened.”⁷⁷ Hence, she confidently states: “storytelling is a powerful tool to help students of all ages make these

⁷³ Lisa Cron, *Wired for Story: The Writer’s Guide to Using Brain Science to hook Readers from the Very First Sentence* (New York, NY: Crown Publishing Group, 2012), 6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Barbara Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain: Integrating Brain Research and Faith Development* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2002), 69.

connections.”⁷⁸ More and more, the field of neuroscience is discovering the integral relationship between telling and listening to stories and the brain. Scientific research is increasingly finding out how stories and the brain interact, and how such connection relates to the ability of people to find wisdom for their daily lives. In an article published online in November 2013 Gavin McMahon writes: “Stories stimulate emotions, which may be the key to better learning, attention, memory and decision making.”⁷⁹ McMahon also explains how the scientific process supports this claim: “Two parts of the brain – Broca’s and Wernicke’s area – automatically light up when listening to a presentation. Think of them as the gray cells that work on processing language and speech — the input/output area of the brain. They’re the same parts of the brain that light up when you read a book, and the same parts of the brain that we use to watch a favorite movie or talk to a loved one.”⁸⁰

The potential for a positive outcome, therefore, persuaded me that the practice of theological reflection by means of the story-based L.I.V.E. method prescribed by Baker would help the J2A parents and their respective teenagers, who were to participate in my project, learn how to tell and reflect on their own stories with more ease, depth, and authenticity. In the process they would also gain a greater ability to connect their everyday experiences to the experiences found in the biblical narrative. Moreover, they would grow in self-awareness and in awareness of the presence of God in their lives.

For my part, this project had the potential of helping me expand the scope of my ministry. The implementation of such a program would allow me to ‘risk for faith’ with

⁷⁸ Ibid, 69.

⁷⁹ Gavin McMahon, “The Science Behind Storytelling – and Why It Matters,” <http://blog.slideshare.net/2013/11/20/the-science-behind-storytelling-and-why-it-matters/> (accessed November 7, 2015).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

God a little more than I had done in the past—the kind of risk that Kenda Creasy Dean advocates for. In regards to our ‘risking for faith’ in ministry with youth, Dean claims the following:

In truth, neither young people nor the adults satisfied with serving God from the shallow end have any inkling how little we actually risk for faith. Our unfamiliarity with the depths of grace makes every act of passion feel like a high platform dive. And, given adolescents’ lack of faith experience and our own lack of theological muscle tone, practicing passion in the shallow end is a high risk proposition for most of us. Consequently, we overlook opportunities to dive deeply into Christian tradition, and focus on clever antics designed to win young people’s attention instead.⁸¹

In this case, I believe that I would be ‘risking more for faith’ by engaging parents and their teenagers in the long-standing but uncomfortable and, sometimes neglected Christian practice of testimony. Thomas Hoyt Jr. highlights the life-giving quality of the practice of testimony with these words:

In different ways, testimony happens in every vital Christian community. It also happens, as we shall see, in the midst of daily life and in the life of society. In testimony, people speak truthfully about what they have experienced and seen, offering it to the community for the edification of all.⁸²

Baker also understands testimony in relation to our human everyday type of experiences.

In the introduction to her book, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young*

Women, Baker offers the following definition of testimony in the context of her research:

In girlfriend theology, learners engage in the practice of testimony. Here testimony expands to include not just the big stories, the conversion experiences, and mountaintop moments, but the significant little stories of God’s work in the lives of everyday people, every day. Here testimony arises not as predictable stories of religious conversion, but as a shared

⁸¹ Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 163.

⁸² Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 89-90.

process of finding glimpses of God in everyday acts such as a summer swim, a surprising friendship, or the death of a best friend.⁸³

Once I realized the extent to which *The Barefoot Way: a Faith Guide for Youth, Young Adults, and the People Who Walk with Them* could play an instrumental role in my thesis project, I was satisfied with having found a good model of storysharing and theological reflection. I did not continue to search for resources in the same genre because this book appeared to be the perfect resource to use with the families who would participate in my project. I also thought that this small volume could be an excellent tool to use in the future. If the parents and their teenagers in my research liked the content of *The Barefoot Way* through their experience with my thesis project, the book could become a useful resource to use with upcoming J2A families. Therefore, I shared the premise of my thesis proposal as well as my recommendation of this resource with the members of the Education committee at the parish, and I sought their support in purchasing a number of copies to have on hand for the project. I, then, began the process of inviting all of the families whose teenagers were enrolled in our J2A class, fifteen families in all, to participate in the project.

The response from the J2A families was very gratifying. The parents expressed their desire to support me with my project as one of the reasons why they wanted to participate. They also wanted to be engaged in the preparation of their teens for confirmation. Eight families, including twelve parents and eight teenagers, committed to participate. First, I designed and administered a “Before” survey for participants to fill out at the beginning of the project, as well as an “After” survey for the participants to

⁸³ Dori Grinenko Baker, *Doing Girlfriend Theology: God-Talk with Young Women* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2005), 7.

complete at the conclusion of the project.⁸⁴ In the end, ten parents and seven teenagers actually completed most of the work that they had committed to do in relation to the project. One family had to drop out because of a new phase of cancer treatment that one of the parents had begun to undergo shortly after the project started. The members of this family had been honest. They had informed me that it might not be possible for them to continue to come to the meetings, and we had agreed to try and see what would happen. Eventually, they had to drop out, and understandably so, because they lacked the necessary energy to fully take part in the project.

After having received all the responses to my letter of invitation I gathered the group for the initial sessions, which took place respectively on Monday, January 6, 2014, and Thursday, January 9, 2014. Our last gathering took place on February 20, 2014. At first I had offered two identical weekly meeting sessions to the parents, one on Mondays and the other on Thursdays. My desire was to create a number of possibilities to encourage maximum participation. In response to my offer, four parents opted to come on Mondays and the other eight on Thursdays. However, during the second week, the members of the Monday group and I decided together that it would be best for us to combine the two groups and meet as one community on Thursdays. This change proved to be a beneficial one for the group because the gathering of all the parents, together as one, fostered a sense of wider fellowship and a more dynamic exchange of ideas. I must also note that I had planned to include all of the teenagers in just one of the sessions toward the end of the project. Instead, I had to readjust the schedule slightly to include the teenagers in two of the last sessions in order to keep the meetings at a reasonable length since we met on a school night.

⁸⁴ See Appendices.

I will first describe the activities of the sessions held during the first two weeks of the project, and then I will turn my attention to the last two sessions. During the first week, our gatherings began with prayer, welcome, and introductions. During these initial sessions I collected the necessary materials, such as the ‘Informed Consent Forms’ and ‘Before Surveys’ that I had sent to the participants in advance of the first meetings. After collecting the papers, I distributed the books, which I had stamped with the name of the parish as well as an assigned number in advance of those first meetings. I needed to keep track of the books that would be distributed on loan to each family. Since a few of the participants did not bring back their papers, I made alternative arrangements with them to collect their forms at a later time. After completing these formalities, I reviewed the scope and purpose of my project. We also reviewed the schedule of sessions and the assignments for each week. It was important for me to explain the details of the L.I.V.E. theological reflection process, and to take the time to clarify and answer any questions from the participants—I had to make sure that everyone present understood what was expected of the group. I reminded the participants about the need to purchase a notebook or journal to keep track of their thoughts and reactions to the stories. We adjourned with prayer.

During the second week, the parents met for the first time in a combined session, which took place on Thursday, January 16, 2014. Eight of the parents were present. Before discussing the stories that they had to read that week, we began by talking about the L.I.V.E. process. I wanted to know their thoughts about the method. Several participants pointed out that certain parts of the process were easier than others. Several participants found the initial stories in the book difficult while a number of others thought

the stories were fun. Many were surprised by the difficulty that they had encountered in their effort to find scriptural references in connection to the stories. Others reported feeling touched by the personal aspect of the stories and were able to find some parallel experiences in their own lives.

As we began to explore the stories and apply the L.I.V.E. theological reflection process to the stories, the participants began to become more engaged, and most were very open with their comments. As a result, we delved a bit deeper. Rita,⁸⁵ a mom with shoulder-length, brown, wavy hair, expressed total surprise elicited by the faithfulness of her family in participating fully in the process that week; a surprise that she punctuated by saying “We hate stuff like this!” She continued by indicating how they had, for the most part, been “able to come up with something” in terms of making biblical connections. During our reflection on the stories that evening Rita was able to bring up an apt and interesting connection between one of the stories and the story of Ruth and Naomi. She also expressed how this project had come at a good time for her family and was helping the members of her family reconnect spiritually. She explained how they used to say their devotions together as a family when her kids were younger; however, this familial practice had been set aside as the children got older and busier.

A few others expressed some dismay at how they, as well as their teens, found it difficult to do the “View it Wider” part of the theological reflection process. A dad by the name of Casey asked “what might help to prime the pump,” and Stella suggested that “it would help to have cheat sheets.” Tammy, whose teenager was ‘resistant’ to doing the project assignments, shared a funny anecdote. She reported how her teen, Kristin, had apparently learned for the first time about the ethnicity of Jesus. Kristin had actually

⁸⁵ I have assigned pseudonyms to all of the participants in the project.

texted a friend to say “Did you know that Jesus was a Jew?” Tammy’s response to Kristin’s lack of knowledge simply added: “it’s wonderful if the project is triggering connections.” A few others also commented about how their teenagers were responding to the assignments as they were doing them at home. For example, Samantha, who tends to be calm and collected, reported how the stories had kept the attention of her teen, and Casey expressed that it was “helpful to have a structured framework to have that kind of conversation.” Finally, a couple of the parents expressed how the project would be useful to the teens in terms of helping them learn to tell their faith stories. Suzanne offered how her son was beginning to understand the concept of finding out “where is God in that” while Stella confidently asserted: “this will definitely help the teens write their stories for confirmation.”

The descriptions of these first sessions of the project, especially of the third meeting when we earnestly began to engage in reflection, offer an adequate sample of how the parents and their teens reacted to the L.I.V.E. process of theological reflection during the group meetings and at home. These initial sessions sufficiently show the interest and the varying levels of engagement of the parents and teens. Interest and engagement are clearly evident in the surprises and difficulties that the participants voiced about the process. In my estimation, most of the participants showed a strong level of interest and engagement in the process early on, interest and engagement exhibited during both the group sessions and the sessions at home. In addition, they quickly, though not easily, began to engage with Scripture, and they were able to find parallels from the stories to their own lives. In spite of the initial difficulties encountered with making such connections, their engagement increased and deepened over time. Even the

teen, Kristin, whose mom commented about being ‘resistant’ to the process serves as an example of early engagement in the process as she communicated with a friend about having learned something new—even if such learning was simply about the ethnic identity of Jesus.

In addition to showing interest and engagement in the process from the beginning, the parents also exhibited a level of trust and comfort with each other and with me. To a great degree, such a level of trust and comfort in the group was due to the fact that these families and I are of similar social class and belong to the same community outside the parish. We have also been a part of the parish for a number of years and have nurtured relationship through various types of interactions mostly related to parish ministry and activities. What is more, these families are close in age, late forties to early fifties. They faithfully participate in the worship and life of the parish, and, for many years, they had regularly enrolled their children, ages thirteen, fourteen and fifteen at the time of the project, in Sunday school. Hence, such a level of trust and comfort in the group is not surprising.

The interactions I have just described offer a good description of the general tenor of the sessions in which the participants reflected on the stories contained in the book. A full description of all of the group sessions, seven in all, can be found in the appendices. I will now focus on the last two sessions in which several parents and teens were involved, and at which time they had the opportunity to share and reflect on their own personal stories. I will share in detail the reflections that transpired during the sixth session, and will offer a synopsis of the seventh session.

The sixth session took place on Monday, February 17 instead of Thursday, February 13 as originally scheduled. Nature, by means of a snow storm, had forced us to reschedule our regular weekly group meeting. As a result, the parents and I communicated via e-mail messages to decide together about an alternate day and time to meet.

I had proposed that we have a meal during this session. Everyone had volunteered to bring something and I had committed to bring the main course in the form of a platter of sandwiches. Four of the seven teenagers and eight parents came that evening, and we first shared the meal. After we had eaten, and as it was often my custom, I began our time of reflection with a Collect from the season of The Epiphany, and I then invited the teenagers to be the first ones to share their stories.

The teens appeared to be shy at first, but after a few minutes one of them, Kristin, decided to go first. Kristin shared with us a story that she entitled “My friend Christina” which is about an adult who is, actually her mother’s friend, but is a person with whom she feels extremely comfortable. Kristin wrote about the way that she and Christina relate to each other by describing certain activities that they have done together. Here is her story in her own words⁸⁶:

MY FRIEND CHRISTINA

Actually Christina is my mother’s friend. It started with me dog sitting for her, but Christina was so much fun to be with and talk to that I ended up spending more time with her. One of her daughters is married and the other is in college so she likes to have my

⁸⁶ I want to note here that have inserted the written stories of Kristin as well as the stories from all the participants as they have submitted them and the stories are unedited for the most part.

company too. Christina is from Ireland. She's a very glamorous with long blond hair and is a woman who I can tell anything to. She is always there for me.

Christina has two dogs – poodles – one is named Chloe and the other is Pierre. I've been spending the snow days at her house and when it is cold we make a fire and have tea. Christina says that in Ireland and England they drink tea all the time. She has Netflix and we watched the movie 'We are the Millers'. Christina laughed so hard she started crying and I had to run around the house to get tissues for her!

I like to cook and have been making dinner for Christina and the exchange student from Spain who is staying with her. We pick out the menu from a Costco cookbook that I have and I go buy the ingredients.

Last Friday on Valentine's Day I handmade potato salad for an early dinner since Christina was going out that night to an event. It took a long time to cut all the potatoes and cook them, boil and peel the eggs, and wash and cut the vegetables. Cooking usually relaxes me, but we forgot to check on the potatoes and all the water boiled out and we were running around screaming not knowing what to do with the burned pot! It turned out great though. When we went back later in the evening for seconds, we found that Christina's exchange student had eaten all the leftovers so we ended up just having toast!

When Christina goes out I do her hair and nails and make her look glamorous. While Christina was out on Valentine's Day, my mom and I went out for dinner in Old Town and then back to Christina's house where we turned on the fireplace and watched two movies while waiting for Christina to come home.

Then Christina came home and told us all about her evening at the Austrian Embassy. She tells me like I am like her daughter. It makes me feel so good.

After hearing Kristin's story I guided the group to apply the L.I.V.E. process to the story. We had, of course, already done the first part of the process, which is to listen to the story. Next, I asked everyone to offer their thoughts about what they had experienced as they heard the story. Several members of the group said that the story elicited a sense of "coziness and comfort;" others were reminded of the "gift of having a close friend;" Suzanne remarked how "Kristin and Christina are very lucky to have ...to know each other and have that special friendship." Others said that it was "...especially nice to have a good friend that cooks for you"; "...nice to have the age difference;" "...always nice to have another adult to step up ...have another adult's presence in one's life as a teenager."

"What kind of stories come to mind from our own lives?" I asked. Samantha remembered how an adult friend used to make "tomato and lettuce sandwich and grape juice" for her after school, and, to this day, the two of them continue to be close. Since no one else had any other recollections to share we moved on to the "Viewing-it-Wider" part of the process.

I asked the group the question "how do we see God in the story?" Kristin alluded to having a sense of God's protection because, when she and Christina had cooked the meal, as she had described in her story, they had "almost burned down the house." The fact that the house did not burn down elicited a sense of "protection from God" for Kristin. Suzanne said "I think it is in the sense of the close relationship," which she felt had emanated from the story. I also offered how "I immediately thought of the Holy Spirit

...like the person who is beside you ...a comforting presence.” After waiting a short while for more responses I asked if we could think of a Christian practice that could relate to the story. Rita said: “eating meals together ...hospitality.” Suzanne pointed out as a significant detail “the fact that Christina helps Kristin’s mother out; she is lending her support.” I then asked the group about any ‘aha’ moments that they might have gained from the story. Samantha shared her ‘Aha’ moment in this way: “keeping your eyes open to people who are right next to you; that you can either lend a hand to or who are there waiting to help you.” I thanked Kristin for sharing her story and asked if she would like to make any last comments about her story.

Next we listened to Lisa’s story, which she entitled “Camp Happy.” This is a story about Lisa’s experience as a child when she was on the road with her Girl Scout troop, and about the group’s experience of getting lost on the way to the camp.

CAMP HAPPY

When I was younger I was in girl scouts. Every year we would go on 2-3 camping trips. This trip I had to be about 8 years old. The camp was called Camp Happy. Well trying to find the camp we weren’t very happy. The directions that we had told us to get off at the certain exit and to turn on to the other back roads until we were in the middle of the woods. We had no idea where we were. All we knew was we were lost in the middle of the woods. It was in the end of winter so the sun still set early. So we are driving around trying to find this camp and we just can’t find it. Imagine 5, 8 year old girls in the back of a minivan in the dark woods. This way to get back to the camp wasn’t marked off very well. So we are driving and driving, we had to have drove around for 45 minutes at least and all of a sudden there was a sign that said “Camp Happy ☺.” So the sign had an

arrow on it pointing which road to take. Finally we were able to find the camp and we weren't driving around the dark woods anymore. When we all layed down to go to bed that night we were VERY happy to be in a nice warm sleeping bag.

At first, we joked about the name of the camp, and then someone asked for clarification about Lisa's experience to find out if the girls ended up being frightened during their stay at the camp, or if only during the experience of getting lost. We continued to apply the L.I.V.E. process to Lisa's experience. Another teen, Kristin, remembered one of her own experiences at a Girl Scout's camp, which she labeled as the "worst experience of her life!" She felt that way because of a "creepy counselor" whose name was either "Happy or Smile" or something like that." Rita said knowingly "I've been lost before!" and Joan, another mom, said "I don't like camping!" Christian, a dad who wears glasses, recalled a good experience he and his daughter had when going to camp with other dads at a camp for "Indian Princesses." Christian's comment prompted another dad, Milton, to talk about the "anxiety of having to be somewhere and as it is getting dark, and you don't know where you are." Samantha thought of the biblical stories about "Wandering in the desert" while Tammy explained how life is a journey that includes road blocks, which get in the way of one's goal, and believed it was an analogy for life, and to remember that "God walks with you." Rita mentioned how this story was a good one to remember during the J2A Urban Adventure, which the teens would soon undertake.⁸⁷ In terms of 'Aha' moments Don, a dad who had remained quiet up to this point, observed how Lisa appeared to be "still upset" about this experience she had had

⁸⁷ The Urban Adventure is a part of the J2A program involving the teens' engagement in a scavenger hunt in a city. The aim of this exercise is to help the teens develop navigational as well as leadership skills.

so long ago. Kristin shared her memory of a more recent experience at a cheerleading camp, which involved getting “bad sunburn on her nose.”

Joseph’s story came next. Joseph wrote about an adventure he had with his friends after a recent snow storm.

STORY WRITTEN BY AN 8th GRADE BOY, THIS STORY HAPPENED A FEW WEEKS BEFORE HE WROTE IT.

One day after school I was with a group of friends and we saw a frozen creek in a county park. It had snowed three days earlier but it had started to warm up. The one question everyone was asking was whether someone should walk on it. The melting ice looked very thin but eventually I said I would do it. After I thought for a second about what could go horribly wrong, I withdrew my offer to walk across the uncertain ice. After calling me a chicken, someone else said they would do it. Not having as keen a conscience as I, he did not think about what could go wrong. When he took his first step on the ice we all heard a crack. The second step another louder crack, and with the third step he plunged into three feet of water and got soaking wet.

There seemed to be collective gasp when the group heard how the friend had fallen into the water. We were all impressed by the courage Joseph showed in changing his mind about the dare his friends had egged him on to accept. Joseph’s mom, Suzanne, quickly exclaimed how she was so happy that Joseph had listened to “the little voice.” Some commented about feeling “anxiety.” The story, having come to a conclusion, prompted Rita to say how she thought “we wanted more.”

I asked the group about the name calling, which Joseph had to suffer through when his friends called him “chicken” etc., and the conversation became focused on either the “name calling” or the “taking the dare” aspect of Joseph’s story as part of the

“View It Wider” process. Don mentioned “Eve” and Rita said Jesus had been called “King of the Jews—name calling.” Samantha said how Jesus endured “called names” or was told “prove yourself to be the Messiah,” and how he seemed always to be tempted to “dare” – for example “if you are the Son of God, do.” I venture to say how Jesus often listened to the “little voice” even if, by listening to the “little voice,” he was led to the cross.

During the search for the ‘Aha’ moments Rita offered the possibility that Joseph may choose to continue to listen to the “little voice” in the future. Suzanne related how: “there are so many temptations out there...” and Christian said “falling in three feet of water is a piece of cake compared to what else is out there...” Everyone seemed to want to offer a comment rather than ‘Aha’ insights. Milton suggested “the experience of receiving taunts is painful; it’s not pleasant; but, juxtaposed with the experience of falling through the ice, you can’t really compare that. You sort of learn a lesson ...the taunt might sting a little but is nothing compared to the danger that the other boy put himself in.” Rita then said: “The sting of the water will last longer than the sting of the taunts.” These other comments were also offered: “I hear courage ... courage to take back his word;” “peer pressure is so hard to say no to;” “It’s ok to change your mind;” “It’s not like letting a friend down.” In my observation, Joseph’s story is a good example of the significant level of engagement, which took place during this session and the lively exchange and interaction between the parents and teens.

The fourth and last teen present during this session shared his story next. Colie entitled his story, “The Mourning Dove,” and is about an experience Colie and his sister had while being at home on a Saturday.

THE MOURNING DOVE!

By Colie, age 13, recalling a childhood memory!

! I can remember a day when I was relaxing, watching T.V., I was very glad it was Saturday. My sister was in another room, watching the birds come and go to the bird feeder, outside the window. The most common type of bird that flew down to grab a bite to eat was the Mourning Dove. They were larger than most of the other birds, and they usually took advantage of this. It was sometimes fun to watch the Mourning Doves hop across the bird feeder to startle away the others. You might even say the Mourning Doves are the bullies of the bird feeder. Sometimes, even if you knock at the window, it couldn't scare them off. Anyway, back to my story.!

! After a while of watching T.V. My sister wanted Mom, Dad, and I to all come into the room where she was, by the bird feeder. There were a few birds at the feeder, one of which was a mourning dove. The strange thing was, this Mourning Dove wasn't defending his territory. It only sat close to the window. This Mourning Dove was wounded. His wings were torn, his feet were weak, and dread was in his eyes. The most noticeable fatality was that a piece of its head was missing. The right part of its brain was completely exposed. We all wondered how it was managing to stay alive.

My sister felt much sympathy for the bird, but mom and dad were sorry to tell her that the bird probably wasn't going to live for that much longer. The Mourning Dove eventually hopped off of the bird feeder, on to the ground, and hobbled away.!

2 weeks later.!

My sister was at the bird feeder again, watching the birds stop by for a quick snack. My sister soon exclaimed, "Mom, Dad, look! The Mourning Dove is back!" Mom, Dad, and I gathered around the bird feeder. Mom and Dad, were doubting my sister's declaration,

but when they looked at the at the bird feeder, to their astonishment, they saw a healthy Mourning Dove, with a scar on the right part of its head. Mom and Dad asked, “Can you imagine the struggle it must have gone through to survive?” My sister answered with a simple “I prayed for him.”!

Christian was the first to comment that Colie’s parents had shared the same story with the group during one of our previous sessions. Then, he said “I guess it means you all think alike or something!” His observation elicited some laughter from the group. Many also remarked about the slight differences between the two versions of the story. Samantha said “it makes you feel a little helpless because there’s really nothing that you can probably do ... you have to let nature take care of the bird or not.” Suzanne added: “and then there is the aspect of the miraculous;” and I echoed her thoughts with the words: “I get a feeling of awe!”

During the “View It Wider” discussion Tammy pointed our attention to the image of the dove, saying “the dove is symbolic of peace, purity, the Holy Spirit.” She added “...to see it injured like that ... it is even more heart-wrenching, I think, that it survived. It is strong...” I asked if anyone could think of a Christian practice in this case and, since no one was offering what was most obvious, I chimed in “I can think of one: PRAYING!” Everyone laughed heartily. These other comments were offered: “Jesus’ baptism when the Holy Spirit appeared like a dove;” “What about the healings that Jesus did...a continuum.” Finally, the group talked about Tammy’s expressed ‘Aha’ moment, which she reported experiencing during the part of the story when the bird came back, and how she had felt a “sense of miracle and faith” and of “letting go.”

We continued with our session that evening by listening to two more stories from two adults. Once again the sharing of personal stories led to an evident deep engagement on the part of the participants and a lively exchange of reflections. Here is the first story written by Suzanne—a story, she explained, was about an experience she had ten days before.

I am preparing to travel. A week away from home – far away. I confess that I am not a good traveler. Although I love visiting new places, I just don't care for the "getting there" part. In fact, I anticipate it with feelings of dread. I begin by putting my house in order, making beds, changing sheets, doing mountains of laundry, vacuuming, cleaning out the fridge -- so that my in-laws will feel comfortable in our space. I write schedules and instructions for those who will be left behind. As I proceed, my movements speed up and by the end of the day, even my dog suspects that something is about to happen, although I've taken great pains to cover my suitcase with a blanket so that he won't be in mourning until after I go. Yet, he seems to sense something anyway as he hovers underfoot. I check my list, iron my clothes, and before long I am anxious, tense, and irritable. A chance encounter at the gym with a neighbor whose body language betrays her disapproval of me and what I'm saying adds to my dark mood. I leave my cell phone at the gym (again!) and race out in the darkness just in time to retrieve it before closing, and I start a fight over a school project left until the last minute. I stay up too late and get up too early. I am in a funk. It is with this heavy, dark feeling that I go out the next morning. The traffic is thick and the rain drizzles. Just then, I hear something. A snippet of melody. There it is again. It stirs up something in my brain and I realize I recognize it. In fact, not only am I familiar with it, it is uncommonly beautiful. I suddenly grasp

that I heard this very music in concert just the week before. The melodies pass between the oboe and the flutes, and then to the violins. The sounds are magnificent. Yes, it is Dvorak's Symphony #9, the so-called New World Symphony. The music swells and without awareness I am transported somewhere else just as I have been since I was a child. I glance in the mirror and I am grinning from ear to ear. The heavy weight is gone.

The parts where Suzanne describes the behavior of her dog, as well as when she mentions starting “a fight over a school project left until the last minute” elicited knowing-laughter from the group. In terms of feelings in response to the story, one of the teenagers, Lisa, quickly jumped in by saying: “...when your parents know you're doing your homework at the last minute!” Samantha reported feeling: “that weight of the LIST” while Rita echoed “Getting everything in order!” Joan enjoyed hearing about “the music, of course, so nice...soothing.” Christian said “sometimes just one thing sets you right. It could be someone saying hello the right way...just one little thing can set you back in course.”

In regards to viewing the story wider, the group appeared to be losing focus, and a mom offered: “being away from your family is not a pleasant thing.” The two young ladies, Kristin and Lisa, talked about their experience with packing. One remarked when, as a child, she used to pack the week before but how, now she puts everything she thinks she might need and ends up taking things that she doesn't need. The other said she “packed for a month or two!” Then there were several back and forth comments about the dog, and Christian reported how their dog gets happy when they go away. I tried to bring the group back into the process. Then, Milton offered this thought: “I don't think it

is biblical, but I've heard a saying before, usually when someone is going through a crisis time, that God gives us what we can bear," and, after elaborating a bit more, he also added how God "was offering help through that good music." I commented about God giving "a little manna from heaven," and I talked about the example in the Bible where Paul sings hymns during an imprisonment and, as a result, his chains fall off. Rita began to speak about how feelings of anxiety can be like a "ripple effect"; the ripple effect passes one's anxiety down to others like it did to the dog; but a 'ripple effect' can also be positive. In terms of an 'Aha' moment two of the moms, Rita and Samantha, said respectively: "We've all been there! You're glad you're in good company." I echoed "it's good to remember for the next time;" and, Samantha continued "...as a mom you feel you have to keep it all together...as a mom it is a hard thing to let go of."

At that point in the session, even though there was still a sense of good energy among the group members, I recognized that everyone was getting a bit tired. However, there was still enough energy and time for one more story, and so, we listened to the story of Don.

WHY? SOMETIMES THERE ARE NO EXPLANATIONS OR ANSWERS

It did not make sense to me. It was the first day of school, second grade at Spann Elementary. As one can imagine, it was a nervous but exciting day for all. Ten minutes into class nervousness was trumped by confusion. Tyler and Vanessa were just asked to sit in the back of the classroom. Why? I wasn't going to ask Miss Burns, she scared me. Would my parents know the answer?

I was born in New Orleans not due to family roots but by corporate happenstance. My father had been transferred to New Orleans from Boston and my mother had just finished

college at Vanderbilt and her father had been transferred by General Electric to New Orleans from Connecticut. So there they met, both from the Northeast but now in the South.

For the first four years of my life we enjoyed the simple and easy times of New Orleans; riding the street trollies, skipping rocks on the Mississippi river, climbing fences to my friend Sam's house and playing tag with my younger brother. Sheltered and innocent. Just as I turned four, we had the first of what in my life, would be six relocation related "family sit downs." My father had accepted a promotion and we will be moving to Jackson, Mississippi. Of the six moves made before finally graduating high school, this move would be the most learned. Jackson to me was nothing more than a city east northeast of New Orleans. However, it came with a new house on a creek, a swing set, new friends, plum trees, organized baseball and football, a new TV to watch the Jetson's and Johnny Quest. But to adults and the nation, Jackson in the mid 1960's, was a racial warzone (so I learned later in life).

During our first two years in Mississippi, my brother and I attended Jackson Academy. It was a private school that did not reflect the racial make-up of Jackson but rather catered to families with white southern heritage. It became obvious to my parents that this was not the best environment for their children. I was oblivious to surroundings and riots taking place in downtown Jackson. I was having a great childhood. We had built a tree fort, learned to fish and ski in the local reservoir and played intense games of neighborhood football till the dinner bell would ring. Sheltered and innocent. I was excited but a bit apprehensive. It was the sixth day of September, 1967 and I was about to begin my public school education. Spann Elementary, one mile from our

house... a school attended by my South Venetian Way neighborhood friends. I had heard how much fun it would be...kickball, nice teachers and a new library. That morning, my mother dressed my brother and me up and walked us to the principal's office for an introduction and to obtain class assignments. For me, I was told Miss Burns would be my teacher. I thought, "Burns", easy enough to remember, but in retrospect, hard to forget.

My mother made me walk to Miss Burn's classroom alone. A bit timid and shy, this was not an easy task; especially having to knock on the door to gain entrance....I was the new kid as the others had been at Spann the year before. The children in the room were milling about and when Miss Burns called for order, we all sat at the nearest school desk. Then it happened.

There were two black students in our class, Tyler and Vanessa. They had seated themselves near the front of the class and next to each other. Miss Burns, a young woman raised in Jackson and with an Ole Miss pennant hanging from the chalkboard, firmly and with contempt, asked Tyler and Vanessa to move to the back of the school room and away from each other. This is how it began and this is how second grade ended in Miss Burn's class, Tyler and Vanessa sitting in the back of the room and with scant attention paid to them by the teacher and some of the students.

That day, shelter and innocence evaporated. Why would Miss Burns do that to Tyler and Vanessa? Through her actions, Miss Burns made it clear that she was unapproachable and to me she was scary. It was not an option to ask her why. Would my parents be able to explain this situation to me? At our church, St. Andrews, our Sunday school learnings were far from what I had just witnessed. In social interactions in the neighborhood, none

had prepared me for the blatant racism that occurred in Miss Burn's class. It wasn't right.

That evening, when I shared the day's events, my parents tried to explain what had happened but struggled as they themselves could not comprehend the situation. The next day, my mother had communications with the school to share my story. The unintended consequence of this was made clear to me as Miss Burns began to treat me differently (not in a good way) from the rest of the students. It was a few weeks later when a fellow classmate and new friend, Ellen Winter provided "local" insights to why Vanessa and Tyler were moved to the back of the class. She explained the history of race relations (in second grade parlance) in the South and in particular Jackson....it bothered her too. (Ironically, her father, William Winter, became Governor of Mississippi and did great things for race relations and black education).

Throughout the fall, it became very evident that racial separation at Spann Elementary was not just limited to Miss Burn's attitude or the classroom, but the cafeteria, hallways, recess and the new library. And in fact, rampant throughout the city, once one knew what to look for. It seems that many in the religious South were a bit subjective in applying Jesus's teachings and adhering to God's laws.

In May of 1968, we had another "family sit down", hurray, we would be moving to sunny Florida. Regrettably, the story doesn't get that much better, forced busing was the social experiment du jour.

Why? I learned at a very young age, love and equality for mankind cannot be forced, legislated or adjudicated; it must come from the hearts and minds of those who respect the higher authority and ascribe to a simple tenet of human decency for all.

This is a story told by a 53 year old recalling his memories of racism in the 60's and how it conflicts with the Bible's teachings.⁸⁸

Don's story caused the group to grow quiet. I invited everyone to take time to let the story sink in. After some time had passed, Christian expressed "feeling a sense of violation" in the story. Suzanne talked about a sense of "injustice" but thought the word "violation" to be a better word. Rita shared how the story brought to mind an experience she had with her children during a dress rehearsal performance of the show, *Ragtime*, at the Kennedy Center—her husband was a musician who was performing in the orchestra at the time. She related how her children could not understand a scene in the show where someone was on the verge of being murdered because of being "Black," and how her children kept on asking "but, why, but, why?" Samantha thought it interesting that the children in the story, *Tyler and Vanessa*, chose the front row seats. She wondered "was that happenstance?" "Was it intentional?" "Were they told to by their parents?" Tammy said how she had just seen the movie, *The Butler*, and shared this, in address to Don: "I was really primed to hear your story. I just watched it last night..." After a brief moment of silence, she then affirmed: "Prejudice has to be taught. It's not innate. It has to be taught." After a short pause, Rita, who, a moment before, had related her experience during the performance of *Ragtime*, talked about the adults in the room having "sort of grown up with it," with racial turmoil and division, "but, ...but these kids, I am not saying that there's not prejudice now, but it's, hum, it's somehow different, I think, than it was then." One of the teens, Kristin, followed up with this remark: "there are a lot of stereotypical ways that people describe Black people, especially in high school. So..." Samantha shared how the community where her husband grew up is still segregated.

⁸⁸ This sentence is a postscript that Don had included with his story.

After another short pause I offered: “I think WOW! ... I did not grow up in this country and I count it a blessing...” and everyone laughed! I also shared how I found it difficult to relate to the situation. I talked about trying to imagine putting myself in the situation and found it really hard to do. I continued saying “coming from a place where, having been the majority, always I continue to feel as a majority.” I also shared how it gave me pause to think about how different my life would have been had I grown up in this country.

Christian exclaimed: “I mean, it was there, but it is hard to imagine that it was there!” Christian further elaborated about his experience with racial prejudice while living and working in Los Angeles in the 1960’s when he was young and working in that part of the country following high school. He mentioned the “1965 LA riots,” and said, in relation to comments he had heard from people around him at the time, that he had “never heard such hatred. I mean, it was really evil stuff.” He continued: “and, it’s just, it’s hard to imagine that level of hating” a comment to which and I added “virulence!”

There was another pause. Then, Rita said to Don: “then now being a parent, you can think about how hard it was for your parents to have to talk to you about that too.” Don said his parents could not explain it because they had grown up in the Northeast. Rita also commented about possible sadness on the part of Don’s parents with seeing him go through such an experience; and I talked about how Don’s parents attempted to rectify the situation but their attempt ended up causing unintended backlash for Don.

After a few other miscellaneous comments I asked the group: “How do we View-it-Wider?” I also said I thought this story a good one to view wider. I asked: “What stories come to mind?” Tammy said gently: “We’re all God’s children!” Samantha

brought up the idea of extending, at some point, “forgiveness for Mrs. Burns,” explaining how Mrs. Burns was a product of her background; and, Christian added, in reference to Mrs. Burns, that “she probably was getting her marching orders from the principal too.”

There was a pause. Then Rita commented at length:

The other side of it would also be that, biblically, hum, you’re always trying to ... people are always trying to think about who’s in and who’s out, who’s the Gentile, who are the Jews, what’s the plan, the Samaritans, you know. Everybody’s got to figure out, you know, what their label is, to some degree, and, hum, you know. People wanting to know; the disciples wanted to know who’s the number one disciple, right? Who’s God’s? Who’s Jesus’ chosen? So I think it’s an age old problem with just different faces.

After another reasonable pause Christian, who had talked about his LA experience, said: “If God’s truth is eternal all this stuff is temporary.” Then, another pause, and I asked if there were any other insights or any ‘Aha’ moment. Don offered how the region in the story, “the Bible Belt,” could be considered as the “Bible Belt” if only ‘selective applications’ were being taken from the Bible. Then Christian said how “religion has historically been used to mask or cover up a lot of evil.” I then talked about something I read from a fellow priest. I explained how the Bible asks many questions; how the prophets often questioned the ‘establishment’ and how it is good to question the establishment, cautioning about the dangers of reading and understanding many parts of the Bible literally. Finally, I asked if there were any insights or comments anyone wanted to offer. Milton then shared how this incident had happened so long ago and, yet, Don had remembered the story very vividly. He imagined this event had an effect on the children in the story but does not know if these children had taken as much away as Don had. He also found it amazing how Don benefited so much from this experience; and how, where Don was from must have influenced the extent to which he had learned a

lesson from this experience. A short exchange of humorous comments brought some levity to the group, and since we still had many more stories to share and listen to, we agreed to meet in a few days to both, finish listening to the stories from the rest of the members of the group, and to talk about the last three stories in the book. We also agreed the teens who had participated that evening did not need to come back.

The group met for the seventh and final session on Thursday, February 20. Eight adults and one teen were present. We were able to listen to everyone's story and we finished the last three stories in the book. I noticed the conversation being particularly lively, and I observed how many members of the group were making wonderful connections to the biblical stories. The one and only teen present was particularly impressive with his knowledge of the Scriptures. During the session I also reminded everyone to fill out the "After" surveys, which I would send to them via email, and that I would contact them to set up the personal interviews. I thanked everyone profusely and, several comments indicated the participants had enjoyed the experience. In the weeks following the sessions I sent and received the "After" surveys, and I conducted personal interviews with all the families between March 10 and March 22, 2014.

The biblical mandate is very clear about the duty of one generation to transmit the faith to the next generation. As we grew closer to the end of the project I began to realize these faithful parents had, indeed, a deep desire to follow the directive given to us in the eleventh chapter of Deuteronomy, more specifically chapter 11:18-21, which is the directive to keep the precepts of God very close to our hearts and minds and to teach them to our children. This passage from Deuteronomy depicts the continuous and vigilant effort the community of believers must exert in order to transmit and nurture

faith, and, during our project, the members of our group were actively engaged in taking steps toward such a worthy goal. The Scriptures often show us the cultivation of faith taking place through the daily activities of life. The parents who participated in my project had the chance to exercise the responsibility of playing an active role in transmitting the faith to their children in the midst of their daily lives. These parents cultivated their own faith. They also helped their teens develop their own spiritual convictions, and pushed them along toward becoming the next bearers of the faith. I am grateful this thesis project I proposed, designed, and implemented with the help of the parents and teenagers of St. Luke's, is a project that may have helped a small number of Christians discover new ways to recognize the presence of God at work in their lives.

Chapter 3: Discovering the Results

The two questionnaires, which I created at the beginning of the project, included twenty-five questions —twelve “How often do you...” questions, twelve “How comfortable are you with...” questions with a Likert scale for response, and one open-ended statement asking the participants to share a moment in their lives when they felt spiritually alive. I chose a simple word processing format to allow me to easily distribute the surveys either in print or electronically. By means of these surveys I asked the parents and their teenagers to reveal the frequency of a variety of their practices, and to describe the extent to which they are aware of their own responses to interactions they encounter in life with God and with others. For example, I asked about the frequency with which the participants engage in the habit of sharing personal stories or of attending worship, and I asked them to measure their comfort level with sharing stories from their lives and with talking about their spiritual experiences with family and friends. In response to the “How often do you...” questions, the participants had the ability to rate their answers from “almost daily” to “never,” and in response to the “How comfortable are you with...” questions, from “very uncomfortable” to “very comfortable.” I administered the same survey to all the parent and teen participants, noting, however, that I divided the twelfth question in the “How comfortable are you with...” section in two parts to indicate one part “For parents only” and the other “For teens only.” I further highlighted this two-part question by means of a red-colored font.

The “Before” and “After” questionnaires were identical, except for the open-ended question, which I had modified slightly in the “After” questionnaire. In addition, I included a few evaluative questions in the “After” survey to solicit the input of the

participants about the strengths and weaknesses of the project, and to seek after their suggestions for future improvements.⁸⁹ Furthermore, upon completing the project I scheduled and conducted personal interviews with the participants.⁹⁰ The “Before” questionnaire was administered on January 5, 2014 to twelve adults and eight teenagers, and the “After” on March 2, 2014 to ten adults and seven teenagers.

My aim here is to describe the themes and learnings that have surfaced from the ten adults and seven teenagers who responded to both surveys. Detailed analysis of the surveys, as well as the responses to the evaluation questions, is included in the Appendices. In regards to the interviews, those took place between March 10, 2014 and March 22, 2014.

First I want to mention how gratified I was by the wonderful response that I obtained to my invitation—grateful to these parents and teenagers for their willingness to take time out of their busy schedules to play an active part in the intervention I had proposed for their lives. I was excited about the project. I was greatly encouraged by the enthusiastic response, and I looked forward to spending time with this particular cluster of families from the parish.

As I have already mentioned, the parents and teenagers who participated in the project were active in our J2A class. In terms of gender, the group of parents included six mothers and four fathers, while the group of teenagers encompassed four young men and three young women. I did not ask the participants to reveal their age; however, since I know the members of this group fairly well I can affirm the parents were, for the most

⁸⁹ See Appendices.

⁹⁰ See Appendices for protocol.

part, in their late forties to early fifties, and their teens in their mid-adolescence; their ages ranging from thirteen to fifteen.

Since the project took place over the course of eight weeks, such a short span of time is not enough to effect significant change in behavior/attitude or reveal major trends in the “before and after” data I gathered from the participants. In consultation with my thesis advisor, Dr. Elisabeth M. (Lisa) Kimball, I came to the conclusion that my aim would be to show the subtle fluctuations, if any, which would come to light on account of the participants’ answers to the surveys and interviews. I anticipated a few variations to appear and, indeed, I found note-worthy changes in degree of self-awareness on the part of the participants.

Two main themes emerged most clearly from the data and could be said to be small windows through which the longing of the human heart for community and for God is perceived. The first theme could be characterized as a strong desire on the part of the participants to interact with each other in community for the purpose of sharing, listening to, and reflecting on personal experience, and the second theme as a yearning for a greater knowledge of Scripture. In terms of learnings, the parents and teens appeared to have increased in their ability to actively listen, and to more easily recognize the intersection between their spirituality and daily lives. The parents seemed to become more at ease with speaking with their teenagers about spiritual matters, and the teens seemed to gain an interest in reading passages from the Bible more frequently.

Learnings: Survey Comparison Scores and Interview Comments of the Participants

According to Donald L. Kirkpatrick, learning is defined as a change in attitudes, behavior, and/or results because an individual engages in a specific program or

intervention. More specifically, according to Kirkpatrick, “Learning can be defined as the extent to which participants change attitudes, improve knowledge, and/or increase skill as a result of attending the program.” Behavior is understood as “the extent to which change in behavior has occurred because the participant attended the training program,” and he describes results as “the final results that occurred because the participants attended the program.”⁹¹ The modest fluctuations evident in the responses of my participants to the “Before” and “After” questionnaires show the extent to which these three principles came into play and is illustrated by the accompanying charts. The comments of the participants during the personal interviews also corroborate the responses obtained through the questionnaires.

In order to contrast the results of the questionnaires more sharply, I created charts comprised of a weighted scale. For the “frequency” scores I used a scale ranging from 0-4, assigning the number “0” to “never” and “4” to “almost daily.” I followed the same process for the “comfort” scores but used a scale of 1-5, assigning the number “1” to “very uncomfortable” and “5” to “very comfortable.” Since the fluctuations between the results would be best highlighted when seen side by side, I created two similar charts with the aggregate scores from the “Before” and “After” questionnaires to show the differences between the responses to the two surveys in terms of frequency and comfort as is exemplified in Figures 3 and 4.

According to the results of the frequency scores, one parent out of ten reported gaining a greater ability to find a spiritual connection in the stories told them by others, which is reflected by the scores for question 11. In the process two of the ten parents, as

⁹¹ Donald L. Kirkpatrick and James D. Kirkpatrick, *Evaluating Training Programs: Third Edition The Four Levels* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006), 22, 25.

is indicated by the scores for question 10, became more adept at relating their lives to stories in the Bible. Such modest growth seemed to indicate the parents had experienced some sort of change in attitude and behavior, which would then mean they had actually learned something of value on account of the project. In fact, the scores relating to question 10 showed the largest increase by far.

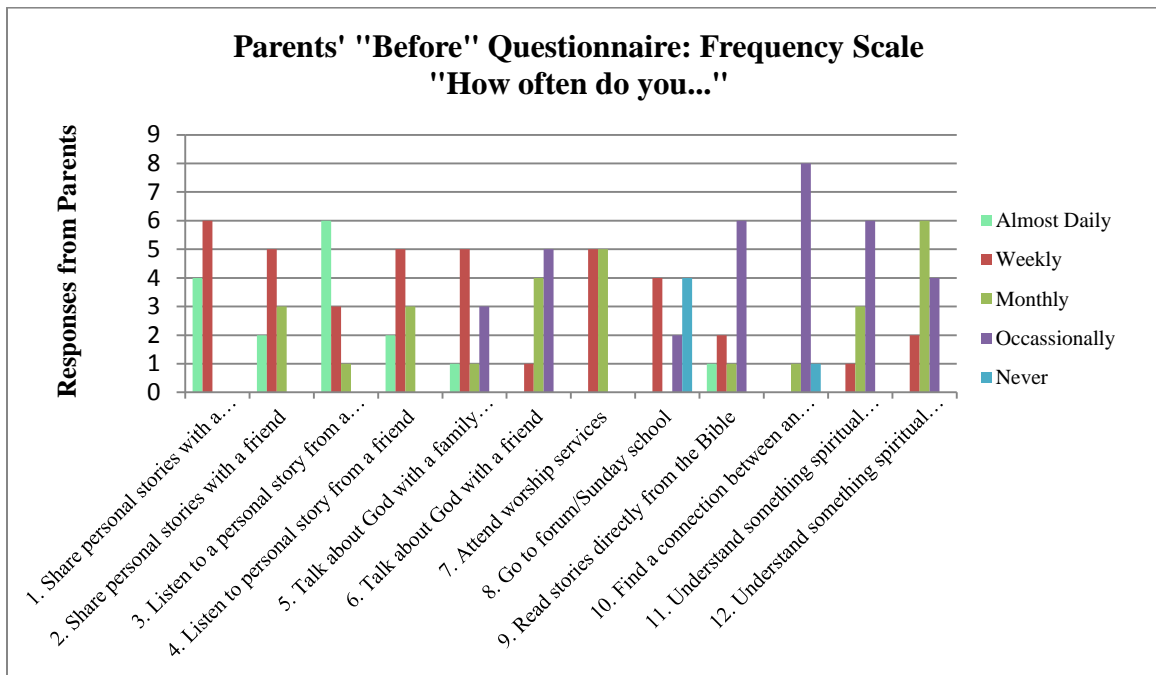


Figure 1: Chart of the “Before” Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Parents

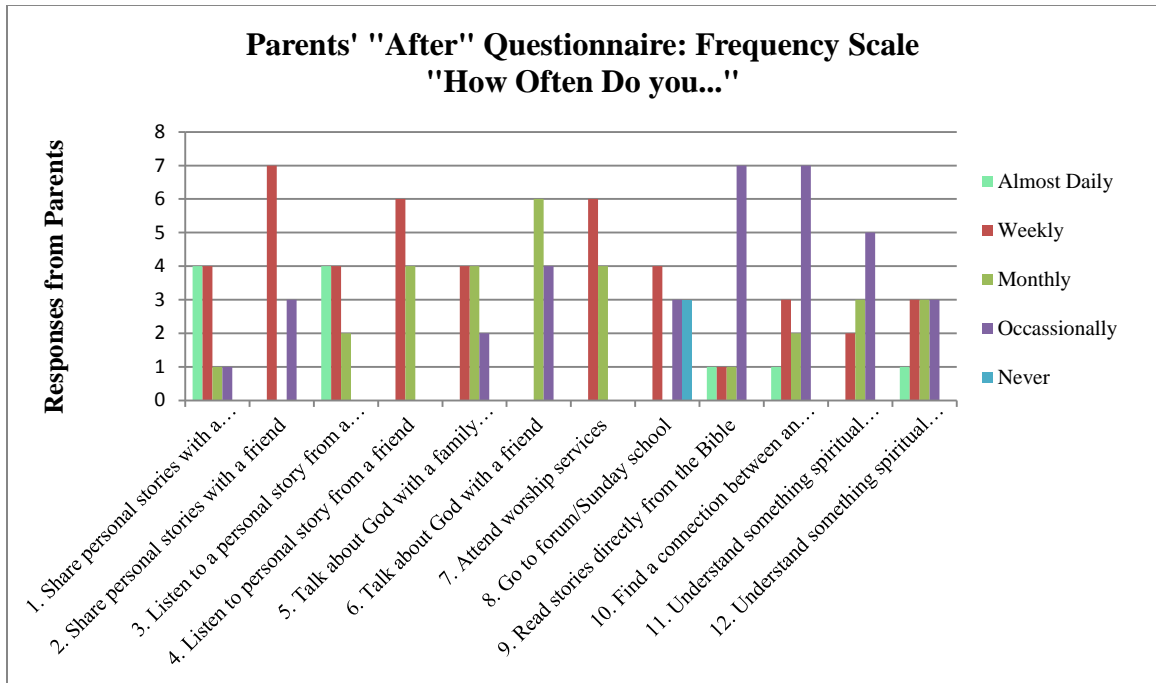


Figure 2: Chart of the “After” Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Parents

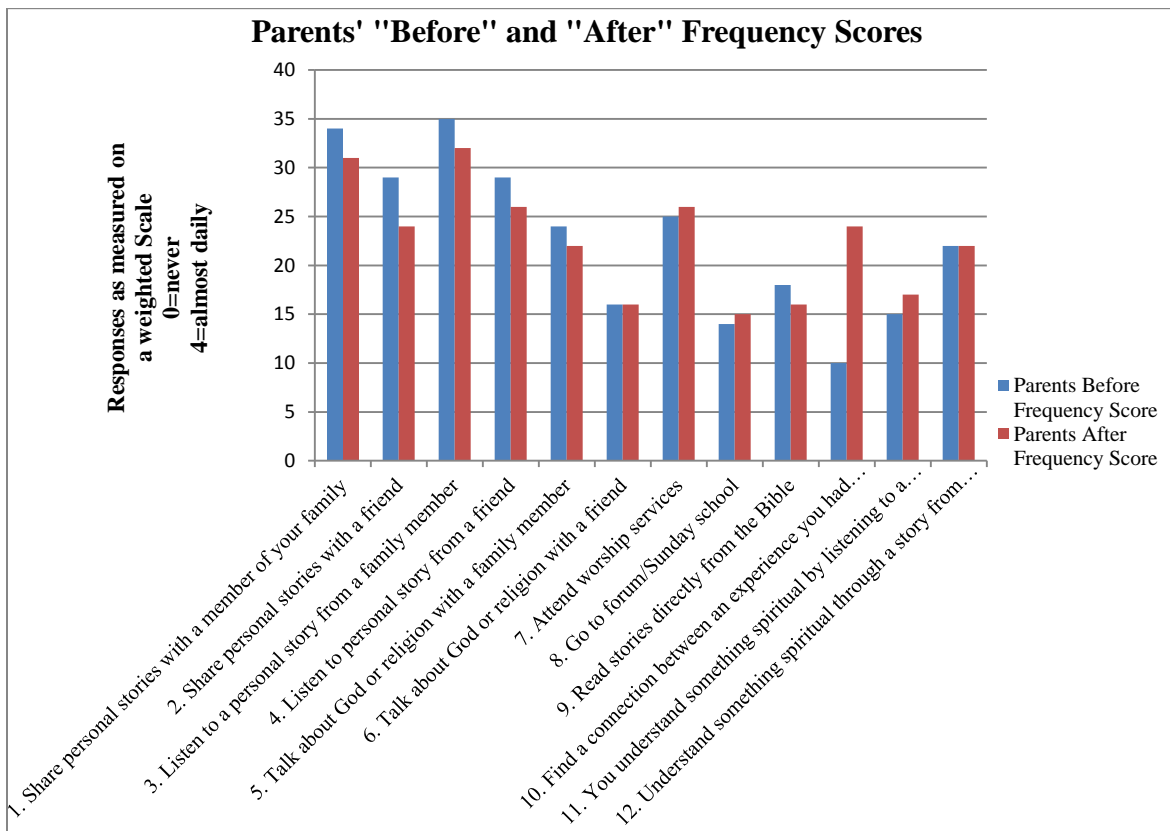


Figure 3: Chart of the “Before” and “After” Frequency Scale Survey Scores of the Parents

During the personal interviews, the parents highlighted “listening to the stories of others” as the most enjoyable part of the project. One parent, Rita, even exclaimed “That’s the easy, fun part!” Additionally, in answer to the question that relates to “having learned something important” she said that the project “helped me to be a better listener for people; to listen in a different way.” Other parents echoed the same sentiment in various ways. For example, Milton said about the listening aspect of the project: “I really enjoyed that! That was one of my favorite parts in the project,” in answer to the question: “What part of the project did you like best?” In addition, he stressed how it was “interesting to hear ways that people either connected to or didn’t connect to the various stories” in the book. Yet, another parent, Samantha, after having talked about her enjoyment of hearing the stories, also shared that the project “probably helped me realize that there are stories everywhere but how to, in a defined way, process them.”

Overall, I found the most positive change in the “comfort” scores, showing an increase in the parents’ level of ease in several areas, with the most significant area of gain being the ability of the parents to talk about God with their teenagers. It was exciting to see how the scores to statement 12 “Talking about God with your Teen” had increased the most since none of the parents reported being uncomfortable and four additional parents checked the “Somewhat Comfortable” box in regards to this affirmation. I was gratified to see a tangible indication that parents were learning to communicate more easily about spiritual matters with their teenagers. Looking at the comfort scores in aggregate, the parents appeared to also be more open to sharing their thoughts about themselves and about God with others. They appeared to have also grown

in terms of their awareness of the tangible presence of God in their lives as Figure 4 indicates.

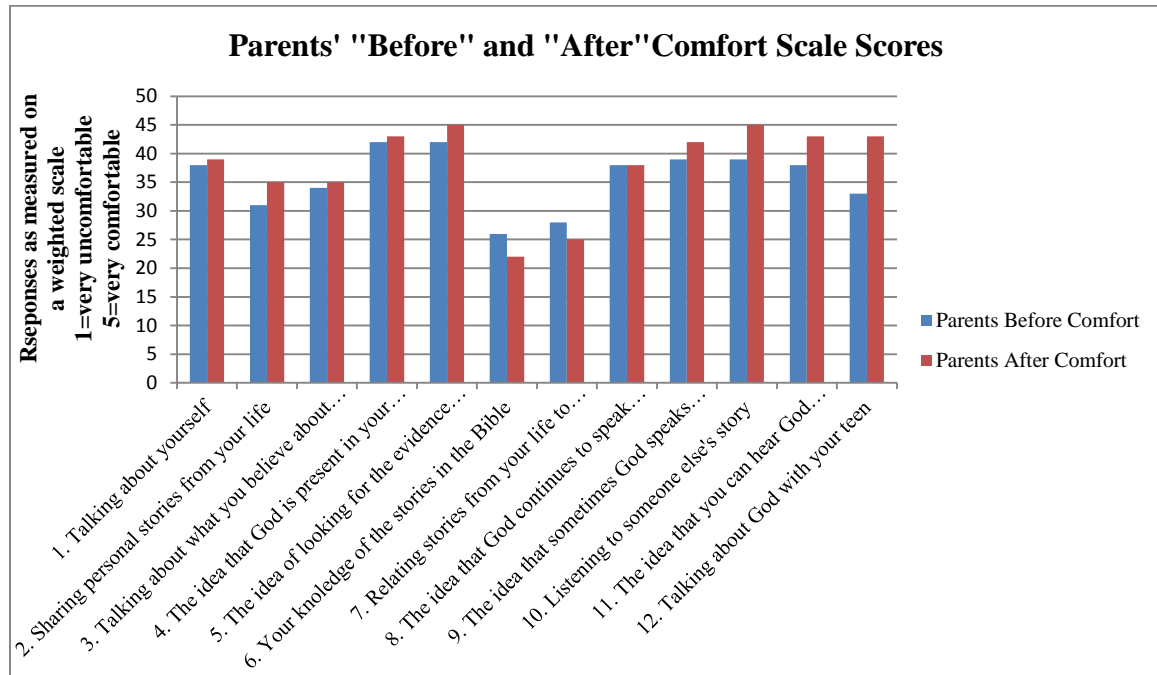


Figure 4: Chart of the “Before” and “After” Comfort Scale Survey Scores of the Parents

The parents’ responses to the interview questions showed an overall increase in self-awareness. Self-awareness is a type of listening—a listening to the interior thoughts and longings of one’s heart. For example, Milton shared these thoughts in regards to the project:

What it did opened my eyes to, was the fact that there are stories going on; there are these vignettes in our lives that might be overlooked but shouldn’t be; I would be more likely to notice them when they’re happening.

Milton also talked about an increased ease with talking and listening in the group setting.

In response to the questions about the experience with sharing a personal story with the other members of the group this person said: “I was sort of hesitant to do that, but the

process of reading the stories in the book, talking about them with the group, hearing other people's insights into the stories, uh, made me less nervous, less self-conscious, less hesitant." Someone else, Samantha, shared how the setting that the group was in, being with other parents and with persons they were familiar with, made it an easy venue to have an exchange of personal thoughts. In brief, these comments also reveal the desire of the parents to gather with each other and enter into a process of reflection in the context of community.

John Navone, S. J., who has written at length about narrative theology, explains how the stories told by Jesus about himself and the stories about God and about ourselves "are told to contribute to our understanding of the Gospel truth, of the Good News of Jesus Christ's life story for us."⁹² The act of listening to stories has the power to embed truth in the heart of listeners in an unparalleled manner. Moreover, Navone confidently states: "We are storylisteners before we become storytellers."⁹³ He then expounds on how "We are storylisteners before becoming storytellers because we are affected both by stories lived and stories told by others before we become capable of putting together our own stories."⁹⁴ Perhaps, the most significant learnings on the part of all of the participants in my project relates to their increased ability to actively "listen." This particular learning became even more evident through the comparison of the "Before" and "After" responses to the open-ended question in the surveys; a question, which prompted the participants to describe a time when they felt spiritually alive. Parents and teens, both, expressed a high level of interest in and engagement with the listening-to-the stories aspect of the project.

⁹² Navone, Joh, S. J., *Seeking God in Story* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 183.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 183-184.

“Open-ended” “Before” and “After” Survey Responses from the Parents

The “Open-ended” “Before” survey responses showed a significant level of transparency on the part of the parents. I was particularly touched by a statement from one of the parents, Christian, who had reacted with some degree of skepticism about the God experiences in the stories that we had explored during the project. In fact, in spite of not being much of a churchgoer Christian wrote: “When I was undergoing a personal crisis, I believe that I heard God speaking to me.”

Two others, Casey and Suzanne, spoke about the effect of music on their experience of feeling spiritually alive. Casey offered: “I can think of many, but here are two [*experiences*]. The first is my first time attending the Easter Vigil at St. Luke’s when Marty sang the Exultet. The second is when I first heard “Quartet for the End of Time,” played in concert at the Eastern Music Festival in 1984. I was spellbound and had the distinct feeling that profound truth was being revealed to me.” Suzanne shared this: “I have felt spiritually alive when I sing particular hymns or songs.” It is worth noting here that they had both also written about similar experiences with listening to music when they had shared their personal stories with the group.

Additionally, three persons expressed how their involvement in church helped them feel spiritually alive and two others expressed how a sense of ‘gratitude’ helped them experience God more fully. These two individuals described what they felt in these ways. The first, Suzanne, wrote: “I feel spiritually alive when I take time to really “see” our children, and when I feel gratitude for the blessings God has bestowed;” the other, Tammy, described a specific moment during a J2A pilgrimage when she felt overcome by a sense of ‘gratitude’, “On the pilgrimage when we were in compline individually

giving thanks and praise to God, I was overcome emotionally with all the blessings God has given me and got too choked up to continue speaking.” Finally, two parents shared the role of nature in helping them experience spiritual connection—Stella, described an encounter with a ram during a visit at the Grand Canyon and Samantha, mentioned the beauty of nature at the beach as well as the loveliness of another natural setting at a specific locale used for retreats. The responses can be seen in a corresponding pie chart, Figure 5, which makes the distribution clear. The chart demonstrates how church involvement, nature, music and gratitude ranked the highest, scoring 27% and 18% respectively.

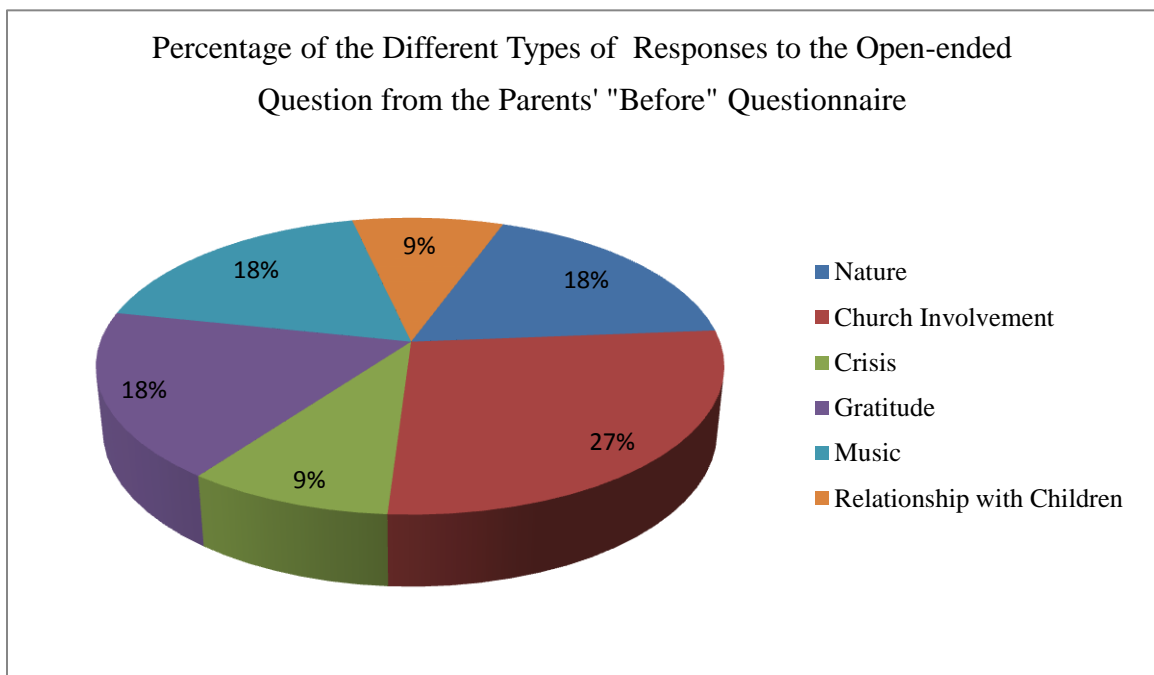


Figure 5: Chart of the “Open-ended” “Before” Survey Responses from the Parents

I must note here that the open-ended question in the “After” questionnaire differed slightly from the one posed in the “Before” survey and was phrased in this way: “Describe a moment when you felt more spiritually alive during the weeks of the project?” Consequently, the types of responses generated were focused more narrowly

on their recent experiences and proved very different than the ones given for the “Before” survey. This time eight categories surfaced: “listen to stories from others,” “readings and discussions,” “group participation,” “writing own story,” “listen to stories from the book,” “L.I.V.E. process,” “did not have an experience,” and “sharing with teen/parents.”

In terms of percentages, the category, “listen to stories from others,” received the highest score, 29%, while, “participation in the group,” received the second highest percentage, 24%. “Writing own story” and “listen to stories from book” received 12% each, and the remaining categories formed 6% each of the total score as can be observed in Figure 6. The high percentage given to the first two categories “listen to stories from others” and “participation in the group” reflects what the participants also expressed with their comments. For example, one of the participants simply wrote “Listening to people’s own stories” while another participant expressed how “listening/sharing with the group at every meeting” was the catalyst to feeling more spiritually alive during the weeks of the project.

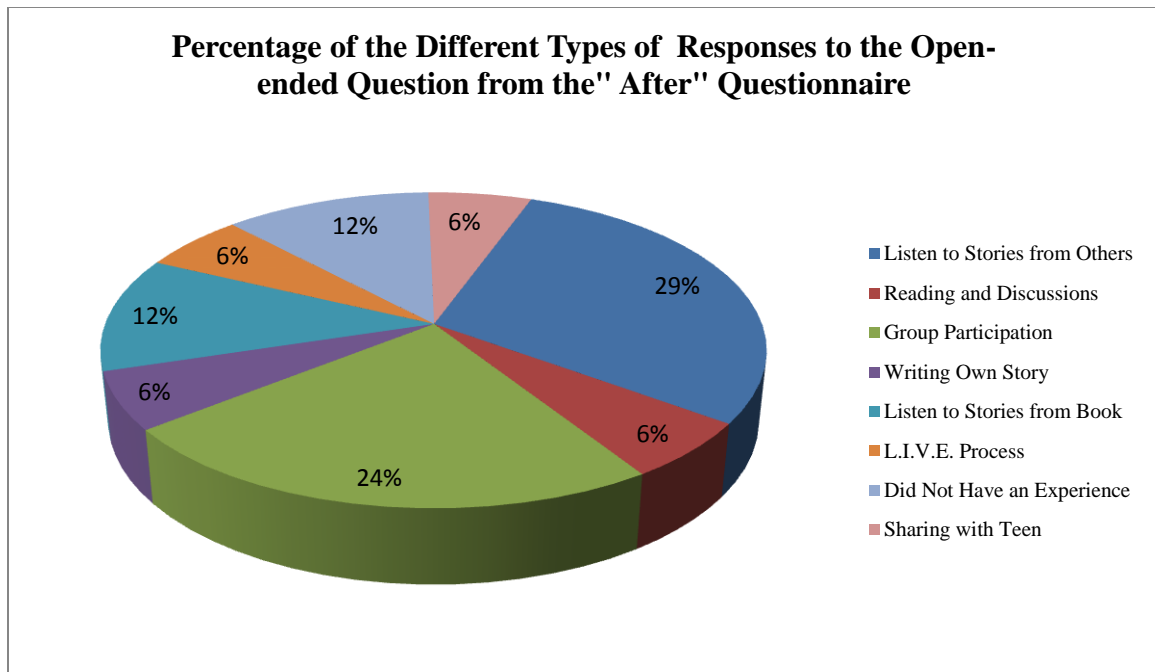


Figure 6: Chart of the “Open-ended” “After” Survey Responses from the Parents

“Open-ended” “Before” and “After” Survey Responses from the Teenagers

The open-ended question, “Describe a time when you felt spiritually alive,” in the “Before” survey from the teens produced four distinct responses: service to others, none, nature, and God’s help. The majority of the teens, four of them, stated that they had not experienced a time when they felt particularly alive spiritually. A young man, Jay, shared a positive experience during a time of service to others and wrote:

I felt spiritually alive when I was delivering Thanksgiving dinner to less fortunate people specifically when we gave food to one lady she opened the door and took the bag of food but it was the way her eyes lit up when she saw us that really made me feel spiritually alive.

Another teen wrote about an experience in nature and offered: “One time I saw a raven cross my path at the Grand Canyon. It made me feel spiritually alive.” Finally, one teen expressed the conviction that her experience of feeling spiritually alive came from a sense of having received God’s help during a test at school. This young person stated:

“When I passed my math final last year I thought God got me through it because I’m very bad at taking tests.” Despite the small participation numbers, seeing the responses in a pie chart highlights the significance of over half of the group having no recollection of a “spiritually alive” experience as is evident in Figure 7.

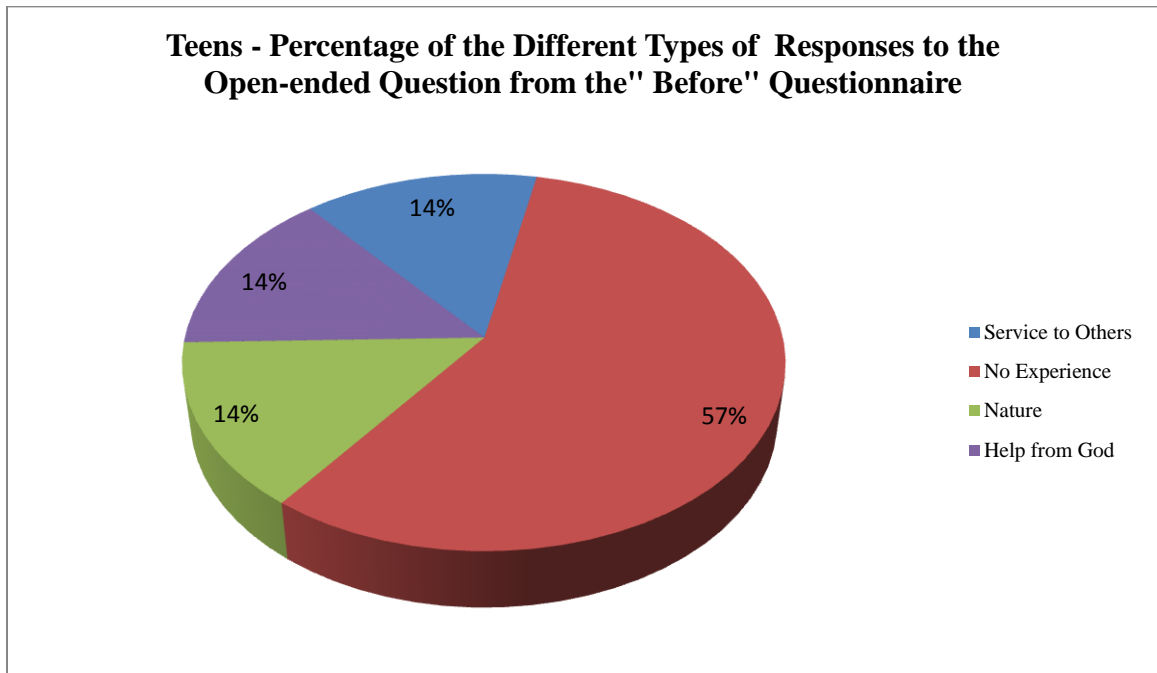


Figure 7: Chart of the “Open-ended” “Before” Survey Responses from the Teens

The teens’ responses to the open-ended “After” survey questions clustered around two of the choices: “listen to stories from others” and “did not have an experience.” Four teens “did not have an experience” while three teens felt most spiritually alive when they were “listening to stories from others.” Figure 8 illustrates this distribution graphically.

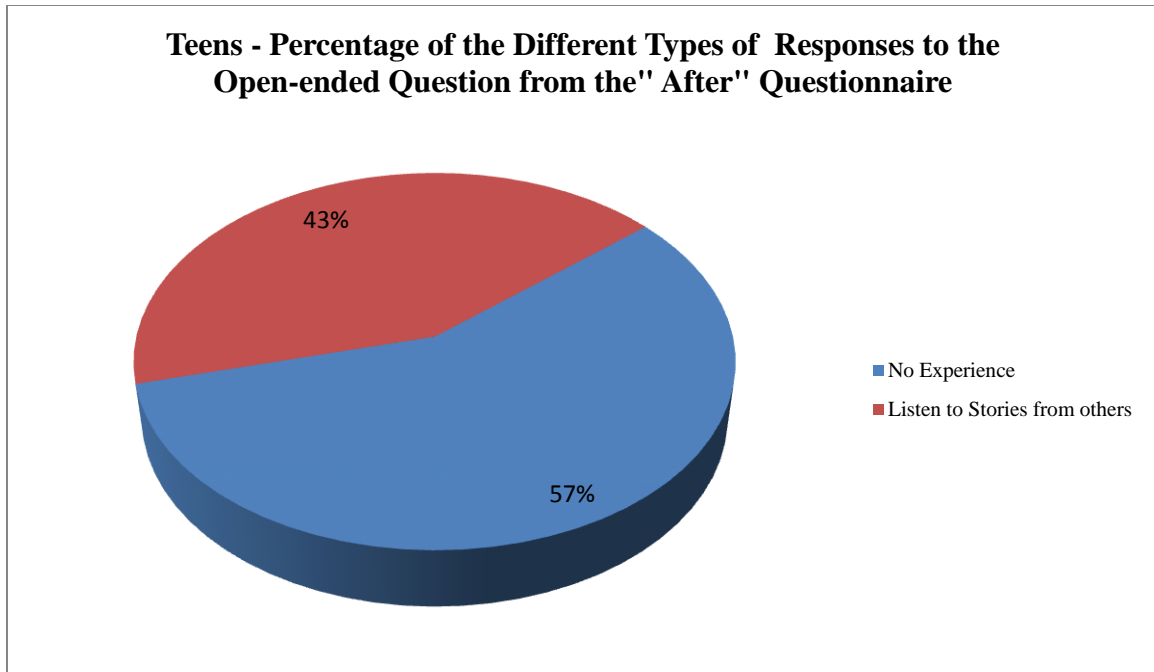


Figure 8: Chart of the “Open-ended” “After” Survey Responses from the Teenagers

The “Before” and “After” frequency survey scores confirmed how, in the same way as the parents had, the teen participants were beginning to benefit from a strengthened ability to listen. I must note, once again, that I used the same protocol to compare the data for the teens as I did to compare the data for the parents. I created charts comprised of a weighted scale. For the “frequency” scores I used a scale ranging from 0-4, assigning the number “0” to “never” and “4” to “almost daily.” I followed the same process for the “comfort” scores but used a scale of 1-5, assigning the number “1” to “very uncomfortable” and “5” to “very comfortable.” Since the fluctuations between the results would be best highlighted when seen side by side, I created two charts with the aggregate scores from the “Before” and “After” questionnaires to show the differences between the responses to the two surveys. I will only use these particular charts of aggregate scores to describe the results from the responses of the teens. More detailed information can be found in the Appendices.

Looking at the “frequency” scores of the teens it was interesting to note an increase in the frequency with which the teenagers “listen to a personal story from a family member” as well as a decrease of the frequency with which they “share or listen to personal stories from a friend.” I was surprised by this result because I entertained the assumption that teenagers are more apt to talk and listen to their friends than to their family members. I wondered if, perhaps, this modest change could be due to the natural increase in interactions between the teens and their parents during the project. Yet, there was also a slight increase to the scores for question 6, which is about the frequency of conversations between the teens and their friends about God or religion. Hence, according to the results the teens appeared to have become keener in listening to a personal story from a family member as well as in discussing matters related to God with a friend as can be seen in the data relating to questions 3 and 6 in Figure 9.

The comparison between the frequency scores also revealed, to my surprise, that a higher number of teens were now reporting reading stories directly from the Bible, in response to question 9—a score that shows, by far, the most significant increase. What is more, a higher number of teens seemed to have gained a greater ability to find the intersection between the spiritual realm and their daily lives in relation to questions 11 and 12 as is shown in Figure 9.

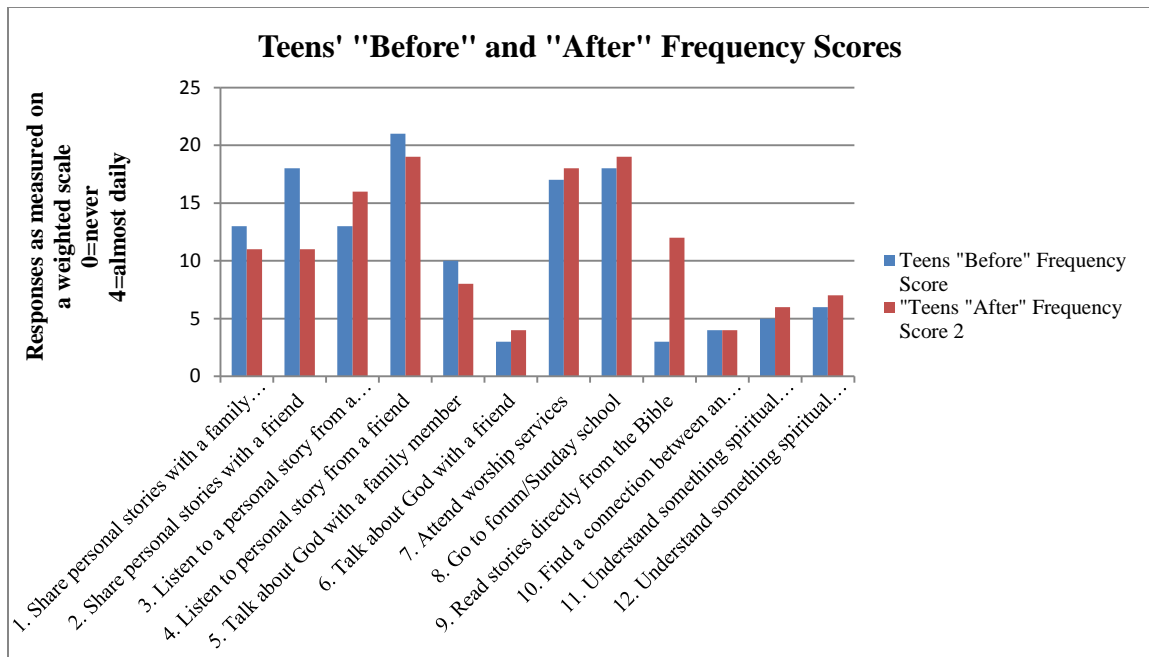


Figure 9: Chart of the "Before" and "After" Frequency Scale Survey Scores of the Teens

The "Comfort Score Comparison" further affirmed that the teens were beginning to learn to connect matters of spiritual import to their daily lives. Such learning could be seen in the evident increase in the scores for questions 7, 8, and 9, as seen in Figure 10. While the teens were becoming more comfortable with relating the stories of their lives to the stories in the Bible and they were showing more openness to the concept talking about themselves and of listening for and hearing spiritual lessons through the words of others, the data also shows a decrease in their comfort level with talking about their belief about God. I was surprised to see the decrease in the responses to questions 4 and 5 which specifically seek to gauge the teenagers' level of awareness of the presence of God in their lives.

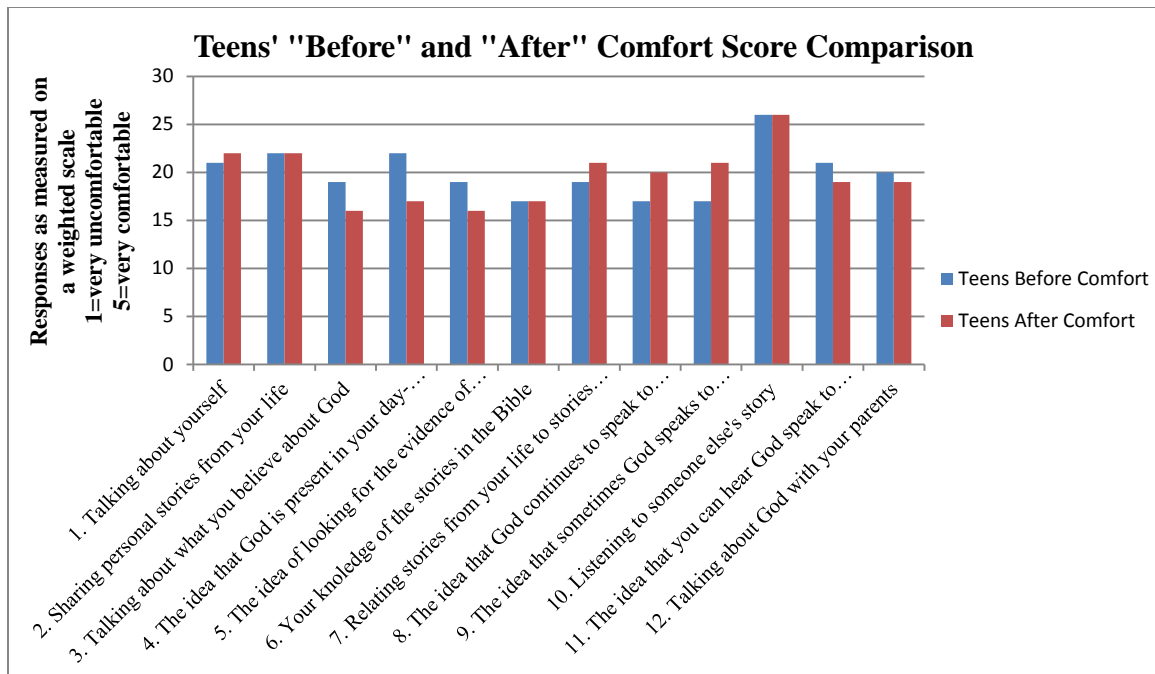


Figure 10: Chart of the “Before” and “After” Comfort Scale Survey Scores of the Teens

This higher level of comfort on the part of the teens in terms of realizing how spiritual life pertains to daily life was also reflected in the conversations that took place during the personal interviews. I was able to interview six of the seven teens and I was pleasantly surprised to find out firsthand that, overall, the teens liked the project. Their increased awareness about spirituality and ordinary life came through a variety of responses. A young man, Colie, shared how “the L.I.V.E. system was very helpful,” and reported having begun to use the process when listening to day-to-day stories. Joseph, who is thoughtful and measured with his speech, commented about the L.I.V.E. process being “like a big puzzle,” and he also shared this: “When you link the stories to the Bible you can do that in your everyday life.” By contrast, Lou-Ann, who is energetic and sporty, was rather succinct as she said: “God’s in everything!” She also talked about the entire project as being helpful in preparation for confirmation, and she stated: “It will definitely help me write my faith story for confirmation because I was totally in the dark

about the faith story like, now that I read the stories, I am kind of like, Oh, I think I know what I am doing now.” Kristin, a creative young woman, discovered the joy of remembering her own experiences and said “I never knew how many good experiences I had” while Lisa, who is bright and fast-speaking, talked about how “it made me think about stuff,” and Jay, a very outgoing and talkative fifteen year old, expressed how the project was “a real anchor for me” especially at a time when he admitted to being at a stage of “faith indecisiveness.”

Summary

In summary, while the overall number of participants and surveys will not allow for generalization, there are some findings that are noteworthy. Perhaps the first and most important discovery is the existing and obvious thirst that the majority of the participants have for building deeper relationships with others in an intimate group setting. In formal and informal ways, and throughout the process, I heard many of the parents as well as the teenagers express how much they enjoyed being together in the group. They gave voice to this thirst by talking about the joy they experienced in listening and sharing their personal stories with each other. One young man, Jay, said the following during the personal interviews: “I learned something about my father, something about everybody there.” Colie shared how it was “cool to listen to stories kind of like yours!” A parent, Stella, even suggested having more sessions in the future because “people want to talk!” I too felt much more connected to these parents and teens who I had known for so many years. The project gave me the privilege of knowing them even better on account of the personal stories that they had so readily shared with our

group. Without a doubt, the thirst for building deeper relationships stands out to me as the first of two primary themes that emerged from this thesis project.

The second important theme that emerged during the project is the desire on the part of the participants, especially the parents, to have a more extensive knowledge of the words contained in Scripture. During the session almost everyone talked about how difficult it was to make connections with stories from the Bible as is required by the L.I.V.E. process. I must note here that one of our teenagers, Jay, proved to be the most adept at making wonderful connections with Scripture. In spite of this general sense of not knowing the Bible very well, a small number of the participants persisted and were able to relate the stories that we read in the book to relevant stories from the Bible. It was revealing that the majority of the participants found the exercise difficult, and one of the parents, Tammy, the mother of two teenagers, made this touching remark during the personal interviews: "I realized some lacks. I don't know the Bible. I don't have a deep well to draw from." I must also admit that, on a few occasions, I too felt at a loss to readily make connections with the Scriptures in spite of my extensive knowledge of the biblical narrative. Some of the stories the participants told were limited in imagery and emotive content which may explain why it was particularly difficult for me to move toward biblical narratives and metaphor.

In addition to these two significant themes the results from the surveys showed that the parents became more at ease with sharing about themselves and about God. They also became more comfortable with the concept of the tangible presence of God in their lives. Most importantly, the degree of comfort on the part of the parents with talking about God with their teenagers had increased. The teenagers likewise appeared to

become keener listeners. Moreover, the young people reported attending worship as well as Sunday school more regularly; they were also reading stories directly from the Bible more often. Overall, a number of the participating young persons seemed to have gained a greater awareness of the joy of cultivating faith through storysharing, greater comfort with reading stories in the Bible, and the increased ability to relate the spiritual to their daily lives.

Most of the teens and parents liked the project. They reported that they had fun and found the project to be worthwhile. In the process of conducting this thesis project I deepened my skills as a researcher in a congregational setting—a skill that I had begun to develop when I conducted an ethnographic study of this congregation two years earlier. I learned how to design a survey instrument and how to develop appropriate scales for responses to the items. I further developed the skill of conducting personal interviews, keeping good notes, recording and transcribing the conversations, and managing audio files. Most importantly, I realized once again the enrichment that good relationships with others brings to my life—the fabric of wonderful relationships with parishioners and colleagues. I felt grateful to all the people involved; grateful to build on the work that Baker had done; grateful for the opportunity to learn more about the power of sharing stories for building faith with a delightful group of parishioners; grateful for the great privilege that I had, as a priest, to get to know them more deeply and to hear the longing of their hearts. I learned in a more profound way that storysharing continues to have the potential of being one of the most powerful ways to cultivate our faith.

CHAPTER 4: The Vital Role of Stories, Community, and Scripture

Clemens Sedmak invites Christians and, especially pastoral leaders, to “do theology” as a way to follow Jesus. He invites us to consider the ministry in which we are engaged in relation to its local setting, and he advocates for the construction of “little theologies” as an effective way to meet the needs of people in their specific contexts.

Thus, he writes:

Little theologies are theologies made for a particular situation, taking particular circumstances into account, using local questions and concerns, local stories and examples as their starting point. People should be able to recognize themselves in little theologies.⁹⁵

While Sedmak has in mind the various cultures that exist in the world, his remarks seem apropos to small group ministry, especially to groups that gather for the purpose of sharing and reflecting on stories. Small groups can be considered to be microcosms in their own right, and as such they have need for “little theologies.” The questions and concerns that tend to surface in a small group gathering will likely differ depending on the context and needs of the people who are part of the group. For example a group of parents of toddlers will have different concerns and questions than a group of parents of teenagers. Moreover, parents of toddlers who live in poor neighborhoods will express different needs than parents of toddlers who live in rich neighborhoods. The members of a small group also have an opportunity to see themselves through extra lenses—seeing themselves through the stories that may closely relate to their own stories or through the

⁹⁵ Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity* (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 119.

feedback that they receive from each other. Hence, the practice of sharing stories offers people of faith, in community, an avenue for nurturing their faith.

Stories and community are linked together and work in tandem for the benefit of the participating members of a group. Sedmak points out the value of using stories in relation to “doing theology.” He writes:

Stories connect to people’s experiences. True stories have depth and authenticity that can be communicated, shared, and remembered. They become part of and reveal who people are. Sharing stories is an essential element in building community. It takes subtlety, intuition, and sensitivity to choose the right local stories and then to tell them well.⁹⁶

As Sedmak says, stories and community contribute to our growing in awareness about ourselves and about God, and this, I believe, makes them essential for our spiritual health.

The concept of self-recognition that Sedmak stresses here is akin to David Gortner’s suggestion that “...we only come to know ourselves and to develop a sense of identity from what others reflect back to us—from what we witness as our impact on others.”⁹⁷ Gortner further supports the notion of the need we have for each other to grow by expounding on the psychotherapeutic model known as “mirroring.” Gortner explains how:

A healthy and whole self develops in relationship with others who act as mirrors to us, showing to us and naming for us what we have just showed them. It begins simply with mothers and fathers echoing, mimicking, and expanding on their infants’ actions and emotional expressions. It continues through childhood, adolescence, and all our adult lives with parents, elders, counselors, mentors, and confidantes who hear us and respond to our heartfelt expressions in kind.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ibid, 154.

⁹⁷ David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, Incorporated, 2008), 55-56.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 56.

When we practice doing “little theologies” in the context of a safe and intimate group, our “mirrored” interactions serve to deepen our sense of self. Moreover, this type of communication helps us clarify what we think, feel, and believe.

Gortner goes a step further to correlate “mirroring” with the truth of God’s presence in us and our identity. He claims that “When we name God’s presence, we reflect back to others what we see as something deeply true about their being. Without this mirroring, people run the risk of forgetting who they really are in the eyes of God.”⁹⁹ The “mirroring” action and effect that Gortner calls our attention to can also serve to expand our recognition of God. The act of “mirroring” may be particularly powerful among Christians because the Holy Spirit imparts to the followers of Christ a special ability to ‘see’ and to be transparent. The Apostle Paul affirms the Spirit’s gift of transparency and deeper vision to believers in relation to their ongoing transformation into the image of Christ in this way: “...the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.”¹⁰⁰

Our need for community may be, therefore, closely related to a need to see in each other the Spirit of God and the signs of transformation that the Spirit is effectuating in each of us. Our need may be to see the Face of God or experience the Presence of God through our own presence to each other. James E. Loder explains how “To say that Jesus Christ is the Face of God is to make reference to the long tradition and many-faceted

⁹⁹ Ibid, 57.

¹⁰⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:17-18, NRSV.

metaphorical uses of “the face” in Scripture to designate the personal presence of the holy God. In both Greek (*prosopon*) and Hebrew (*panîm*) the word for face also means “presence.”¹⁰¹ Furthermore, Loder states that “...when we are speaking of the Face of God, we are speaking humanly and existentially to the longing in persons for a cosmic ordering, self-confirming presence of a loving other, a longing for that which defines what it means to be human and makes us over in its image.”¹⁰²

Human beings are social animals. We have a need to be and to function in relationship with God and with each other. We have a deep desire to form and nurture relationship. God created the potential for us to enjoy the blessing of relationship with one another when God declared “It is not good for the man to be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.”¹⁰³ As Sedmak, Gortner, and Loder have shown we need the companionship of others to learn, grow, and thrive. Such learning allows us to gain profound freedom—freedom based on finding our identity and purpose in Christ—freedom, which Anne E. Streaty Wimberly would characterize as spiritual liberation.

Wimberly writes:

Liberation results when we choose to link our lives with God’s Story revealed in the person of Jesus Christ and know ourselves as called to make that Story come alive in our lives. We see the difference between living that doesn’t work for us and life in positive relation of God, self, others, and all things. We allow the Story of God and the good news of Jesus Christ to direct our lives. This is liberation through religious transformation. As a result of this transformation, we enter into a relationship with God and act on our knowing ourselves as called to be disciples of Jesus Christ in ways that free us from acquiescence to a dead-end or “boxed-in” existence to our embrace of and act on God’s hope and purpose for our lives.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1998), 119.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰³ Genesis 2:18, NRSV.

¹⁰⁴ Anne E. Streaty Wimberly, *Soul Stories: African American Christian Education*, revised edition (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), 9.

Our gatherings and our interactions, especially when they take place in a context of a small group where we can share and reflect on our stories and also locate them in the larger perspective of the biblical narrative, allow for the development of profound communication, understanding, and transformation.

As discussed in the previous chapter one theme that clearly emerged out of my thesis project is a greater awareness on the part of the participants of their longing to build deeper relationships with each other. On account of the project, most of the participating group members discovered the joy, wisdom, and stimulation that result from intentionally gathering for fellowship, theological reflection, and storysharing. Thus, the members of the group may have realized together how, in the words of Westerhoff, “experience is foundational to faith.”¹⁰⁵ Such productive interactions also confirm Westerhoff’s claim,

To be concerned about others’ faith is to share our faith with them in word and deed, and to permit them to share their faith with us in similar ways. We can share and respond, but the character of another person’s faith cannot be determined. What we can do is provide an environment of sharing and interaction between faithing selves. The responsibility of Christian parents is to endeavor to be Christian with their children, and the responsibility of all Christians is to strive to be Christian with all others.¹⁰⁶

The purposeful interactions fostered in an intimate group setting and at home allowed the majority of the participants to share faith and to gain, in the process, a greater awareness of their own yearning for deeper human interaction. It was a valuable beginning.

The practice of gathering for intentional fellowship, theological reflection, and shared stories has been a part of the journey of believers since the inception of the

¹⁰⁵ Westerhoff, *Will Our Children*, 92.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 93.

Christian faith. In fact, Jesus modeled these specific ways of building personal relationships during his earthly ministry. Early on, Jesus formed a modest circle of people who would interact with each other frequently and would learn to perceive greater spiritual truth by means of stories and reflection. Most often, Jesus interacted with his disciples by telling a story with the aim of helping them reflect on the spiritual ramifications involved. For example, at the beginning of chapter 18 in the Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus tells his disciples a short object story to answer this question, which they had posed: “who is the greatest in the Kingdom of heaven?”¹⁰⁷ In this instance, Jesus points to a child to help his disciples understand the virtue of humility. Jesus shared numerous stories with his disciples in the form of object lessons, analogies, and parables, and, in this way, helped them to reflect about life theologically.

The practice of storysharing was an integral part of the life of Jesus and his disciples. Reflection and conversation about God, as a part of daily life, is the point that Long highlights when he says:

We will talk about God, but we will always talk about God in the midst of life—that is, we will be in the midst of life, and God is in the midst of life too. Like Jesus’ own parables, so full of farmers and seeds, parents, and children, weddings and funerals, baking bread and feasting at table, our faithful talk will be about work and play, parents and children, feasting and fasting, faith and doubt, sickness and health, cruelty and kindness, war and peace, being born and growing old, living and dying.¹⁰⁸

In explaining how the practice of reflecting and talking about God is an essential aspect of the daily life of all Christians, Long emphasizes our need to have a wider vision: “We need, then, to think of ourselves as more than just “church people,” as more than people who go about our daily business and who have a quiet, almost secret compartment in our

¹⁰⁷ Matthew 18:1, NRSV.

¹⁰⁸ Long, *Testimony*, 20.

lives where we are religious. We cannot be human, much less faithful to God, if we keep silent. We must begin to think of ourselves—dare we claim the name?—as *witnesses*.”¹⁰⁹

When believers express their faith through words they actually clarify and strengthen what they believe. Hence, the apostle Paul insists that “... one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.”¹¹⁰

Similarly, Long affirms the power of the spoken word for faith:

We don't just say things we already believe. To the contrary, saying things out loud is a part of how we come to believe. We talk our way toward belief, talk our way from tentative belief through doubt to firmer belief, talk our way toward believing more fully, more clearly, and more deeply. Putting things into words is one of the ways we acquire knowledge, passion, and conviction.¹¹¹

I believe, therefore, that the thesis project that I designed and implemented with the help of the parents and teenagers of St. Luke's is a project based on a core principle of the Christian faith. This thesis project was beneficial to the spiritual lives of most of the parents and teenagers who participated in the project. To a measurable extent, the core objective of the thesis project was realized: to help parents and their teenagers become more aware of the presence of God in their daily lives and be more articulate in talking about their respective journeys of faith. I have shown that teenagers and their parents can grow in awareness of the divine presence in their lives and become more articulate about their faith, and a similar project designed to be longer in duration could potentially yield greater results. My project has demonstrated how parents and teenagers can cultivate their faith by learning how to reflect theologically on the ordinary stories of their lives and how to share these stories and reflections with others. Hence, a number of the

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 20.

¹¹⁰ Romans 10:10, NRSV.

¹¹¹ Long, *Testimony*, 6.

parents and teenagers who have participated in my thesis project gained the capacity to learn to access and deepen the conviction of faith more readily, and, in agreement with the language of Long, they also became more adept at being “witnesses” of the faith.

The new degree of faith expression and articulation that these few teenagers gained is particularly noteworthy because, as I have already established, teenagers have a great deal of difficulty with articulating their thoughts about faith even if they have been exposed to religious education since childhood. We saw in the first chapter that the research of Smith and Denton indicates that a large number of American teenagers (Smith and Denton had interviewed over 250 teenagers) can appear to be woefully inarticulate when it comes to expressing their faith beliefs in words. In their view this inability is due, in part, to inadequate Christian education and faith formation. Smith and Denton shed light on this issue with these comments:

We do not believe that teenage inarticulacy about religious matters reflects any general teen incapacity to think and speak well. Many of the youth we interviewed were quite conversant when it came to their views on salient issues in their lives about which they had been educated and had practice discussing, such as the dangers of drug abuse and STDs. Rather, our impression as interviewers was that many teenagers could not articulate matters of faith because they have not been effectively educated in and provided opportunities to practice talking about their faith. Indeed, it was our distinct sense that for many of the teens we interviewed, *our interview was the first time that any adult had ever asked them what they believed and how it mattered in their life.*¹¹²

Their observations highlight the need for communities of faith to be intentional about creating various opportunities that can foster dialogue about faith between members of the community, but especially between youth and adults. More specifically, Smith and Denton point to the importance of being intentional about asking people questions about their faith and to ask these questions particularly of young people.

¹¹² Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 133.

In this regard, Mercer¹¹³ offers practical insights. She highlights the importance of asking adolescent girls to talk about their faith as well as the importance of listening to them carefully. Mercer writes: “One of the best ways to learn about the spiritual lives of adolescent girls is to ask them—and then to listen, carefully and attentively, to the variety of ways in which girls talk about their religious lives.”¹¹⁴ Moreover, like Long, she asserts that people clarify their beliefs through verbal expression. She goes on to say: “Sometimes people do not know what they think or how they feel about something until they talk about it. Over and over in these interviews, I watched girls figure out what they thought by telling me. This suggests to me that adults, by listening carefully to girls, can participate in helping them sort out what their perspectives, feelings, and experiences mean to them.”¹¹⁵ In this way, Mercer echoes Moschella who underscores how careful ethnographic listening as pastoral practice “offers a path toward deep, loving, and empowering listening to persons, congregations, and other religious agencies.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, she affirms: “Ethnographic listening begins with relationships to individual persons. When we ask individual research participants to reflect deeply on their faith practices, we give them an opportunity to name their experience, to find new words to describe it, and to become more conscious and intentional about their theology-in-action.”¹¹⁷

The ability to articulate one’s thoughts or story to someone else seems to play a role in the life development of teenagers. Felicity B. Kelcourse, who recapitulates a

¹¹³ Mercer, 2008.

¹¹⁴ Mercer, *Girltalk/GODTALK*, 9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁶ Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice*, 254.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

number of faith development theories for the purposes of her own writing, relates how “In middle and late adolescence, the capacity for abstract reasoning, independent thought, and reflection comes into its own.”¹¹⁸ She also mentions that “Erikson notes that adolescents need to be seen, heard, and affirmed by their communities.”¹¹⁹ She, therefore, explains: “The faith of late adolescence tends to be somewhat narcissistically focused on the self; faith in oneself is best discovered in a community of faithful others.”¹²⁰ Moreover, in relation to the importance of social interaction in the context of human and faith development Kelcourse concludes: “All development takes place in a social matrix in which reality is defined in and through relationships.”¹²¹ The sharing of self through story seems to correspond to the developmental stage that James W. Fowler terms as “*synthetic-conventional faith*,” which “typically begins to emerge in early adolescence.”¹²² Fowler uses this term because, at this stage, faith is synthetic because it involves “a drawing together, an integration into one, of that viable sense of selfhood that we have come to call identity”¹²³ and, faith is conventional because “one is embedded on one’s faith outlook, and one’s identity is derived primarily from membership in a circle of face-to-face relations.”¹²⁴ What is more, Fowler explains how synthetic-conventional stage of faith “has to do with the drawing together of one’s stories, values, and beliefs into a supportive and orienting unity. In this stage a person struggles with composing a “story of my stories”—a sense of the meaning of life generally and of the meaning and

¹¹⁸ Felicity B. Kelcourse, *Human Development and Faith: Life-Cycle Stages of Body, Mind, and Soul* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 79.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid, 103.

¹²² Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 45.

¹²³ Ibid, 47.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

purpose of one's own life in particular."¹²⁵ Succinctly, Kelcourse summarizes this particular stage of Fowler's faith development in this way: "The *synthetic-conventional faith* of stage 3 first emerges in adolescence and is found in many adults. Identifying a "personal myth" can provide means of navigating the complex world that extends beyond home, friends, and school or work."¹²⁶

The stage theory, which Fowler advances about adolescents, sheds light on two important aspects of my thesis project. First, the difficulty that the teenagers in my project encountered with articulating their stories of faith seems completely natural since it correlates with Fowler's description of the synthetic-conventional stage, and such difficulty appears to be a natural part of the course of human faith development. It is interesting to note here that Fowler's assertion contradicts Smith and Denton who suggest that the inarticulate nature of teenagers is due to a lack in Christian education. Second, it seems particularly important to develop programs that offer the opportunity for teenagers, at this stage of their development, to engage in reflection and storysharing with others because teenagers are at a stage in their development where they are engaged in the process of creating "personal myths." Hence, reflection in community would have the potential of facilitating this process for the teens in finding their "story of stories." In addition, human development has a physical aspect. A "personal myth" necessarily correlates to a pathway in the brain. As I have already shown in chapter one, Barbara Bruce makes the connection between story and the wiring of the brain and affirms: "When you encourage students to tell their faith stories, they must use various parts of their brain to connect the words in sequence. Stories have the ability to communicate an

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Kelcourse, *Human Development and Faith*, 46.

event through the filters of personal experience and emotion.”¹²⁷ Hence, a story-based program of theological reflection has the potential to help teens develop their “personal myth” in a variety of ways. What is more, according to the results of my research, I can also affirm how, regardless of gender, teenagers have a need to express their own stories and to be heard; and, how they enjoy listening to the stories that transpire out of the lives of other people—stories from the lives of other teens and adults alike. When I asked the teen participants in my project about what they enjoyed best about the project, all of them expressed their enthusiasm about the storysharing aspect of the project. The teens communicated their views in a similar fashion, uttering phrases such as: “sharing the stories;” “I liked the stories;” “I liked writing the stories and listening to them at the end;” “I could do that for a long time.”

The discipline of gathering for fellowship and reflection became a hallmark of the early Christian communities as the *Book of Acts* aptly describes. These early Christian believers “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”¹²⁸ Furthermore, Luke, the presumed author of the *Book of Acts*, also reports how the believers “spent much time together in the temple... broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.”¹²⁹ Since then, and throughout the ensuing centuries, countless people of faith have continued to intentionally gather in large and small groups for fellowship and worship. Hence, my project gave the participants an experience of this

¹²⁷ Bruce, *Our Spiritual Brain*, 69.

¹²⁸ Acts 2: 42, NRSV.

¹²⁹ Acts 2: 46, NRSV.

long-standing Christian practice of reciprocal care, which then kindled their desire to continue to mutually nurture their relationships.

Upon reflecting on the themes that surfaced from my thesis project, themes that I restated earlier in this chapter, I began to realize that the project participants' longing for deeper fellowship could have been heightened by the deficiency of regular fellowship gatherings that was evident in the parish at the time when I was implementing this project. For example, a few years back the congregation used to have a thriving small group ministry. Groups would intentionally gather regularly for dinner. In addition, the parish had not yet found effective ways of offering meaningful support to parents of young children and teenagers. Hence, the lack of opportunity for parents to meet regularly with each other or with other members of the parish could have been a contributing factor to their keenly felt need for fellowship and their positive responsiveness to my project.

Interestingly, the longing for fellowship expressed by these parents could have also been a reflection of the needs of various people in the wider community. A few years ago, in 2012, when I was serving as chair of the Communications committee of the parish, I became aware of the fact that a few members of our surrounding community were feeling a profound sense of isolation from their neighbors. I discovered this detail because, that year, the committee had decided to conduct two focus group discussions to find out the needs of the people in our area. To our surprise, "isolation" emerged out of these focus group discussions as a primary theme. The focus group members offered that it was hard to meet people and to engage in group activities in our community, and one

person aptly added: “people are in their own little world.”¹³⁰ I, therefore, wonder if the thirst expressed by the parents in my study was in some way a reflection of the apparent yearning for more meaningful communal interactions that was also felt in the wider community.

Patricia O’Connell Killen and John De Beer frame the process of theological reflection in terms of a human journey in the quest for meaning. They affirm how “For human beings the drive for meaning is stronger than the drive for physical survival.”¹³¹

Furthermore, they offer this apt comparison about the reflective process:

The movement toward insight is like a journey. We travel from experience through feeling to image to new ideas and awareness that can change and enrich our lives.¹³²

In this way, Killen and De Beer highlight the wisdom that can be gained through the process of practicing theological reflection, and several of the participants in my thesis project seemed to have increased in such wisdom. Their newly-gained wisdom is evident in some of the comments they offered in response to one of the interview questions about important lessons they might have learned because of their participation in the project.

“When you link the stories to the Bible you can do that in your everyday life,” said Joseph, a teen participant in the program. Colie said: “the L.I.V.E. system was very helpful. I am using it when I am listening to stories.” Kristin expressed how “I learned that when we did all the stories it really made me think...” and, Jay exclaimed: “I learned that writing is a good way to vent; how powerful writing something down can be.” One of the parents said: “The stories gave us connection to the Bible.” The L.I.V.E. reflection

¹³⁰ Saint Luke’s Communications Committee. *Monthly Committee Report*, 2012.

¹³¹ Patricia O’Connell Killen, and John De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection* (New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 45.

¹³² *Ibid.* 77.

process they had engaged in, both, as a small group and as a family at home, had helped the majority of the participants make this “movement toward insight.”

The practice of taking the time to share stories in the midst of fast-paced and busy lives may appear to be a luxury that few people can afford. Nonetheless, as Baker eloquently asserts,

“Practicing the art of slowing down to listen to our lives is powerful at any stage of life. When we do so, we can begin to see the way our deeply felt values align with something new that wants to be born in the world.”¹³³ Several of the comments made by the project participants during the personal interviews attest to the significance of taking time to listen to our personal stories. For example, one of the teenagers, a fourteen year old, Joseph, talked about his experience of the project in these terms: “very interesting and a new experience” and “is something you don’t hear about,” and, fifteen year old Kristin stated “I liked the stories; reading and remembering my own stories.” By sharing stories from their own lives these teenagers had discovered something new and valuable.

The comments made by the parents also reveal the importance of taking time to share stories and reflect on them. One parent, Milton, talked about the new sense of awareness brought about by the project, a comment that I already highlighted in chapter three but is worth reiterating: “what it did, opened my eyes to, was the fact that there are these stories going on, there are these vignettes in our lives that might be overlooked but shouldn’t be.” And, “I would be more likely to notice them when they’re happening.” Milton also exclaimed in regards to the storysharing aspect of the project: “I really

¹³³ Baker, *The Barefoot Way*, XIV.

enjoyed that!" "that was one of my favorite parts in the project." Lastly, he offered this insightful comment, which aptly reflects the remark that I quoted from Baker's book in the previous paragraph:

Our lives are too fast-paced. It brought home just another reason why stopping and reflecting, and not just moving on to the next thing, the next event is just so important; to be able to consider things, to think of things and take the time to think about things that have been said or actions that have occurred, and what the implications of that are instead of saying "Oh, I got to go," and not just to the next thing.

Overall, the participants in my project offered a range of remarks suggesting that taking the time to engage in this type of exercise is well worth the effort because of the significant likelihood of gaining new insight. What matters is to be intentional about engaging in the process and to be sensitive to listen. Furthermore, insights come, as Killen and De Beer claim when, "We enter reflection open to the possibility that our interpretive frameworks are in need of revision and will be changed by our reflection and experiences."¹³⁴

To restate, a second important theme emerged out of my project which is the participants' desire, especially the desire of the parents, to have a more extensive knowledge of the Bible. This theme is not new to the People of God. This theme can be heard in the wise exclamation of the psalmist who wrote, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path,"¹³⁵ in recognition of the wisdom the words of Scripture offered for his life. This theme permeates other passages in the Bible extolling the importance of the Scriptures for the life of believers. For instance, Isaiah depicts the eternal nature of the word that the Spirit imparts through the Scriptures in contrast to the

¹³⁴ Killen and De Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 50.

¹³⁵ Psalm 119:105 (KJV).

ephemeral quality of human life—contrast that should serve as a great motivation to believers to pay close attention to and seek an understanding of Holy Writ:

A voice says, “Cry out!” And I said, “What shall I cry?” All the people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades but the word of our God will stand forever.¹³⁶

The authors of the Gospel accounts convey an eternal nature to the words of Jesus also.

For example, Jesus asserts in Matthew: “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”¹³⁷ The Letter to the Hebrews reveals how utterance from God has the ability to affect the heart or conscience of a person: “Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”¹³⁸ The desire of the participants to have the ability to draw from a deeper inner well of scriptural references reveals their profound sense of reverence for the biblical literature as well as a new awareness of their felt need to connect more closely with God.

According to the recent *Reveal* study, conducted by Greg L Hawkins and Cally Parkinson out of Willow Creek Church and later administered across denominations, the desire to connect more closely with God is one that is felt by a significant percentage of churchgoers. This need seems manifest in the expressed dissatisfaction of these congregants. In fact, Hawkins and Parkinson have discovered that “on average, 26 percent—or about one of every four congregants—are either stalled, dissatisfied with the

¹³⁶ Isaiah 40:6-8, NRSV.

¹³⁷ Matthew 24:35, NRSV.

¹³⁸ The Letter to the Hebrews 4:12, NRSV.

church, or both.”¹³⁹ Furthermore, they address how their “...research confirms what church leaders have known for centuries: the Scriptures are the key to breaking through the barriers encountered by both the stalled and the dissatisfied. Those who are stalled *need* the Bible; those who are dissatisfied *want* the Bible.”¹⁴⁰

The Scriptures impart to us the stories of a great number of persons whose lives were shaped by their own experiences and stories in relation to the story of God. Their stories help us, readers and hearers of the Scriptures, find entry points in the biblical narrative where we can connect to their stories and find some reflection of our personal and collective experiences. As I have already mentioned, we have a prime example of how the nurture of faith can happen through the influence of storytelling in the context of the ministry of Jesus who gathered an eclectic group of people around him and helped them become spiritually formed through the power of shared stories. Hence, a number of Christian educators have emulated the storysharing example of Jesus by creating effective narrative-based methods of Christian formation such as *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* and *Godly Play*. Kelcourse affirms that “In relation to others, we learn about their reality as they become real to us, sharing their stories and life experience in close proximity. And we develop a *sturdy sense of reality* when our lives are sufficiently experienced with others who love, affirm, rub, contact us in ways that give us confidence about what to expect next.”¹⁴¹

Jesus helped his disciples find the “sturdy sense of reality” which Kelcourse has described so well. His disciples developed a deeper sense of reality on account of the

¹³⁹ Greg L. Hawkins and Cally Parkinson, *Move: What 1,000 Churches Reveal About Spiritual Growth*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 171.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 187.

¹⁴¹ Kelcourse, *Human Development and Faith*, 212.

stories that they shared in relation to each other in the context of their daily lives and in relation to God. The intervention that I proposed and implemented was designed to foster learning in an intimate environment where parents and other parents as well as parents and their teens could be in regular and intentional contact with each other. In the same way as Kelcourse has proposed the project assisted them with finding appropriate and shared connections through the experiences they had lived in common. A number of the participants found such connections. For example, in the “After Surveys” a parent commented: “Listening to others in the group share their faith stories offered an insight to their spiritual worlds and fostered a spiritual connection with them.” Two others expressed how they felt spiritually alive with these statements: “In the presence of the fellow group participants,” and, “Listening/sharing with the group at every meeting.” In response to the same question two of the teens wrote: “When I was listening to others’ stories about faith,” and, “I liked hearing other people’s spiritual stories.” Moreover, the increased ease with which the project participants had begun to relate the stories that were shared during the group sessions with stories from the Bible suggests that they were collectively learning to grow and to internalize deeper truths. Hence, the parents and the teens were learning alongside each other, and alongside others, as Kelcourse aptly describes: “Getting a useful grip on reality, especially emotional reality both in self and in others, does not come automatically. It is the result of a process of thousands of ongoing internalizations of the truth about self and others that happens within the context of intimate human interactions.”¹⁴²

Learning through human interaction is also a principle that governs theological reflection, which is a point that Baker highlights when she writes: “Usually done in

¹⁴² Ibid, 214.

community, theological reflection is a hallmark of groups around the globe who have set out to change the world in order to make it a more faithful representation of God's *shalom* (the Hebrew word for God's vision of wholeness and peace.)"¹⁴³ This thesis project demonstrated that parents and teenagers can engage in theological reflection through a structured process of lifestory-sharing and reflection. Edward O. DeBary advances that "Thinking theologically means looking at the richness of the human experience to discover its meaning by recognizing the transcendent factors that connect us to one another and to the divine milieu."¹⁴⁴ By practicing theological reflection, the majority of the participants in my thesis project discovered the benefit of learning more about themselves, about their faith in God, and about God together in community. They discovered deeper meaning out of seemingly ordinary stories from their lives and from the lives of others, and their experience reflects DeBary's claim that theological reflection takes place in the midst of life and in community.

¹⁴³ Baker, *The Barefoot Way*, XVIII.

¹⁴⁴ Edward O. DeBary, *Theological Reflection: The Creation of Spiritual Power in the Information Age* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 5-6.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Reflections

This thesis project focused on the potential that teenagers and their parents have to learn to cultivate their faith individually through storysharing in community. I highlighted this potential by stating the following:

Many Christian teenagers in the United States and their parents have difficulty articulating their personal experiences of faith, finding it challenging to express the degree to which they are aware of the manifest presence of God in their daily lives. I contend that learning how to reflect theologically on the ordinary stories of their lives and learning how to share these stories and reflections with others can help teenagers and their parents grow in awareness of the divine presence in their lives, and help them become more articulate about their faith in the larger context of the Christian narrative. Therefore, I propose that a program designed to assist teenagers and their parents with the practice of talking about and reflecting theologically on the ordinary stories that they experience will help them recognize and name the presence of God at work in their lives.

The thesis project helped me confirm the unleashing of this potential.

In the introduction and first chapter I underscored the difficulty that a number of teenagers and their parents at St. Luke's experience when asked to articulate their journeys of faith. I also pointed out that this predicament is not unique to this parish since research shows that others throughout the church have had a similar experience. Many people, especially parents, often lack confidence in their religious knowledge and are reluctant to speak about faith, even with their children. Research, especially the research of Anderson and Hill affirms the need to educate parents in order to have religiously-healthy youth. Brian William Winter's doctoral dissertation asserts: "While parents want to pass on their faith, many are not comfortable enough with their own beliefs, let alone know what the Bible is and is not, to feel comfortable enough to share their faith. They are worried that they do not know enough and as a result, they are not

sharing much of their faith within their homes. This desperately needs to change.”¹⁴⁵

The findings of my study have led me to arrive to a similar conclusion, and that the need to transform such a predicament is, indeed, critical because, as I have already established in the first chapter, the research of Bengston, Putney, and Harris¹⁴⁶ shows that faith is primarily transmitted through the family.

This project demonstrates that parents and youth benefit from structured opportunities to talk about faith with each other. To increase parental confidence as faith mentors for their children, the church must provide support for faith practices in the home. The church has a challenging and a good opportunity to find new ways to help parents, indeed all people, continue to be faithful to the mandate to “make disciples of all nations” while helping insecure parents and often uninterested teenagers deepen their relationship with Jesus in the midst of daily life.

The call on the lives of Christian disciples is to offer an ongoing witness by words and deeds about the greatness and faithfulness of God. Therefore, the faith of Christian believers of all ages must be nurtured and developed in order to enable them to offer such witness with depth and conviction. When children are baptized, their parents promise to disciple them in the faith. The witness of parents to their children is greatly diminished when parents lose the confidence to speak about their own journey of faith to their children. The intervention that I designed and implemented offered the participating parents tools to more fully incarnate the promises they made at their children’s baptism, particularly, “Will you be responsible for seeing that the child you present is brought up

¹⁴⁵ Brian William Winter, *Bringing Our Faith Into the Home*, 76.

¹⁴⁶ Bengston, Putney, and Harris, 2013.

in the Christian life and faith?”¹⁴⁷ This was designed to help parents and their teenagers learn how to share their faith through storysharing and theological reflection. I set out to open a window of opportunity for spiritual conversation between parents and their teenagers, and I anticipated that the participants in my project would learn how to look at their lives within the larger context of the biblical narrative. Ultimately, my desire for them was to grow in their awareness of the presence of God at work in their lives and to be better equipped at articulating and sharing their own journeys of faith.

This project showed that adults and teenagers are open to learning in new ways; that both, parents and teens, have the potential to respond positively to a fresh approach to faith formation rooted in loving relationship. As a result, the participants became aware of their desire to have closer fellowship and build deeper relationships with each other. They also experienced new motivation and joy, in the process, and they saw the wisdom of practicing theological reflection and sharing personal stories in community. Eight out of the ten parents and six out of the seven teenagers who participated in the project had a positive reaction to the process of learning in the company of others. They enjoyed the project and especially the part of the project when they listened to and shared their personal stories with each other. The fact that one teenager said how it was “...cool to listen to stories ...kind of like yours...,” and how a parent expressed the desire to increase the number of sessions in the future because “people want to talk!” are examples of the delight that the majority of the participants felt about the project even if two parents and one teenager expressed dissatisfaction with part of the content of the project.

Such a high degree of positive reaction to this project indicates that it is possible to engage parents and teenagers in lively conversation about faith. I have learned that

¹⁴⁷ *Book of Common Prayer*, 302.

adults and teens want to share their personal experiences. Parents want to talk about faith with their teenagers and teenagers want to listen to the stories that their parents and other adults as well as the stories that their peers have to share about themselves in connection to faith. The process of discovery is surely challenging but worthwhile as one of the teens aptly expressed during the personal interviews: “I can never start off a story...but once I do it, I like... it just flows...that’s how it was with this...” Furthermore, this teenager also said with delight: “I never knew how many good experiences I had!” The comment of another teen exemplifies how we want to discover and share our own stories with others by saying: “I liked writing the stories and listening to them in the session.”

Song, who makes a case for reading “Story” in place of the “Word” in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, writes: “Theology, if it has to do with God, must have to do with stories, since God is the God of stories, since “in the beginning was the Story, and the Story was with God, and the Story was God.” That is why God cannot but love stories.”¹⁴⁸ In this way, Song reaffirms the centrality of story to our human understanding of God. Furthermore, he asserts that “God’s is the power of the redeeming love that works in all sorts of ways to bring about well-being in us and in human community. And many stories testify to this redeeming power of God’s in our life and in the world. How could theology be anything other than stories of testimony of it?”¹⁴⁹

During the project I saw God’s power at work in our small community of parents and teenagers—the same power that I had personally experienced in the context of the small community of my family as I was growing up. I am left with a profound sense of gratitude for the stories that the members of my family so readily shared with me when I

¹⁴⁸ Song, *In the Beginning Were Stories*, 6.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 65.

was young. Their stories, which so often testified about the presence of God in our lives, helped me to catch a glimpse of the active redeeming power of God in the day-to-day life of my family. These stories began to teach me to see daily life in the larger context of the divine narrative.

My research suggests that faith communities need to offer more intergenerational Christian formation programs that include these two important components: storysharing and theological reflection in the context of personal interactions. Storysharing and theological reflection in the context of personal interactions between adults and teens is especially powerful for the nurturing of the faith of young people. In the book, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*, Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster state how “Significant friendships between youth and mature Christian adults constitute another kind of holy ground for youth ministry.”¹⁵⁰ They also explain that “Such relationships provide emotional spaces that bring teenagers face to face with Godbearers who communicate God’s affirmation and invitation to them and who make it safe to shed protective footwear to stand barefoot before God.”¹⁵¹ Parents are in a unique position to be effective “Godbearers” to their teens and to the teens of fellow parents. We need to create space and help families find the time to have these conversations because, as Anderson and Hill claim, “Reflective and attentive conversations have the potential to influence the lifestyle, character, faith, and values of youth. Most families today need the active support of the church to name, claim, and find roadmaps to the holy ground of life-affirming conversations. This process of finding the roadmap and

¹⁵⁰ Kenda Creasy Dean, and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room, 1998), 85.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 86.

enjoying the discovery of personal conversation takes time.”¹⁵² Conversations are vital to faith formation. Parents and teenagers need to speak and listen to each other’s stories in order to grow in faith.

Storysharing and theological reflection through personal interactions matter! Our words make a difference in our lives and in the lives of others, and Long affirms how “Our words are a main pathway on which our faith goes forth into the world.”¹⁵³ We use words to make meaning and to express that meaning to others. Faith communities, therefore, need to create opportunities to help parents reclaim the great role that is theirs by right to nurture the faith of their children.

In addition to the importance of the sharing of personal stories and reflections in the presence of others, this project has revealed how Christian parents deeply desire for Scripture to play a central role in their lives. The participants, especially the parents, expressed this desire in many ways during the project: during the group sessions, in their evaluations, and during the personal interviews. In her evaluation one mother wrote that she “would be happy to continue with a Bible study/class.” A few others suggested adding a Bible passage reading component to the project in the future. More specifically they suggested finding biblical passages that have clear connections to the particular stories that the group was engaged in reflecting upon during the sessions. The suggestion to establish a Bible study beyond the scope of the project offers an excellent way for such a group to move forward and continue to build community and acquire more knowledge of the biblical narrative. I would highly recommend the inclusion of follow-up Bible study sessions to persons who may consider implementing a similar project at their

¹⁵² Anderson and Hill, *Frogs Without Legs Can’t Hear*, 124.

¹⁵³ Long, *Testimony*, 155.

parishes. If I were to do this project over again, I would most likely include a short Bible study as part of the weekly sessions, and I would continue with weekly Bible study sessions after the conclusion of the project. However, I would be reluctant to find specific biblical passages that clearly connect to the stories because it would defeat the purpose of allowing the participants to make these connections on their own. The desire of the participants in my study to engage Scripture and to look for ways to apply scriptural wisdom to their lives confirms that there is a need for intentional adult Christian formation in the congregation.

The project participants' desire to increase in knowledge of the Bible is in keeping with the high priority that the church, especially the Episcopal Church, gives to the authority of Scripture in relation to the Christian life. The reading of Scripture is central to the liturgy and catechism of the Episcopal Church. For instance, in answer to the question: "Why do we call the Holy Scriptures the Word of God?" the *Book of Common Prayer* affirms: "We call them the Word of God because God inspired their human authors and because God still speaks to us through the Bible."¹⁵⁴ Moreover, the appointed prayer for the Sunday closest to November 16 for the congregations throughout the Episcopal Church underscores the priority of Scripture:

Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which you have given us in our Savior Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.¹⁵⁵

This prayer beautifully captures the expressed desire of the participants in my project to know the Bible better. In addition, the Episcopal Church bears the responsibility to

¹⁵⁴ *Book of Common Prayer*, 853.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 236.

respond to this need, which is a need that has been expressed in the context of the wider church. I have already shown how the *Reveal* study underscores this evident need in the church at large, and, in response, Hawkins and Parkinson propose: “Reflection on Scripture Is the Most Powerful Spiritual Practice [leading to healthy growth of believers] for Every Segment”¹⁵⁶

Reflection on Scripture has even more significance in light of the results of the statistical comparison that Hawkins and Parkinson have done. They write: “And that’s only part of the story. Because when we statistically compare the responses of those who take the REVEAL survey, of all the personal spiritual practices, we find that Reflection on Scripture is much more influential than any other practice by a significant margin.”¹⁵⁷ Hence, they suggest to church leaders: “...there may be nothing more important we can do with our time and effort than encouraging and equipping our people in this practice.”¹⁵⁸

Christian Scharen asserts how “...pastoral leaders are first of all *disciples* themselves and their work is to foster lively discipleship through their ministries. In order to do the work of fostering discipleship, pastoral leaders must find faith as a way of life compelling and be able to model it in their own life as disciples.”¹⁵⁹ This project has highlighted for me the importance of thinking theologically as a way of life. Scharen is convinced that thinking theologically is “...crucial to a full understanding of pastoral excellence.”¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, he affirms this about the aim of his book: “By encouraging

¹⁵⁶ Hawkins and Parkinson, *Move*, 117.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 117-118.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 119.

¹⁵⁹ Christian Scharen, *Faith as a way of life: A Vision for Pastoral Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 41.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 41.

the practical skill of thinking theologically about everyday matters, this book aims to help pastoral leaders (and those with whom they work in their ministry) find a way to live faithfully in the world.”¹⁶¹ I take Scharen’s words to heart, and it is my hope that I was able to lead by example and also to help the parents and teens who participated in my project to grow stronger spiritually.

The experience that I have gained through this project has helped me better understand the needs and desires of the parents and teenagers to whom I was providing pastoral leadership at the time of this project. In the process I learned to also understand the needs of numerous parishioners in the church at large. This project has confirmed that storysharing in light of theological reflection, a practice that I had begun to experience as a child, is an effective way for believers to cultivate their faith. Yet, above all, the power of the everlasting Word of God, which finds its best expression in the person of Jesus Christ, remains beyond compare:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. From his fullness we have all received grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Ibid, 41.

¹⁶² John 1:1-5, 14, 16-18, NRSV.

APPENDICES

Letter of Invitation to parents to participate in the thesis project sent as an email attachment.

December 15, 2013

Greeting line,

As you already know Tuck and I ask everyone who is in the process of preparing for confirmation (adults and youth alike) to write the story of his or her faith journey. This is an important aspect of confirmation preparation since the very act of writing generally helps us to think more deeply about the things that are close to our hearts. The process of writing about one's faith often seems difficult. Hence, the writing process engages us to wrestle with the questions that pertain to faith, which is why we insist on this requirement for confirmation candidates, whether a person eventually decides to be confirmed or not to be confirmed.

In addition, I am happy to say that I am working towards finishing the last phase of my studies for the Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) program at the Virginia Theological Seminary (VTS). As such, I am charged with the task of conducting a research project that will help me support and write a coherent and effective thesis, which is part of the requirement for this doctoral degree program. Since, I have observed that our teens who prepare for confirmation often feel anxious about having to write and tell their faith stories, I thought of designing a thesis project that could potentially help ease the anxiety that often accompanies the story-sharing aspect of our confirmation preparation program. Hence, the project that I have opted to do is one that involves J2A parents and their teens. The project is designed to engage both J2A parents and their teens in a process of theological reflection on the everyday-stories that emerge out of their lives. I would like to start the project in January 2014, and I am writing to invite you and [*your teen – name of teen here*] to participate in this short-term project. My hope is for this project to be of great benefit to J2A families, as well as to the parish and me.

I am excited about this project and expect it to be fun. I want to share with you here a brief scope of what your participation would entail.

- 1) Once parents and teens agree to participate in the project each person will be asked to sign an informed consent form—a step that is basic to the protocol of research.
- 2) All participants (parents and teens) will be asked to respond to an online questionnaire prior to the beginning of the project and also at the end of the project sessions. In addition, all participants will be asked to also take part in a

final interview at the end of the project – interview that will be conducted either by telephone or in person.

- 3) Parents will be asked to participate in six consecutive group sessions where they learn and practice a process of theological reflection. Then, parents will be asked to engage their respective teens in the same process at home. The teens will be asked to participate along with their parents in the sixth and last group session. Each group session is expected to last 1 hour and 15 minutes, except for the last session, which may take up to 1 hour and 30 minutes, depending on the number of participants.
- 4) The sixth and last session will be videotaped, and is meant to be used only for the purposes of my research.
- 5) The main book that will be used for the project will be provided “on loan” to each participating family (one book per family). However, each participant will be asked to provide and keep an individual journal to write reflections and stories. The writing of short personal reflections and stories will be an integral aspect of the process of theological reflection.
- 6) In the hope of maximizing the number of participants per session two separate sessions will be offered weekly, beginning **January 6, 2014**. One session will be offered on **Mondays from 5:30-6:45 p.m.** and another on **Thursdays from 7:00 p.m. to 8:15 p.m.** Participants would be expected to attend only one of these sessions each week (either on Monday or Thursday).

In order for this project to be successful I will necessarily need a strong core group to participate. My hope is that you will all want to and be able to take part in this project. Please do not hesitate to ask me to answer any questions that you may have.

Thank you for taking the time to consider your engagement in this project. I look forward to your response. I would very much appreciate your answer by Thursday, December 19, 2013. Please know that, whatever you decide about your participation in this project, I continue to be honored to serve you as priest and associate rector.

In Christ,

Ketlen

Memo to J2A Parents

To: J2A Parents Project Participants

From: Ketlen

Date: Sunday, January 05, 2014

Dear Parents,

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in my Thesis project. Included in this folder is the “Informed Consent” form as well as a few copies of the “Before” survey that I wrote to you about in my initial letter of invitation. Please take a moment to read and sign the form and to fill out the three-page survey. Each participant in your family (including your teen) should also fill out a survey. Please bring all of these documents back with you when you come for the first session this week.

I am excited about this joint endeavor that we are about to undertake. I look forward to meeting with you this week and over the course of the next six weeks.

Sincerely,

Informed Consent

Researcher: The Rev. Ketlen A. Solak

Last Name(s) of Participating Family: _____

Institution: Virginia Theological Seminary, Alexandria, VA

Purpose of the Project: This project aims to offer parents and their teenagers, especially teenagers who are preparing to be confirmed, the opportunity to articulate stories about their lives and to learn how to recognize the presence of God in their lives by means of theological reflection. Although storytelling is a large part of our lives we do not often readily share our stories with the intention of looking for the grace and providence of God in our day-to-day experiences. In addition, this project seeks to develop and establish a short program of story sharing and theological reflection as part of the overall confirmation preparation curriculum of the teenagers at Saint Luke's.

Procedures: The researcher will offer six sessions for the Journey to Adulthood parents (parents of teens who are in the eighth and ninth grade) at Saint Luke's Church (Alexandria, VA.) The first five sessions will be with parents only and the sixth session will include their teens. The sessions will encompass learning how to reflect theologically by following the precepts of the L.I.V.E. (Listen, Immerse, View It wider, Explore) process as delineated by Dori Grinenko Baker in her book *The Barefoot Way: A Faith Guide for Youth, Young Adults, and the People Who Walk with Them*. In turn parents will be asked to go through the process at home with their teens. Each participant (parents and teens) will be asked to fill out "Before" and "After" surveys, and also take part in short interviews at the end of the project. The researcher may use a voice recorder during sessions to help the researcher capture the content of the sessions more accurately, and the last sessions will be videotaped for that same purpose. Participation in this project is voluntary.

Time: Two weekly sessions will be offered on Mondays and Thursdays, beginning January 6 and January 9, 2014. The Monday sessions will be held from 5:45 to 6:45 p.m. and the Thursday sessions from 7:00 to 8:00 p.m.

Consent: By signing this form you are agreeing to participate in this project; you are also giving your consent for your teen to participate. In addition, you are giving your permission to the researcher to include in the writings related to her thesis any pertinent comment (paraphrase or direct quote) that you or your teen may offer during this project with the understanding that the names of the participants will not be used. You also agree to keep confidential the comments that other participants may share during the sessions. Thank you for taking part in this project!

NAME (Signed): _____ Date: _____

NAME (signed): _____ Date: _____

“Before” Survey Questions for Parents & Teens

How often do you: Share personal stories with a member of your family?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Share personal stories with a friend?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Listen to a personal story from a family member?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Listen to a personal story from a friend?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you talk about God or religion with a family member?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you talk about God or religion with a friend?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you attend worship services?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you go to Forum/Sunday school class?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you read stories directly from the Bible?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you find a connection between an experience you had and a story from the Bible?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...How often do you believe that you understand something spiritual by listening to the story that a family member or a friend is telling you?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...How often do you believe that you understand something spiritual through a story from the Bible?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

How comfortable are you with: Talking about yourself?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Sharing personal stories from your life?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Talking about what you believe about God?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that God is present in your day-to-day life?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea of looking for the evidence of God's presence in your day-to-day experiences?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Your knowledge of the stories in the Bible?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Relating stories from your life to stories in the Bible?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that God continues to speak to people today?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that sometimes God speaks to you through everyday experiences?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Listening to someone else's story?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that you can hear God speak to you through the story of someone else's experience?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

For parents only: How comfortable are you with talking about God with your teen?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

For youth only: How comfortable are you with talking about God with your parents?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

Describe a time when you felt spiritually alive.

“After” Survey Questions for Parents & Teens

How often do you: Share personal stories with a member of your family?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Share personal stories with a friend?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Listen to a personal story from a family member?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Listen to a personal story from a friend?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you talk about God or religion with a family member?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you talk about God or religion with a friend?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you attend worship services?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you go to Forum/Sunday school class?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you read stories directly from the Bible?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...Do you find a connection between an experience you had and a story from the Bible?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...How often do you believe that you understand something spiritual by listening to the story that a family member or a friend is telling you?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

...How often do you believe that you understand something spiritual through a story from the Bible?

Almost daily Weekly Monthly Occasionally Never

How comfortable are you with: Talking about yourself?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Sharing personal stories from your life?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Talking about what you believe about God?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that God is present in your day-to-day life?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea of looking for the evidence of God's presence in your day-to-day experiences?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Your knowledge of the stories in the Bible?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Relating stories from your life to stories in the Bible?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that God continues to speak to people today?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that sometimes God speaks to you through everyday experiences?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...Listening to someone else's story?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

...The idea that you can hear God speak to you through the story of someone else's experience?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

For parents only: How comfortable are you with talking about God with your teen?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

For youth only: How comfortable are you with talking about God with your parents?

Very uncomfortable Somewhat uncomfortable Neutral Somewhat comfortable Very comfortable

Can you describe a moment when you felt more spiritually alive during the weeks of the project?

Evaluation

What do you think about the number of the sessions (7)?

What do you think about the length of the sessions (1 hour for the first five sessions and 1 ½ hour for the last two sessions)?

What do you think about the weekly story assignments?

What do you think about the book that was used (*THE BAREFOOT WAY: A FAITH GUIDE FOR YOUTH, YOUNG ADULTS, AND THE PEOPLE WHO WALK WITH THEM* written by Dori Grinenko Baker)?

What do you think about the “LISTEN, IMMERSE, VIEW IT WIDER, EXPLORE (L.I.V.E.)” process of theological reflection?

What was most helpful?

What was unhelpful?

What could have been done differently?

Would you recommend that these sessions be offered to future J2A/Confirmation parents and teens?

Are there any other suggestions that you would like to make?

Description of the Group Sessions

Week One

We began our gatherings with prayer, welcome, and introductions. During the initial sessions I collected the necessary materials, such as the 'Informed Consent Forms' and 'Before Surveys' that I had sent to the participants in advance of the first meetings. After collecting the papers, I distributed the books, which I had stamped with the name of the parish as well as an assigned number in advance of those first meetings. I needed to keep track of the books that I would lend to each family. Since a few of the participants did not bring back their papers, I made alternative arrangements with them to collect their forms at a later time. After completing these formalities, I reviewed with the group the *raison d'être*, as well as the scope of the project; we also reviewed the schedule of sessions and the assignments for each week. It was also important for me to explain the details of the L.I.V.E. theological reflection process, and to take the time to clarify and answer any questions from the participants—I had to make sure that everyone present understood what was expected of the group. I reminded the participants about the need to purchase a notebook or journal to keep track of their thoughts and reactions to the stories. We adjourned with prayer.

Week Two

During the second week our session took place on Thursday, January 16, 2014 and eight of the parents were present. Before discussing the stories that they had to read that week, we began by talking about the L.I.V.E. process. I wanted to know their thoughts about the method. Several participants pointed out that certain parts of the L.I.V.E. process were easier than others. Several participants found these initial stories

difficult while a number of others thought the stories were fun. Many were surprised by the difficulty that they had encountered in their effort to find Scriptural references in connection to the stories. Others reported feeling touched by the personal aspect of the stories and were able to find some parallel experiences in their own lives.

As we began to explore the stories together and applied the L.I.V.E. theological reflection process to the stories, the participants began to become more engaged, and most were very open with their comments. As a result, we delved a bit deeper. One parent expressed her total surprise by the faithfulness of her family in having fully participated in the process that week; a surprise that she punctuated by saying “We hate stuff like this!” She continued by indicating how they had, for the most part, been “able to come up with something” in terms of making biblical connections. During our reflection on the stories that evening this parent was able to bring up an apt and interesting connection between one of the stories and the story of Ruth and Naomi. The same parent also expressed how this project had come at a good time for her family and was helping the members of her family reconnect spiritually. She explained how, when her kids were younger, that they used to say their devotions together as a family; however, this familial practice had been set aside as the children got older and busier.

A few parents expressed some dismay at how they, as well as their teens, found it difficult to do the “View it Wider” part of the theological reflection process. One asked “what might help to prime the pump,” and another suggested that “it would help to have cheat sheets.” One mom, whose teenager was apparently ‘resistant’ to doing the project assignments, shared a funny anecdote. She reported how her teen had apparently learned for the first time about the ethnicity of Jesus. This teen had texted a friend to say “Did

you know that Jesus was a Jew?" This mom response to her teen's lack of knowledge simply added: "it's wonderful if the project is triggering connections." A few more parents also offered how their teenagers were responding to the assignments as they were doing them at home. For example one parent reported that the stories had kept the attention of her teen, and another expressed that it was "helpful to have a structured framework to have that kind of conversation." Finally, a couple of parents reported how the project would be useful to their teens in terms of helping them learn to tell their faith stories. One said that her son was beginning to understand about the concept of finding out "where is God in that?" while another simply said "this will definitely help the teens write their stories for confirmation."

Week Three

Seven parents came to our session on Thursday, January 23, 2014. The group's assignment included five stories for that week whose titles were: *The Bus*, *Flying*, *My First Dirty Word*, *The Stars*, and *My Mom's Room*. We immediately delved into the stories and the process of theological reflection. All the parents got quickly engaged. Everyone participated by taking a turn to express his or her reactions and feelings about the stories that we read and reflected upon. One parent reported that she and her teen were able to connect to the first story about the bus. In fact, her teen had been able to make a connection between an element in that story and another element in the book, *Night* by Elie Wiesel, which her teen was reading as an assignment for school. Moreover, she and her teen felt a lot of empathy for the child involved in the story. Another parent expressed how his son had commented that the lesson learned from that story was about cliques—about mean and nice people. This parent brought up the

"Golden Rule" verse into play—"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." Another parent echoed that her son "did not see God working" in this particular story, while another parent said that her teen talked about the way that the kids at school often behave in the lunchroom at school—how "some friends were not talking to her." This teen had also mentioned the importance of reaching out to a friend who may be sitting all alone.

The next story, "*Flying*," evoked "tons of memories" for one person. Another felt "an element of surprise." Someone commented about "what can happen when you are not so busy" while another lamented about how "kids feel busy" and the "need for vacation" and the lack, these days, of "carefree time." Most of the members of the group talked about the difficulty of finding Bible stories that could relate to this particular story.

The next story, "*My First Dirty Word*," evoked a certain level of irritation on the part of several members of the group. One person mentioned that he and his son had thought of "Eve" in relation to that story. Another mentioned "Judas betraying Jesus" while another thought of "Jesus and the woman caught in adultery," and that, in the end, "none of us are perfect."

The next story, "*Stars*," seemed to provoke some 'parental panic' for many because the story was about a young woman, Kathleen, who allowed herself and her best friend, Jasmine, to be convinced by another mutual friend, Joseph, to drive with him to a deserted and unknown place in the mountains while Kathleen's parents were out of town. One parent did not have the same reaction, however. He felt that "Kathleen was yielding to Joseph in faith" without knowing the outcome. Another parent wondered why Kathleen trusted Joseph. This parent, who had accompanied our teens as a mentor on

their most recent pilgrimage found a connection to the behavior, which she called "assimilation," that our teens had displayed during the pilgrimage. A father expressed that he could relate the story to the story of the "Wise Men." I must note here that in each chapter in the book Baker includes a section that either explains a Christian practice or offers a reflection for people to think about. The Ignatian spiritual practice of the Examen is featured at the end of this story. One of the parents commented about how much she liked the Examen and said that it was something that was "nice to do at the dinner table" with her family.

The last story that we read that evening, "*My Mom's Room*," was written by a seventeen year old teenager, Melanie, who wrote the story about an experience that she had while her mom was in the process of dying—her mom died during her middle school years. Melanie recalled how her mom, who had seemed so close to death the day before, rallied the next morning by sitting up in her bed, alert and smiling. This experience was a great gift to Melanie but one that also baffled her because it appeared to be so surreal.

This story evoked a lot of profound reactions from the members of the group. One mom said that this story was her favorite, and one that she could relate to because her own parents were now elderly. She also related this story to the experience of the death of her husband's mom. Moreover, she shared how this story made her and her family get in touch with their own mortality, which was not all that comfortable for them, and, in fact, extremely uncomfortable for their teenager son. The husband/father chimed in that this story "was more real" for him than the other stories we had read. He shared that he "could see God clearly at work by giving this family a second chance ...God stopped the process of death—really cool ...Resurrection!" Another parent, a father, also

exclaimed "Resurrection." He could relate this story to the experience of "the dread of loss" that the disciples felt during the ordeal of Jesus and his crucifixion, and how "after the crucifixion, then the Resurrection gave it back." A mom related that she and her daughter thought Melanie was dreaming, and that both her teenagers could relate this story to the "Raising of Lazarus." Another parent, a father, shared that he had intentionally left a blank page in his journal. A mom talked about the fear that this story evoked in her; particularly the thought that it is "hard to think of leaving." She also remembered her experience with the loss of her father. Another parent exclaimed with gratitude "each day is a gift," while another shared the short story of her grandmothers' death as well as the death of a beloved pet.

Week Four

For this fourth session the group encompassed seven parents, as well as a youth mentor, who had agreed to help me with the videotaping part of the project that I had planned to incorporate during our last two sessions. He came to this session with the aim of testing his equipment. The reading assignment was slightly different for this session because it included a part where the participants had to tell a story that they had either sought out from someone else that week or a story that they had experienced along the way either that week or a while back. The other two parts of the assignments consisted of two stories; one story was entitled "*No Swimming*," and the other "*Hakuna Shida*," which, Baker explains, is a Swahili phrase that can be translated as "it is no worry."

We began the session with our general hellos and prayer, and then I asked everyone about their readiness with the assignment for the day. Several people had a story to share but three others did not. Two could not think of a story while the other was

still 'catching up' with the assignments. He had also been sick for a couple weeks and so he was able to be absolved for his lack of readiness. The parents who were prepared began to share the stories that they had in mind. The first story was about a personal friend who had lost her father suddenly many years ago and the additional stress that this friend had suffered because her mother demanded that she travel very late at night from wherever she was to be back 'home' with her mother. The second story was about someone's co-worker who had adopted a child from another country. The last story was a type of parable about the experience that parents and teens go through as they apply for college. Each story elicited a rich conversational exchange. The story about the adoption, in particular, brought out deep immersion and reflection. For instance, one person thought of the admonition of Jesus to us to "love one another." Someone else shared about her own experience with adopting a child. She related how there really was no difference between her love for her biological child and her love for her adopted child. The person who related that story felt inspired and challenged to be a better parent to his own kids. Another person thought about how we are adopted by God into God's family. I also chimed in that Paul uses the concept of adoption to help us see how God loves us with the same love that God has for Jesus.

Once we had fully explored all of these stories, I steered the group toward reflection on the two assigned stories. I suggested that we read the "*Hakuna Shida*" story first because of the serious nature of the story. A nineteen year-old woman, Adela, wrote this piece about her experience in Tanzania the summer before writing this story. She recounts the traumatic experience of an 11 year old boy, Michael, who saw firsthand, along with his younger brother, the murder of his mother by his father and the suicide of

his father shortly after having killed the mother. This tragedy transpired because of the rage that the father felt after having found out that both he and his wife were infected by the HIV virus. This story was particularly striking not only because of its tragic content but also because of the natural joy that was evident in the young boy as he interacted with Adela.

Without a doubt, this story made a deep impression on everyone. Most of us felt sad as we encountered such a tragedy. Yet, most of us were struck by the joy of the boy. Someone offered that "God has made people resilient." This same person also brought up the story of Judas as a Biblical example in relation to this story. Another person felt "guilty" because of the abundance that we enjoy so much of in our small community. The story also made this person think of the book, *Half-The-Sky*, which is about the plight of women who suffer terrible violence in other countries. Others experienced a sense of "hope."

The parents also talked about the reaction of their teens. One said that both her teens had been very "uncomfortable" when they heard this story, and that they expressed a sense of helplessness that she expressed by saying that "they would not know how to help." Another parent said that her son "left the room" at some point during the reading of the story, and a mom shared that her daughter did not want to talk about this story. One person caused us to think about issues of theodicy by wondering where God is in the midst of such tragedy. Yet, one parent talked about how the boy was "still able to experience joy" and another thought of Easter as a story of loss and joy.

Once we had expressed all our thoughts about this sad story we moved on to the other story. "*No Swimming*" was written by a young man, Derrick, at the age of twenty-

eight, as a reflection about an embarrassing moment that he had experienced when he was in high school. Derrick and a group of friends were away on a trip, perhaps at a camp, where their accommodations consisted of cabins. Swimming was a prominent activity for the group during this trip; however, since Derrick did not know how to swim he had not brought any swimming trunks with him. At some point his friends tried to force him to get into the pool. Unfortunately for Derrick his friend threw him in, and, to his great surprise and mortification, the shorts that he was wearing gave way and exposed his body to the view of all. Derrick quickly went back to his room after the incident and spent the afternoon alone; but, he had to face his friends at dinner time. His friends were very gracious to him during dinner and Derrick felt that all would be well from then on.

We began to reflect on this story with much humor. One parent made the group laugh by saying that the lesson here was to always "wear your underwear." One person said that she could relate to the anxiety that Derrick had felt because she often experiences that kind of anxiety in her dreams. For another person the story made him think of the times when he felt "inadequate." One person said that she had immediately "assumed that he was of a different culture," which many of us found interesting. She went on to say how by working alongside many African-Americans and Indians (from India) that she noticed that many of them did not know how to swim. Someone else then echoed that, in her family, they found it odd that Derrick could not swim because their assumption as a family was that "everyone knows how to swim." Another parent pointed out that Derrick "did not need to be anxious," and that we all so often hold on to anxiety that we do not need to carry.

Interestingly, when we began to apply the View It Wider principle to this story, one person saw God in three places; 1) when one of Derrick's friends offered to teach him how to swim, 2) when Derrick went back to his cabin and had time alone, and 3) at the dinner table when no one made fun of Derrick. Another parent made a parallel between this story and the story of Job only in the sense that, like Job, Derrick had suffered humiliation but that, in the end, he had regained his dignity. One other person felt that the time at the dinner table reminded her of the story of Jesus healing the leper. Finally, this same person offered that she had an 'aha' moment in terms of having learned a lesson that she could apply at work. I talked a little bit about the section in the chapter where Baker relates the experience of others with whom she had shared the stories and the L.I.V.E. process. I shared how I had noticed an African American expression that I did not know about before, "way out of no way" which many use to express how God can always make a way. I felt that this was a good expression to hold on to. I also reminded the group about their assignments for the next week, which involved reflecting on four stories, as well as their assignment for the week after that week, which involved writing their personal stories. The teens had the same assignments, and so I reminded the parents to encourage their teenagers to also work diligently on their assignments. They asked me to send them reminder in the form of email messages, and they wanted me to impose a deadline. They promised to comply, and we closed our session by saying the Lord's Prayer together and adjourned for the evening.

Week Five

Once again we had seven people present at this session, which included, this time, one of our J2A mentors who had signed up for the project as an 'auditor.' The group had

four stories to reflect on: "*Let It Out*," "*The Kiss*," "*The Quilting Circle*," and "*Harlem Dream*." When I began to inquire of the group members about their reactions to these stories, no one seemed to like or relate to this group of stories very much. One person said how he thought that it was "difficult to relate these stories to Bible stories." Another chimed in that there was "not a lot of depth" in these stories. That said, however, when we began to talk about each story it soon became evident that a few members of the group liked the stories more than they had, at first, expressed. For example, when we talked about the first story, "*Let It Out*," which is about the experience of a young adult whose name is Debra. Debra had this experience during her adolescence, and her story is about how a teacher had helped her find her voice by encouraging her to let go of her fear and sing out when she was rehearsing her "dream role" in a play. One person said that she really liked Debra's story because it was a life-changing type of story. Another person shared that this story had been "profound for her," and yet another explained that she had a similar experience but for her it was "with Math." Someone Viewed-It-Wider by relating this story to "The Call of Moses," and another person said "I drew that parallel too!" One man said that "sometimes we affect people without knowing it!" and a woman was reminded of the fact that "what we do or say make a difference and can have unintended consequences." Finally, one person remarked how she liked the "Gray Boxes" in the book, and how much she enjoyed the one that included information about "Girl Friend Theology."¹⁶³

The next story about "*The Kiss*" did not elicit many comments. In fact, the members of the group did not take that story very seriously. Therefore, we quickly

¹⁶³ Baker has included in her book a number of textboxes that are highlighted in gray where she imparts useful information such as information about a variety of definitions of either theological ideas or terms, or explanations about Christian spiritual practices.

moved on to the next two stories. Everyone seemed to like “The Quilting Circle” and most did not care for “Harlem Dream.” Neither of these two stories elicited any particularly noteworthy comments. We finished this session by talking about having food at the next session—session which would include the teens. Everyone volunteered to bring something and I committed to bring the main course in the form of a platter of sandwiches.

Week Six

The group was unable to meet on Thursday, February 13 because of snow. As a result we communicated via e-mail messages and decided together that we would meet on Monday, February 17.

This session was the session when the teens were also invited to come and share their stories. Four of the seven teenagers and eight parents came. As it was often my custom I began the session with the Collect assigned to the sixth week of the Epiphany, and then invited the teenagers to go first with sharing their stories.

The teenagers were shy at first, but after a few minutes one of them, K, decided to go first. K shared with us a story that she entitled “My friend Christina” which is about an adult who is her mother’s friend but is a person with whom she feels extremely comfortable. She wrote about the way that they relate to each other by describing some activities that they have done together such as cooking dinner, doing manicures, and also about an evening when Christina shared an experience that she had at a dinner at one of the embassies. One aspect of the story that stood out is how Christina told K that she considers her as one of her daughters.

After hearing K's story I guided the group to apply the L.I.V.E. process to the story. Of course, we had already done the first part of the process, which is to listen to the story. Next, I asked everyone to immerse themselves in the story and offer their thoughts. Several members of the group said that the story elicited a sense of "coziness and comfort;" others pointed out the "gift of having a close friend;" one person said that "K and Christina are very lucky to have ...to know each other and have that special friendship." Others said that it was "...especially nice to have a good friend that cooks for you"; "...nice to have the age difference;" "...always nice to have another adult to step up ...have another adult's presence in one's life as a teenager."

"What kind of stories come to mind from our own lives?" Someone remembered how an adult friend used to make "tomato and lettuce sandwich and grape juice" for her after school, and, to this day, continues to be close to this person. Since no one else had any other recollections to share we moved on to the "Viewing-it-Wider" part of the process.

I asked the group the question "how do we see God in the story?" K alluded to the fact that, when she and Christina had cooked the meal that she described in her story, they had "almost burned down the house." The fact that the house did not burn down elicited a sense of "protection from God." One parent saw God in "the sense of the close relationship." I offered how "I immediately thought of the Holy Spirit ...like the person who is beside you ...a comforting presence." After waiting a short while for more responses I asked if we could think of a Christian practice that could relate to the story. Someone offered: "eating meals together ...hospitality." Someone else said that "the fact that Christina helps K's mother out and lends her support" was significant.

I then asked the group about any ‘aha’ moments that they might have gained from the story. Someone shared that “keeping your eyes open to help someone next to you ...someone that you can lend a hand to ...or someone who can help you...” was an ‘aha’ moment for her. I thanked K for sharing her story and asked if she would like to make any last comments about her story.

Next we listened to L’s story, which she entitled “Camp Happy.” This was a story about her experience going to a camp with her Girl Scout troop when she was a child and about how the group got lost on the way to the camp and the fright that the girls felt as the night kept on approaching. At first, we joked about the name of the camp, and then someone asked for clarification about L’s experience to find out if the girls ended up being frightened during their stay at the camp, or if only during the experience of getting lost. We continued to apply the L.I.V.E. process to L’s experience. Another teen remembered one of her own experiences at a Girl Scout’s camp, which she labeled as the “worst experience of her life!” She felt that way because of a “creepy counselor” whose name was either “Happy or Smile” or something like that.” An adult said knowingly “I’ve been lost before!” and another said “I don’t like camping!” One dad recalled a good experience that he and his daughter had when going to camp with other dads at a camp for “Indian Princesses.” Another dad talked about the “anxiety of having to be somewhere and as it is getting dark, and you don’t know where you are...” One mom thought of the stories about “Wondering in the desert” while another explained how life is a journey that includes road blocks that get in the way of one’s goal, and felt that it was an analogy for life, and to remember that God walks with you. Another mom mentioned how this story was a good one to remember during the J2A Urban Adventure that the

teens would soon undertake (the Urban Adventure is a part of the J2A program that involves the teens in a scavenger hunt in a city. The aim of this exercise is to help the teens develop navigational as well as leadership skills). In terms of ‘Aha’ moments a dad observed that L appeared to be “still upset” about this experience that she had had so long ago. One teen shared a memory of another experience at camp when she was younger, which involved getting a “bad sunburn.”

J’s Story’s story came next. J shared a story about his adventure with his friends after he had recently snowed; J’s friends had dared him to venture out on an icy pond. While J took the bait at first, he had the courage to change his mind. Another friend was not so cautious and ventured out in the ice and ended up falling three feet in the freezing water.

There seemed to be collective gasp when the group heard how the friend had fallen into the water. We were all impressed by the courage that J showed in changing his mind about taking on the dare that his friends had egged him on to accept. J’s mom exclaimed how she was so happy that J had listened to “the little voice.” Some commented about feeling “anxiety.” After the story was over someone felt that “we wanted more.” I asked the group about the name calling which J had to suffer through when his friends called him “chicken” etc.

During the View It Wider the conversation became focused on either the “name calling” or the “taking the dare” aspect of J’s story. Someone mentioned “Eve” and another said how Jesus had been called “King of the Jews” (name calling)... Someone else said how Jesus endured “called names” or was told “prove yourself to be the Messiah,” and how he seemed always to be tempted to “dare” – for example “if you are

the Son of God ...do” I offered that Jesus often listened to the “little voice” even if, by listening to the “little voice,” that voice led him to the cross.

During the search for the ‘Aha’ moments someone offered that it could be that J will continue listen to the “little voice” in the future. Someone else exclaimed: “there are so many temptations out there...” and another said “falling in three feet of water is a piece of cake compared to what else is out there....” Everyone seemed to want to offer a comment. One dad suggested that “the experience of receiving taunts is painful ...it’s not pleasant ... but ... juxtaposed with the experience of falling through the ice ...you can’t really compare that ... You sort of learn a lesson ...the taunt might sting a little but is nothing compared to the danger that the other boy put himself in. ...The sting of the water will last longer than the sting of the taunt.” These other comments were also offered: “I hear courage ... courage to take back his word;” “peer pressure is so hard to say no to...;” “It’s ok to change your mind;” “It’s not like letting a friend down.” J’s story is a good example of the high level of engagement that took place during this session and the lively exchange and interaction between the parents and teens.

The fourth and last teen shared his story next. C entitled his story as “The Mourning Dove.” C began by describing that he and his sister were home on a Saturday. His sister was looking, through the window, at the birds that were gathering around the birdfeeder. The most common birds that usually came were the mourning doves. That day, a mourning dove came to the feeder, and the bird appeared to be seriously hurt—part of its skull was missing. Two weeks later, his sister was watching the birds through the window once again, and the same mourning dove that was hurt a few weeks before had come back and had a scar where the previous injury had been. His sister asked them all

to come and see the bird, and as everyone was marveling about how the bird survived the sister confessed that she had prayed for the mourning dove.

One of the dads immediately commented about the fact that C's parents had shared that story with the group during one of our previous sessions. Then, he said "...I guess it means you all think alike or something!" Many also remarked that the story was slightly different coming from C. One mom said "it makes you feel a little helpless because there's really nothing that you can probably do ... you have to let nature take care of the bird or not..." "...and then there is the aspect of the miraculous ..."

"...feeling of awe..."

During the View It Wider discussion someone pointed out the image of the dove, saying that the "Dove is symbolic of peace, purity, the Holy Spirit..." "...to see it injured like that ... it is even more heart-wrenching that it survived ...it is strong..." I asked if anyone could think of a Christian practice in this case and, since no one was offering what was most obvious I chimed in "I can think of one...PRAYING!" This made everyone laugh. These other comments were offered: "Jesus' baptism when the Holy Spirit appeared like a dove;" "What about the healings that Jesus did...a continuum." Finally, the group talked about an 'Aha' moment that took place during the part of the story when the bird came back, and how one person had said that she had a "sense of miracle and faith" and of "letting go."

We finished our session that evening by listening to two more stories from two adults. Once again the interaction and deep engagement was evident. Since we had many more stories to listen to we agreed to meet the week after to finish listening to the

stories from the rest of the members of the group and to talk about the last three stories in the book.

Week Seven

The group met for the final session on Thursday, February 20. Eight adults and one teen were present. We were able to listen to everyone's story and we finished the last three stories in the book. I noticed that the conversation was particularly lively and I observed that many members of the group were making wonderful connections to the Biblical stories. The one and only teen present was particularly impressive with his knowledge of the Scriptures. During that session I also reminded everyone to fill out the "After" surveys that I would send to them via email, and also reminded them that I would contact them to set up the personal interviews. I thanked them profusely and I got a sense, from several comments, that the participants had enjoyed the experience. In the weeks that followed I sent and received the "After" surveys, and I conducted personal interviews with all the families between March 10 and March 22, 2014.

"Before" and "After" Questionnaires Detailed Data Description and Analysis

"Before" and "After" Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Parents

I will now describe the content of the surveys as well as the responses from the parents. The "Frequency" questions posed to the participants loosely encompass three categories: "sharing about self and God" (questions 1-6), "worshipping and learning" (questions 7-9), and "connecting everyday life with spirituality" (questions 10-12). Looking at the responses to the "Before" survey from the parents I noticed a positive

tendency. The parents seem positively inclined to engage in the activity of sharing and listening about self and God with family and friends. This tendency is evident in the clustering of the responses given for questions 1 to 6 which indicate a consistent pattern of occasional to daily engagement.

The answers to questions 7 and 9 are distributed more evenly. For example, the frequency with which parents attend worship is evenly divided—half of the participants worshipping weekly and the other half monthly. Similarly, the responses to question 8 reveal that four parents go to forum/Sunday school weekly and four never go, and two attend on occasion. In regards to question 9, six of the ten parents indicated that they occasionally read stories directly from the Bible while two parents do so weekly, one parent monthly, and another daily.

Question 10 elicited by far the most agreement among the parents with eight of the parents agreeing that they “occasionally” make a connection between their lives and the stories in the Bible. By contrast, the responses to questions 11 and 12 reflect a pattern of decreased frequency of engagement (see Figure 1).

In comparison to the “Before” frequency survey the responses in the “After” frequency questionnaire show a few subtle changes. For example, the responses to the first six questions show a few up and down shifts which may be due to a higher degree of self-awareness on the part of the parents. In response to the first question about sharing stories with a family member, I noted that one parent answered “occasionally” and another “monthly” when previously everyone had either marked “daily” or “weekly.” In terms of sharing a story with a friend (question 2) the responses went up from five to seven. In regards to question 3, the number of parents who “listen to a personal story

from a family member” on a “daily” basis went down slightly from six to four, while the “weekly” and “monthly” numbers went up; by contrast, the number of persons who “listen to personal stories from a friend” on a “weekly” basis (question 4) went up from four to six, and on a “monthly” basis went up from three to four. The frequency with which parents talk to family or friends about God shifted slightly with a small increase in the “monthly” rate for both questions 5 and 6.

When examining the responses to questions 7, 8, and 9, I noticed that an additional parent reported attending worship weekly. I did not see any significant changes in the responses to question 8 (attendance at Sunday school/forums) and 9 (reading the Bible), except that one more person reported that he or she is “occasionally” reading from the Bible on his or her own.

The responses to question 10 show interesting fluctuations. The number of parents who find some connection between their experience of life and the Bible increased in frequency. One person marked “daily” and three others “weekly” when no one had chosen these categories in the “Before” survey, and one more person chose “monthly.” The “weekly” category increased by one for question 11 about understanding something spiritual from a story told by a family member, and the number of persons who understand something spiritual through the Bible changed to show that one person is having such an experience “daily” and the number of persons having such experiences “weekly” went up by one (see Figure 2).

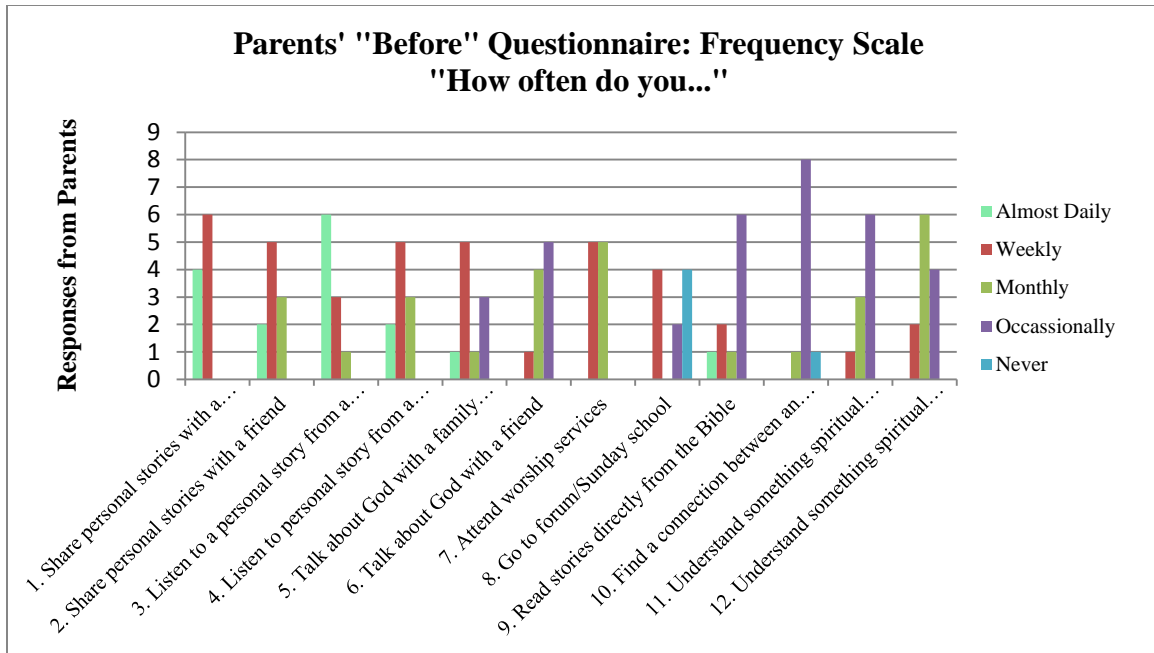


Figure 1: Chart of the “Before” Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Parents

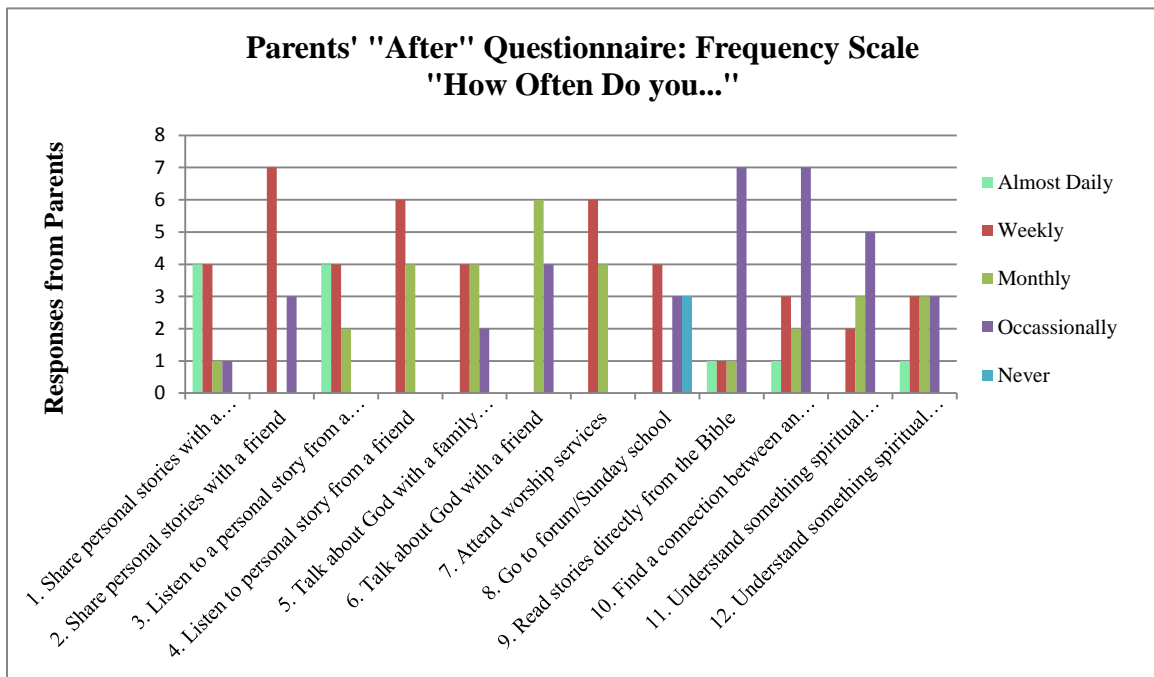


Figure 2: Chart of the “After” Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Parents

The “Comfort Scale” questions can be grouped and defined in the following way: “sharing of self” (questions 1-3), “concept of God’s presence in everyday life” (questions 4-5), “knowledge and application of biblical principles to one’s life” (questions 6-7),

“awareness of God’s interaction with people” (questions 8-9), and “listening for and sharing about one’s experience of God’s interactive voice” (questions 10-12). Looking at the responses from the parents to the first three “How comfortable are you with...” questions in the “Before” survey it is easy to see an overall ease of comfort with their willingness to talk about their personal lives. Only one person admitted to being “very uncomfortable” about sharing personal stories with others while one person marked “somewhat uncomfortable” about talking about himself or herself. Two persons indicated that they are “somewhat uncomfortable” with talking about their beliefs about God.

The responses to questions 4 and 5 which are about the “concept of God’s presence” are more evenly distributed, ranging between “neutral” and “very comfortable”—two persons taking a neutral position about this concept, four persons feeling “somewhat comfortable” and four others feeling “very comfortable.”

The parents’ responses to question 6 concerning their level of Biblical knowledge revealed their highest level of discomfort by far. Six parents are “somewhat uncomfortable” with their knowledge of the Bible while two others are “neutral” and two others “somewhat comfortable”. Perhaps in correlation to this sense of discomfort six of the parents also admitted that they are neutral about relating stories from their lives to the stories in the Bible (question 7); three feel “somewhat uncomfortable” and only one person is “somewhat comfortable” with such an exercise.

Surprisingly, in spite of the discomfort of the adults’ relationship with the Bible, a number of them are at ease with the concept of the active and tangible participation of God in human life. For instance, in response to question 8, four people are “somewhat

comfortable” with the idea that God continues to speak to people today while three are “very comfortable;” only one person marked “neutral” and two “somewhat uncomfortable.” In relation to question 9 four persons reported being “very comfortable” and three others “somewhat comfortable” with the idea that God can speak to them through everyday experiences—one person is “neutral” and the remaining two persons “Somewhat uncomfortable.”

In regards to questions 10 and 11 a number of parents showed some openness to the possibility of hearing God speak to them through someone else’s life experience. For question 10, which is about being comfortable with listening to someone else’s story four parents are “somewhat comfortable” and three are “very comfortable” while for question 11, which is about the idea of hearing God speak through someone else’s story, five are “somewhat comfortable” and two “very comfortable.” Finally, in response to question 12, three of the parents indicated that they feel “somewhat comfortable” with speaking about God with their teens and three feel “very comfortable” with such a task; two parents marked neutral and two did not respond. For the most part, the parents seem at ease with themselves, with others, and with God (see Figure 3).

A comparison between the parents’ responses for the “Before” and “After” comfort scale questionnaires reveals some noteworthy variations. I was pleasantly surprised to see that the responses to two of the questions demonstrate an increase in the comfort level of the parents—an increase in their comfort level with talking about what they believe about God and with talking about God with their teens (questions 3 and 12). The responses for questions 1-3 show a modest increase in the degree of comfort with talking about self and God with question 1 showing an increase from two to three in the

“very comfortable” category, question 2 an increase in the same category from zero to two, and question 3 an increase in the “somewhat comfortable” category from six to eight.

In terms of a degree of comfort with the exercise of looking for the evidence of God’s presence in their day-to-day experiences (questions 5) the categories “somewhat comfortable” and “very comfortable” equally go up from four to five. The responses to question 6 show an increase in the discomfort of the parents with their knowledge of the stories in the Bible because three parents newly indicated that they were “very uncomfortable” when none had marked that category in the “Before” survey. The responses to question 7 about relating stories from life to the Bible stories also show an increased level of discomfort on the part of the parents with three of the responses newly falling in the “very uncomfortable” category. However, I must also mention that the “somewhat comfortable” category for that question went up from one to two. The answers for question 8 remained exactly the same, but the responses for question 9, which is about the idea that sometimes God speaks to people through everyday experiences, indicated a modest increase in the “very comfortable” category which went up from three to five. Lastly, the answers to questions 10-12 show a greater degree of comfort in the areas of listening to someone else’s story, of hearing God speak through someone’s story, and talking with one’s teen (see figure 4).

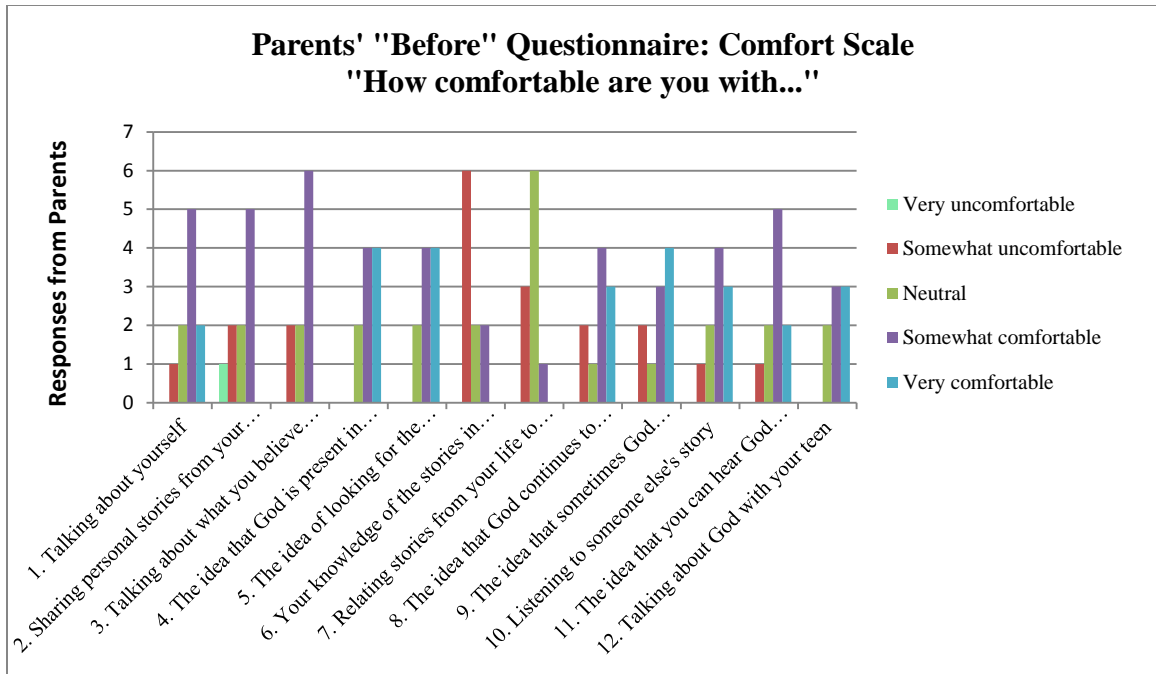


Figure 3 – Chart of the “Before” Comfort Scale Survey Responses from the Parents

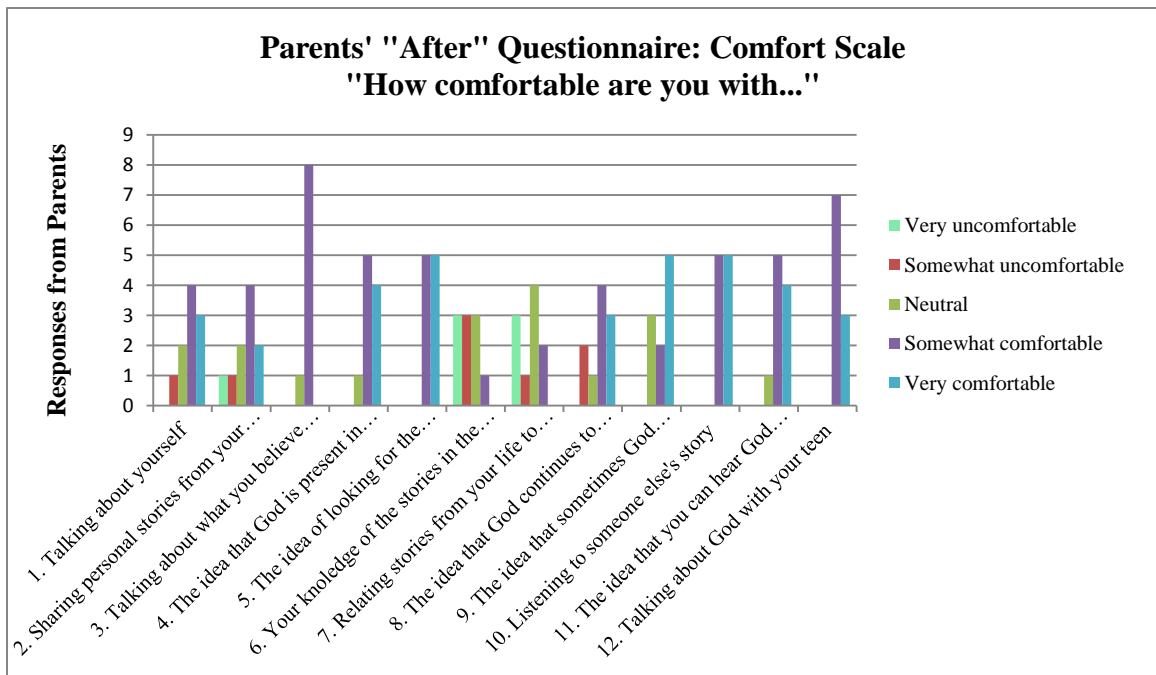


Figure 4: Chart of the “After” Comfort Scale Survey Responses from the Parents

“Open-ended” “Before” and “After” Survey Responses from the Parents

The “Open-ended” “Before” survey responses showed a significant level of transparency on the part of the parents. I was particularly touched by a statement from one of the parents who had reacted with some degree of skepticism about the God experiences in the stories that we had explored during the project. In fact, in spite of not being much of a churchgoer this person wrote: “When I was undergoing a personal crisis, I believe that I heard God speaking to me.”

Two parents spoke about the effect of music on their experience of feeling spiritually alive. One person offered: “I can think of many, but here are two [*experiences*]. The first is my first time attending the Easter Vigil at St. Luke’s when Marty sang the Exultet. The second is when I first heard “Quartet for the End of Time,” played in concert at the Eastern Music Festival in 1984. I was spellbound and had the distinct feeling that profound truth was being revealed to me.” The other person shared this: “I have felt spiritually alive when I sing particular hymns or songs...”

Three persons expressed how their involvement in church helped them feel spiritually alive and two others expressed how a sense of ‘gratitude’ helped them experience God more fully. These two individuals described what they felt in this way: “I feel spiritually alive ...when I take time to really “see” our children, and when I feel gratitude for the blessings God has bestowed;” the other person wrote about a specific moment during a J2A pilgrimage when he/she felt overcome by a sense of ‘gratitude’: “On the pilgrimage when we were in compline individually giving thanks and praise to God, I was overcome emotionally with all the blessings God has given me and got too choked up to continue speaking.” Finally, two parents shared the role of nature in helping them experience

spiritual connection—one person described an encounter with a ram during a visit at the Grand Canyon and the other mentioned the beauty of nature at the beach as well as the loveliness of another natural setting at a specific locale used for retreats. The percentage of all of the responses can be seen in a corresponding chart (see Figure 5). The chart demonstrates how church involvement, nature, music and gratitude ranked the highest, scoring 27% and 18% respectively.

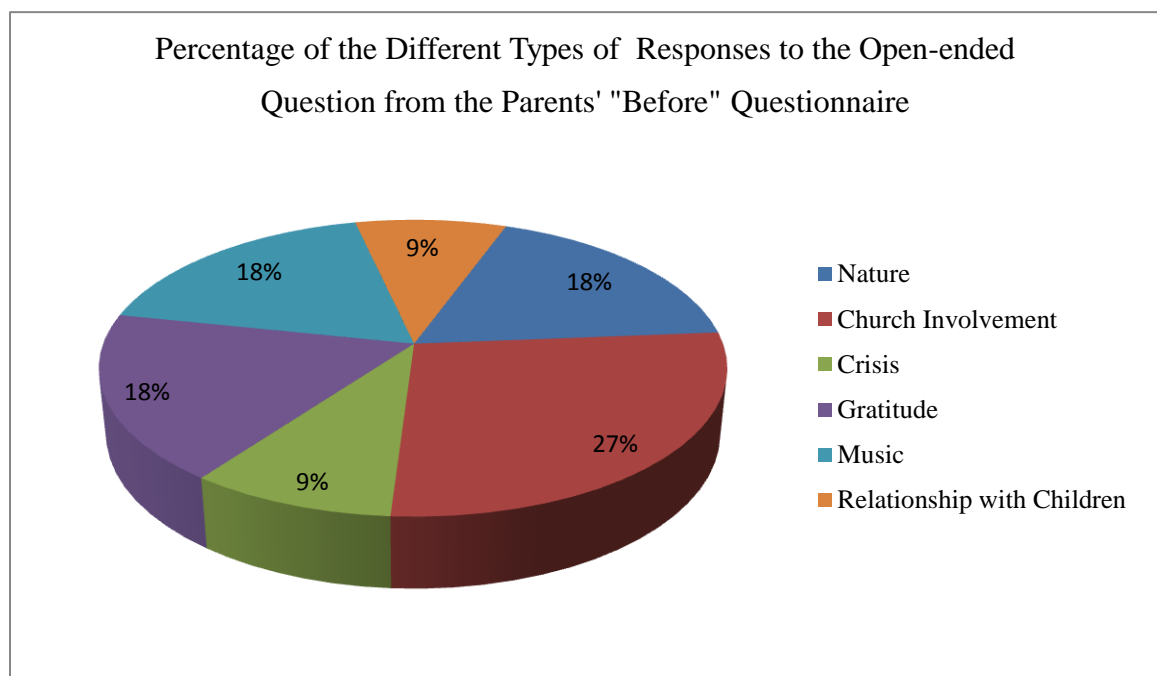


Figure 5: Chart of the “Open-ended” “Before” Survey Responses from the Parents

differed slightly from the one posed in the “Before” survey and was phrased in this way: “Can you describe a moment when you felt more spiritually alive during the weeks of the project?” Hence, the types of responses generated were necessarily very different than the ones given for the “Before” survey. This time around eight categories surfaced which could be described as: “listen to stories from others,” “readings and discussions,” “group

participation,” “writing own story,” “listen to stories from the book,” “L.I.V.E. process,” “did not have an experience,” and “sharing with teen/parents.”

In terms of percentages, the category, “listen to stories from others,” received the highest score, 29%, while, “participation in the group,” received the second highest percentage, 24%. “Writing own story” and “listen to stories from book” received 12% each, and the remaining categories formed 6% each of the total score (see figure 6). The high percentage given to the first two categories “listen to stories from others” and “participation in the group” reflects what the participants also expressed with their comments. For example, one of the participants simply wrote “Listening to people’s own stories” while another participant expressed how “listening/sharing with the group at every meeting” was the catalyst to feeling more spiritually alive during the weeks of the project.

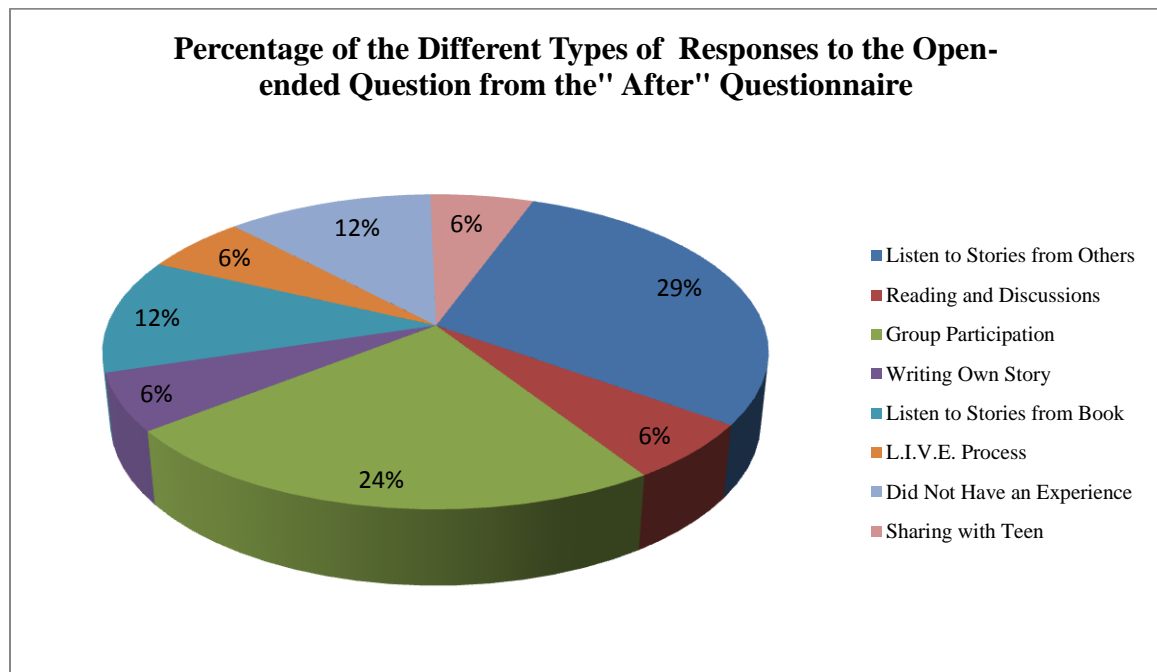


Figure 6: Chart of the “Open-ended” “After” Survey Responses from the Parents

“Before” and “After” Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Teenagers

After having examined the responses from the parents I became eager to find out what the responses from the teenagers would yield. Looking at the “Before” questionnaire I immediately noticed that the responses of the teens were varied and somewhat scattered across the spectrum of possible answers, except for question 6 which showed the most agreement. The responses for question 1 showed that one of the teens admitted that he/she “never “ shares personal stories with a family member; two others “occasionally” share, another does so “monthly,” and three others share stories in a familial context on a weekly basis. In response to question 2, about sharing personal stories with a friend, three of the teens answered “daily” and three “occasionally” while one marked “weekly.” In response to question 3, about listening to a story from a family member, one teen answered “never” and one “daily;” two others marked “weekly” and three “occasionally.” In response to question 4 three of the teens engaged “daily” in listening to a friend tell a personal story, two “weekly,” one “monthly,” and one “occasionally.” In terms of talking to God with a family member (question 5) one of the teens “never” talks to a family member about God; only one admitted to doing so “weekly,” two “monthly,” and the last three “occasionally.” Question 6, which is about talking about God with a friend, was the question that drew the most agreement amongst the teens, five teens answering “never,” one teen “monthly,” and another “occasionally.”

The teens’ responses to questions 7 and 9 were more evenly distributed. For example, the frequency with which teens attend worship varied from weekly to occasionally—four of these young participants worshipping weekly, two monthly, and one occasionally. In regards to question 8, four teens go to forum/Sunday school weekly and

three go monthly. In terms of reading stories from the Bible directly (question 9), four of the seven teens indicated that they “never” read stories directly from the Bible while three revealed that they do so “occasionally.”

Questions 10 to 12 also elicited a fair amount of agreement among the teenagers. The teens either marked “never” or “occasionally” in answer to these questions except for one person who marked “monthly” for question 12. Hence, it is easy to conclude that in general the teenagers in this study found it difficult to make relevant spiritual connections to their daily lives (see Figure 7).

A few differences became evident in the “Before” and “After” frequency answers of the teen participants. The numbers for the responses for questions 1-3 went down ever so slightly. For example, in response to question 1, a participant responded “daily” when none of the teens had chosen this category in the “Before” survey, and two marked “weekly” and one “occasionally.” By contrast, there were no marks for “daily” for question 2 when three teens had chosen that category in the “Before” survey, and, to my surprise, two of the teens chose “never” for this question. In regards to question 3 one teen answered “daily” which is the same opted-for response in the “Before” survey, and then the answers were evenly divided between weekly, monthly, and occasionally, with two teens marking each category respectively. The teens who reported listening to a friend tell a personal story “daily” (question 4) increased in number going from three to four and the number of teens who do so “occasionally” increased from one to three. The responses for question 5, which is about talking about God with a family member, did not change much except for a decrease in the “monthly” and an increase in the “never” numbers by one. The shift in the answers to question 6 is interesting since the “never”

category decreased from five to three and the “occasionally” number rose from one to four. I came to the conclusion that the changes in the responses to questions 1-6 in the “After” survey may possibly reflect a deepened sense of self-awareness on the part of the teen participants.

The responses for the cluster of questions 7, 8 and 9 showed a few shifts that may be significant since the number of teens who attend worship “weekly” increased from four to five, the number of teens who go to Sunday school “weekly” increased from four to six, and the number of teens who read stories directly from the Bible “weekly” increase from zero to four. It is also worth noting that for the latter question (question 9) the “weekly” responses seem to have replaced the “occasionally” category while the “never” category decreased from four to three. I was, therefore, left to wonder if these shifts came from a growing sense of self-awareness on the part of the teenagers or from an actual change in their behavior.

The responses to the last group of questions, questions 10-12, revealed another noteworthy shift. The number of teens who find some connection between their experience of life and the Bible (question 10) increased in the “monthly” category from zero to one and in the “never” category from two to four. The teens showed the most agreement in terms of “occasionally” understanding something spiritual through stories told them either by family member or friend (question 11); the number of teens who do so having increased from five to six and only one person having marked “never.” Finally, in terms of understanding something spiritual through the Bible (question 12) the categories “weekly” increased from zero to one, “monthly” remained the same,

“occasionally” decreased from four to two, and “never” increased from two to three (see Figure 8).

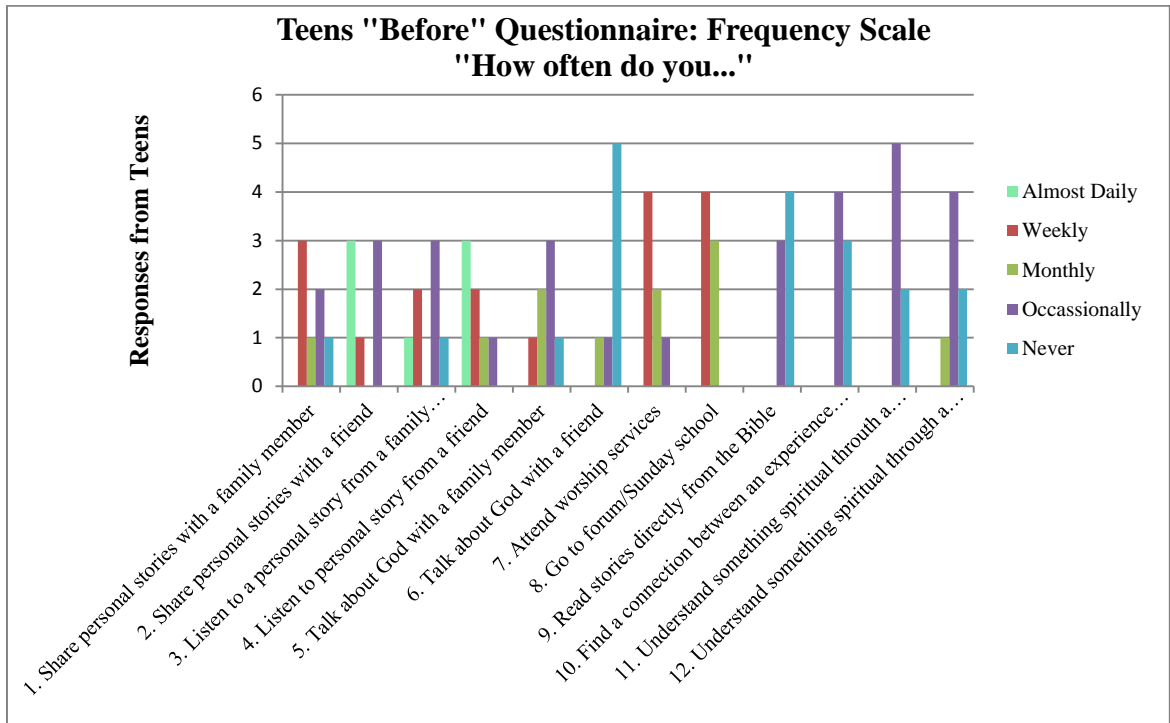


Figure 7: Chart of the “Before” Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Teenagers

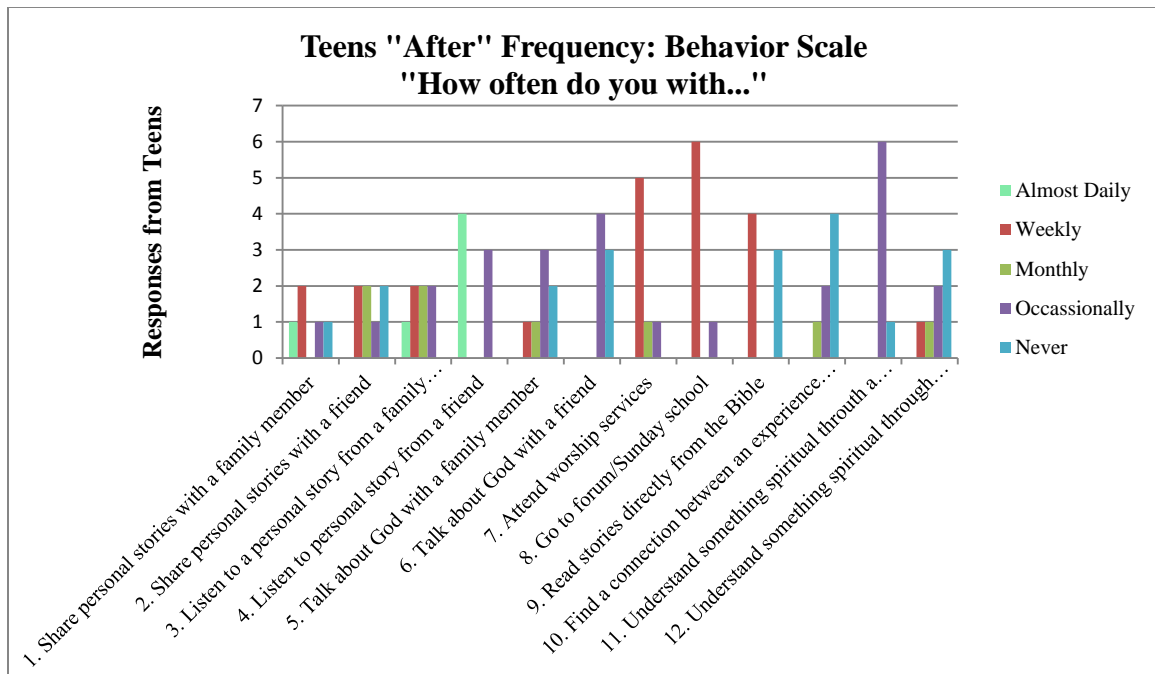


Figure 8: Chart of the “After” Frequency Scale Survey Responses from the Teenagers

“Before” and “After” Comfort Scale Survey Responses from the Teenagers

Looking at the responses from the teens to the “How comfortable are you with...” questions in the “Before” survey it is easy to see some overall discomfort with all of the questions—the greatest level of comfort seeming to be in regards to listening to someone else’s story (question 10) with two teens having indicated that they were “very comfortable” with such activity. By far the most prominent responses fell either in the “neutral” or “somewhat uncomfortable category. Four of the questions, questions 1,4, 6, and 12 elicited the most agreement from five out the seven teenagers—five feeling neutral about talking about themselves, neutral about the presence of God in their day-to-day lives, and neutral about talking about God with their parents, and five also feeling “very uncomfortable” with their knowledge of the stories in the Bible.

The responses to questions 5, which is about looking for the evidence of God's presence in day-to-day experiences, and to question 7, which is about relating stories from ones' life to the stories in the Bible, were more evenly distributed and were distributed in the exact same way—three teens feeling “very uncomfortable”, three feeling “neutral,” and one feeling “somewhat comfortable” (see Figure 9).

A number of fluctuations could be noted when comparing the responses of the teenagers in the “Before” and “After” comfort scale questionnaires. It was immediately apparent that the “neutral” category that appeared so prominently in the “Before” questionnaire was much less evident in the “After” questionnaire. For example, for question 1 about talking about self the responses marked “neutral” went down from five to two while two teens marked “somewhat uncomfortable” for the first time; three others marked “somewhat comfortable” for the first time. In terms of question 2 there was a modest increase in the “somewhat comfortable” category responses about sharing personal stories from one's life. The teens showed considerable agreement in their responses to question 3 and question 4 about talking about what you believe about God and about the idea that God is present in their day-to-day lives—four teens responded “somewhat uncomfortable” to the former and five gave the same response to the latter. The responses for question 5 were almost identical between the two questionnaires with three teens responding “somewhat uncomfortable” and three “neutral” with the exception of one person indicating feeling “very uncomfortable” with the idea of looking for the evidence of God's presence in his/her day-to-day experiences.

I was pleasantly surprised to discover that, according to the responses to question 6, the degree of discomfort on the part of the teens with their knowledge of the stories in

the Bible had decreased slightly. The “somewhat uncomfortable” category decreased from five to three, “neutral” from three to one, and the “somewhat comfortable” increased from one to two. On the subject of relating their lives to the stories of the Bible (question 7) four of the teens indicated that they were “neutral” and one “very uncomfortable;” however, there was a modest increase from one to two in the “somewhat comfortable” category.

For question 8, which is about the idea that God continues to speak to people today, the teens showed more of a commitment with three of them responding that they felt “somewhat comfortable” with this concept and only one “very uncomfortable” and another “neutral” and only two “somewhat uncomfortable.” The responses to question 9, which is about the idea that sometimes God speaks to people through everyday experiences, disclosed a small increase in the comfort level of the teens—an upward fluctuation demonstrated by the decrease in the “neutral” category from four to one, as well as an increase in the “somewhat comfortable” category from zero to two, and in the “very comfortable” category from zero to one. The responses for questions 10 showed a very slight increase in the degree of comfort on the part of the teens. They felt more comfortable with listening to someone else’s story as shown by the increase from one to four in the number of their responses in the “somewhat comfortable” category. By contrast, the teens did not seem so comfortable with the idea of hearing God speak through someone’s story (question 11) since the responses marked “somewhat uncomfortable” stayed the same and the responses marked “neutral rose from two to three. Finally, the responses about the teens’ comfort with talking with their parents about God was mixed, showing one response as “very uncomfortable,” two “somewhat

uncomfortable,” two “neutral,” and only two “somewhat comfortable.” However, a few of the teens chose the “somewhat comfortable” category for the first time in answer to this question (see figure 10).

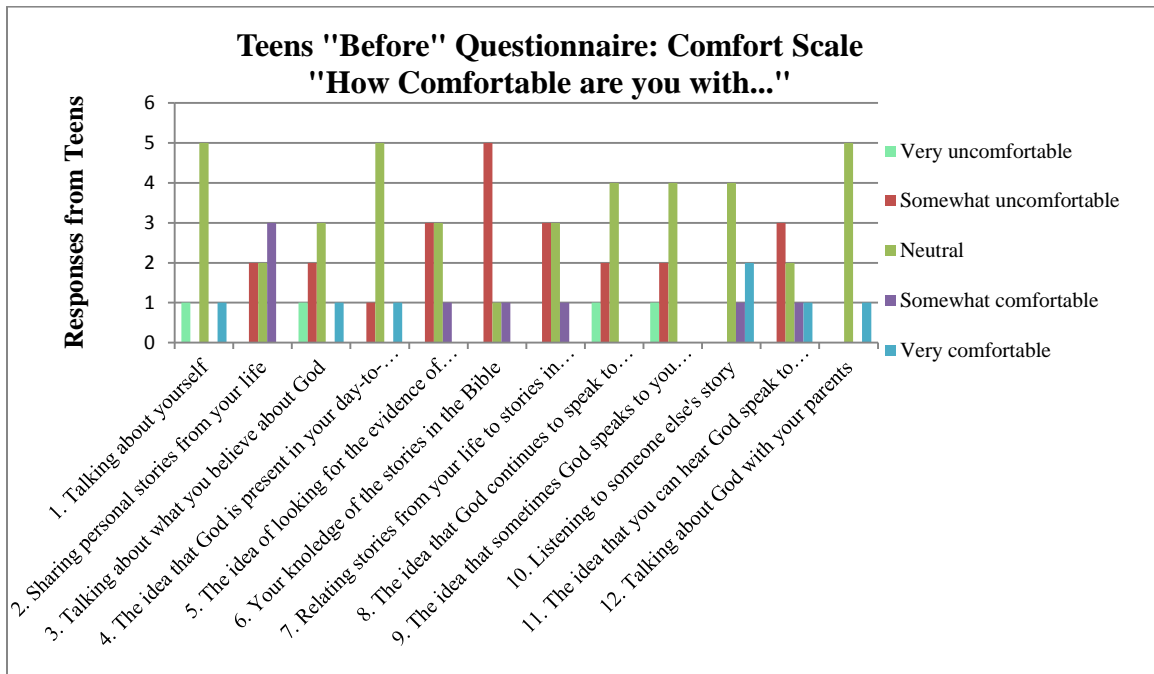


Figure 9: Chart of the “Before” Comfort Scale Survey Responses from the Teenagers

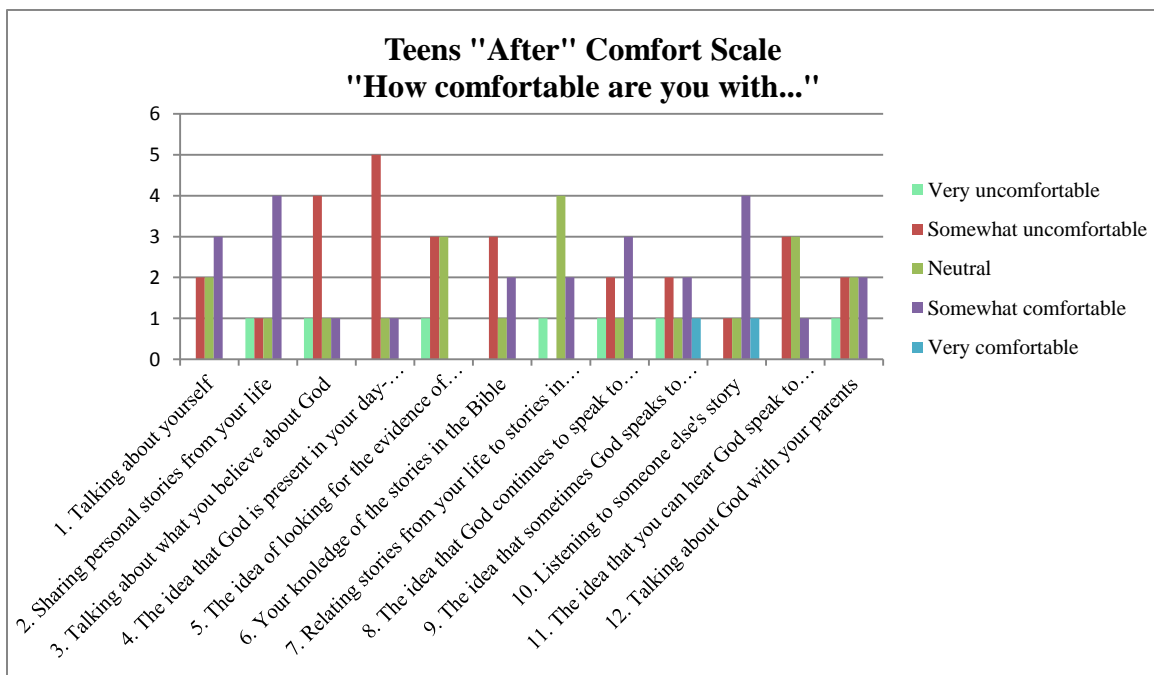


Figure 10: Chart of the “After” Comfort Scale Survey Responses from the Teenagers

“Open-ended” “Before” and “After” Survey Responses from the Teenagers

The responses to the open-ended question in the “Before” survey from the teens revealed four categories at play: service to others, none, nature, and God’s help. The majority of the teens, four of them, stated that they had not experienced a time when they felt particularly alive spiritually. One of the teens shared a positive experience during a time of service to others and wrote:

I felt spiritually alive when I was delivering Thanksgiving dinner to less fortunate people specifically when we gave food to one lady she opened the door and took the bag of food but it was the way her eyes lit up when she saw us that really made me feel spiritually alive.

Another teen wrote about an experience in nature and offered: “One time I saw a raven cross my path at the Grand Canyon. It made me feel spiritually alive.” Finally, one teen expressed the conviction that her experience of feeling spiritually alive came from a sense of having received God’s help during a test at school. This young person stated: “When I passed my math final last year I thought God got me through it because I’m very bad at taking tests.” The percentage of these responses can be seen in a corresponding chart (see Figure 11). The chart highlights the percentages of the responses in this way: having no recollection of a “spiritually alive” experience scored the highest at 57%, while an experience through nature as well as through service to others and through God’s help scored 14% each.

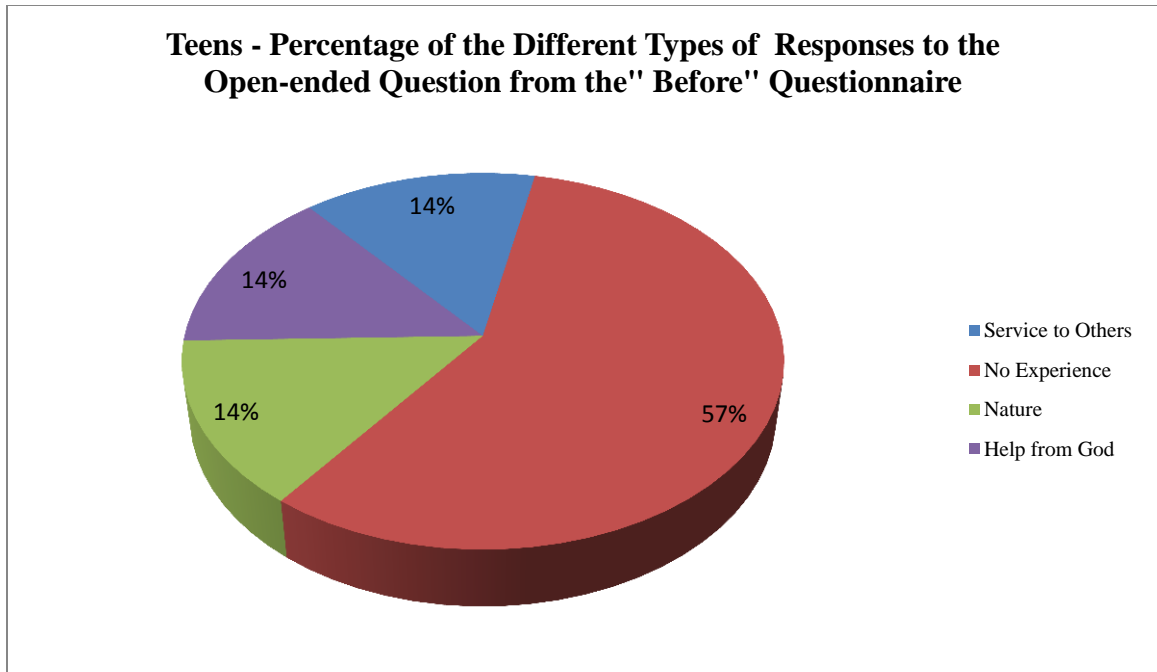


Figure 11: Chart of the “Open-ended” “Before” Survey Responses from the Teens

The teens’ open-ended responses to the “After” survey questions indicated two concrete categories: “listen to stories from others” and “did not have an experience.” Four teens “did not have an experience” while three teens felt most spiritually alive when they were “listening to stories from others.” Hence, the percentages between these categories consisted of 43% for “listen to stories from others,” and 57% for “did not have an experience” (see figure 12).

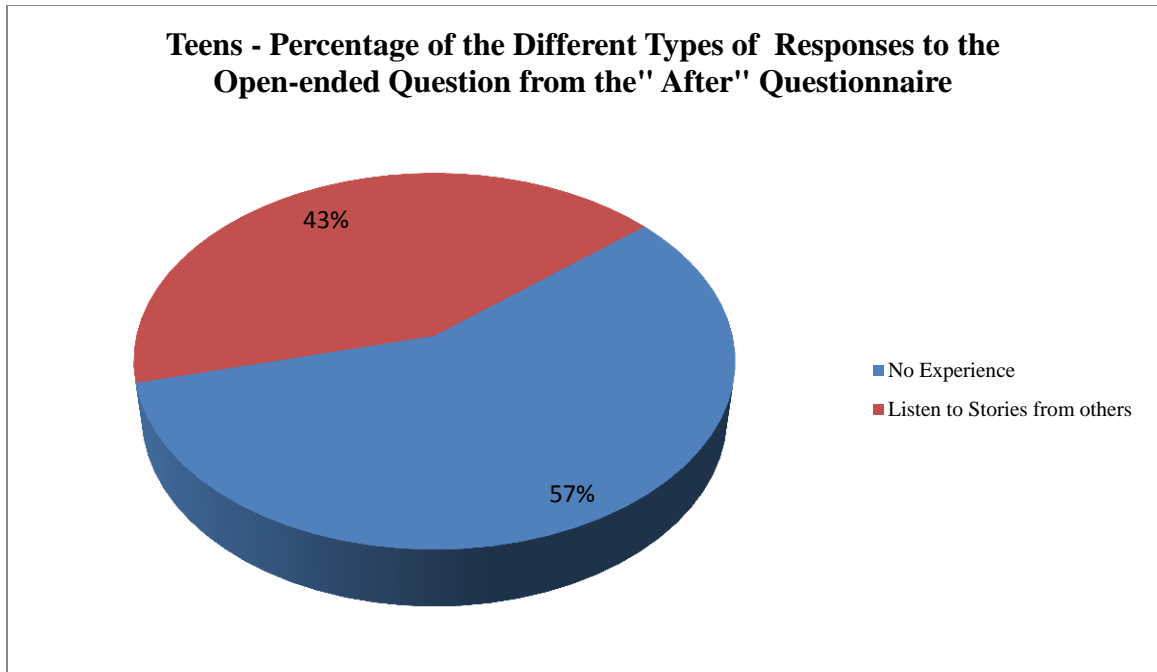


Figure 12: Chart of the “Open-ended” “After” Survey Responses from the Teenagers

Evaluation of the Thesis Project

Donald L. Kirkpatrick has developed a four-level measurement method to help evaluate the effectiveness of programs designed for groups, especially training programs—a method that he and James D. Kirkpatrick explain in depth in the third edition of the book *Evaluating Training Programs: The Four Levels*. In brief, the four levels of this particular evaluation method, which comprises the following categories: Reaction, Learning, Behavior, and Results,¹⁶⁴ offer helpful principles that are useful for the evaluation of the effectiveness of my project. For example, Donald L. Kirkpatrick writes about the value of “reaction” by stressing how “it is important not only to get a reaction but to get a positive reaction.”¹⁶⁵ He goes on to explain how “the future of a program depends on positive reaction. In addition, if participants do not react favorably,

¹⁶⁴ Donald L. Kirkpatrick and James D. Kirkpatrick, *Evaluating Training Programs: Third Edition The Four Levels* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc., 2006), 21.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 22.

they probably will not be motivated to learn.”¹⁶⁶ He also makes many other good observations and affirms especially how “reaction sheets can provide trainers with quantitative information that can be used to establish standards of performance for future programs.”¹⁶⁷

I gauged the reaction of the participants of my project by including an evaluative section in the “After” questionnaire. The evaluation included ten questions asking the input of the participants about the number and length of the sessions, about the quality of the assignments, materials, and the process of theological reflection, as well as their input about ways to improve any similar programs in the future.

Evaluation from the Parents

In looking at the responses of the parents to the evaluation I found that most participants thought that the number of sessions (7) as well as the length of the sessions (1 hour to 1 ½ hour) were adequate. Most thought that the number of weekly reading assignments were appropriate (3-4 stories), although a few thought that having fewer stories to read per week would be an easier load. The participants were also asked to give their opinions about the book and the L.I.V.E. theological reflection process that we used throughout the project and most of the parents liked both the book and the process very much; however, two parents neither liked the book nor the process. In regards to the book one of the two parents who did not like it wrote: “I didn’t like it—many of the stories seemed contrived. I liked only one in the entire book.” The same parent offered the following comment about the L.I.V.E. theological reflection process: “I didn’t like it—it felt like we were trying to apply a complicated structure to something that could be

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 22.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 27.

a simple reflective process.” One parent who liked the book offered that it was difficult to come up with biblical stories to relate to the stories in the book during the theological reflection process. Most of the parents had a positive reaction to the project and affirmed that they would recommend such a program for future J2A/Confirmation parents and teens, and many offered helpful suggestions. For example, one person wrote:

“It was a worthwhile spiritual exercise. I think the teens could have benefitted from experiencing the responses to the stories in the sessions as we went along. They did a good job of acclimating to our session discourse at the end but I think they would have done well to have had exposure to the process from the beginning.”

Another person offered the idea of including “relevant Bible stories ahead of time throughout to help teens make the connection with the story they are reading.”

Evaluation from the Teenagers

In looking at the responses of the teens to the evaluation I found that the first question was not really applicable for them since the teens had participated in only one group session. Nonetheless, most of the participants thought that the number of sessions was good while pointing out the fact that they had only attended one session. One of the teens, however, expressed the wish of having had the opportunity to participate in more than one session. Most of the teens thought that the length of the sessions (1 hour to 1 ½ hour) was adequate. Four thought that the number of weekly reading assignments was appropriate (3-4 stories), expressing their thoughts with words such as “good,” “great,” “interesting.” One teen could not relate to the stories at all, one reported having “liked one” but thought there were too many, and one did not respond to the question.

All the teens, except for one, really liked the book. One teen wrote: “I liked its format in days, and enjoyed listening to all of the unique stories it had to tell,” and another “It was a great book. I especially liked that it didn’t try to make religious choices for you. It encouraged you to make your own choices.” By contrast, the teen who did not like the book expressed how the book was “poorly written and not applicable to the modern normal teen.” In terms of the L.I.V.E. theological reflection process one teen simply did not make the effort to try the process while several of the others thought the process was “ok” and another thought it was a “great system,” further expressing how “it really helped me understand faith, and my own faith. It allowed me to relate to stories, and to look deep inside myself for answers.” In response to the inquiry about what was “most helpful” the teens offered a variety of answers, most notably, one reported the “Immerse” part of the L.I.V.E. process as most helpful, and another the “stories” along with the exercise of writing about one’s feelings. One of the teens thought the “Explore” part of the L.I.V.E. process was unhelpful while another “could not relate to some stories.” The teen who did not like the book expressed how the “vague terminology and political expressions like “Womanist Theology” were not helpful.

Overall, most of the teenagers had a positive reaction to the project and would recommend such a program for future J2A/Confirmation parents and teens. One teen offered enthusiastically:

“Oh yes. These sessions were incredibly beneficial to me in figuring out where I stand. These sessions are an invaluable resource.”

Only one of the teens said “No” in terms of recommending such a program for future groups of parents and teens. Lastly, another teen suggested that, in the future, the entire group of parents and teens should meet every week.

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