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## **PASTORAL INSIGHT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF CHILDREN**

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PASTORAL INSIGHT FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE OF CHILDREN

A Master's Thesis Presented to  
The Faculty of Religious and Theological Studies  
Merrimack College

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
Spirituality

by  
Annie K. McDonnell  
August 2023

Under the Direction of  
Prof. Joseph Kelley, PhD., D.Min.

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## ABSTRACT

There is immense growth during a child's adolescent years. Children begin to identify likes and dislikes, embrace gifts and talents, and push boundaries to learn more about themselves in the process. The physical, psychological, social and emotional development of children is richly studied and researched. This paper argues that the spiritual side should receive just as much attention. Children have an inherent spirituality which they should be encouraged to engage, deepen, and develop as a natural aspect of their childhood experiences through intentional activities as provided by trusted and caring adults. This paper shares suggestions to support the development of the spiritual life of children through both structured and creative exercises.

## PREFACE

The motivation behind this project arises from my work as a Catholic elementary school teacher. I myself attended a Catholic grammar school and was brought up within the parish. Just as much as reading and math were a core part of the curriculum, my school and home life nurtured a spiritual lifestyle focused on love of others, commitment to justice, and desire for peace. In turn, I hope that I can devote the same kind of focus on spirituality and intention for my students.

I am so appreciative to all those in my community of Saint John Paul II Catholic Academy in Dorchester. I am thankful for my students who let me share my passion for learning and through whom I see God every day! I am thankful to my coworkers for their collaboration and thoughtful conversation. I also thank our school parish for trusting me to start a Youth Ministry program and supporting me through that experience.

I am thankful for those from St. Margaret's Parish in Dorchester, who helped demonstrate what it means to be a person of faith and a deeply spiritual person from a young age. I am thankful for those from my Merrimack College community, particularly those from the Grace J. Palmisano Center for Campus Ministry; and in a special way thank Dr. Joseph Kelley, who served as a valued mentor through this project. And of course, I am grateful to my family for everything. I could not have done this without you!

I hope that this research and the suggested activities might benefit other Catholic school teachers, religious education programs, and also benefit students in public or other private schools. I hope this paper can provide some inspiration to those who work with this population. Sometimes it only takes one person, one activity, one experience to totally redirect the trajectory of your life. I hope that these exercises can be the spark that ignites a spiritual fire for students, and teachers, to encourage them to live their life with intention, love, and a desire to spread peace.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1 Spirituality: Its Definitions and Relevance for Children.....	1
Chapter 2 Recent Research on the Spiritual Development of Children.....	13
Chapter 3 The Place of Spirituality in the Classroom.....	27
Chapter 4 Limits and Other Applications of this Research.....	43
Chapter 5 The Promise of Spirituality for Personal and Social Development of Children.....	50
Bibliography.....	56

## Chapter 1 Spirituality: Its Definitions and Relevance for Children

There is extensive research and a great variety of studies that have been done on any aspect imaginable regarding children. Ranging from strategies for academic instruction, or the stages of socio-emotional development, to infant growth percentiles, and environmental health impacts, the wealth of information to be gathered seems endless. The attention given to children's issues, as well as general interest in this population, is multifold. The importance of studies on children, of varying stages of childhood, is evident at every level.<sup>1</sup>

Caregivers of varying relations recognize their role in shaping the life of the child: assisting with sounding out words while reading, providing safe spaces for making friends and practicing problem solving skills, ensuring they have enough to eat, helping after a child has fallen and scraped their knee. Essentially, society at large is addressing the questions of what can and should be done to support children's development as vulnerable members of society. Children will be the next generation to pick up what is left behind - they are the future. There is a generally recognized need for trusted adults to guide children through academics, in athletics, in musical or artistic activities, as well as monitoring their physical and emotional growth; it is worthwhile to recognize those are all things that can be measured tangibly.

Just as we analyze how children grow, develop, learn, and value their physical and mental wellbeing, so too this study argues that the spiritual life of children should also be brought into the conversation. Children have an inherent spirituality which should be encouraged to engage, deepen, and develop as a natural aspect of their childhood experiences through intentional activities fostered by trusted and caring adults.

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<sup>1</sup> There are many organizations dedicated to the study of social emotional learning, or socio-emotional development. There are some organizations that have developed curriculum to be used in a classroom setting to formally educate and practice these skills with children. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning is one of the groups that can provide significant background and more information on this topic.  
<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>

*What is Spirituality?*

Spiritual or spirituality have become almost buzzwords in this atmosphere of nonconformity to organized religion. Amidst the many conversations about spiritual identity we find multiple understandings of the term spirituality. The definition of spirituality can range from being humanist and applicable in a broad sense to being strictly associated with a particular religion. Sandra Schneiders addresses this directly in her article “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum.”<sup>2</sup> Schneiders provides an array of definitions from different theologians on the topic. The definition supplied by Peter Van Ness is one that carries no relationship to a religion. Van Ness explains that spirituality is “the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is.”<sup>3</sup>

This broad understanding of spirituality can be accessible by both persons who identify as religious and those who are nonaffiliated. Schneiders herself understands spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>4</sup> Schneiders is a practicing Catholic Sister, but her open definition reaches farther by not labeling a specific faith practice. Both of these definitions encompass spirituality in a broad manner, so as to be relevant for a wide interpretation of the term.

Many also perceive the term spirituality through a Christian lens. Similarly, Bernard McGinn discusses some of these definitions in his article, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline.”<sup>5</sup> McGinn makes note that there are multiple categories of the definitions of spirituality. McGinn explains, “Without by any means making an exhaustive search, I recently turned up some thirty-five different definitions of spirituality, both “first-order” definitions, that is, ones concerned with the phenomenon itself, and “second-order” definitions treating of the study of spirituality. Most of the

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<sup>2</sup> Sandra Marie Schneiders, “Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” *Spiritus* 3, no. 2 (Fall 2003): 163-185.

<sup>3</sup> Schneiders, “Religion vs Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum,” 166, citing Peter Van Ness, “Introduction: Spirituality and the Secular Quest,” in *Spirituality and the Secular Quest, World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, vol. 22, edited by Peter Van Ness (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 5.

<sup>4</sup> Schneiders, 166.

<sup>5</sup> Bernard McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” in *Minding the Spirit*, ed. Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2005), 29.



second-order definitions are of the theological variety.”<sup>6</sup> He goes on to highlight several definitions that are explicitly religious. For example, the definition from Pierre Pourret directly refers to Christianity in his definition of spirituality as he states that “spirituality is that part of theology which deals with Christian perfection and the ways that lead to it.”<sup>7</sup> Some theologians use the term “spiritual theology” within their definition of spirituality to demonstrate the connectedness between spirituality and theology. McGinn highlights that “...many recent discussions of spirituality, even by Catholics, have hesitated over the term ‘spiritual theology,’ perhaps because of their fear that this may involve the reduction of spirituality to a mere appendage of dogmatic or moral theology.”<sup>8</sup> It is important to recognize the many different approaches to and definitions of spirituality, and understand the various contexts from which they arise. A small, but significant note: throughout this paper, the term spirituality and spiritual life will be used nearly interchangeably, in that one’s spirituality has a direct correlation to how they interact with other people, ideas, problems, or other aspects of life greater than themselves.

#### *Van Bavel’s Definition of Spirituality*

This paper will use the definition provided by Augustinian friar Tarcisius van Bavel, which encapsulates the expansive grasp that spirituality has. Van Bavel claims, “Spirituality is a permanent inner attitude of the human mind and heart, obtained through a process of personal assimilation of an evangelical value, in dialogue with the world of the individual and of the human race as a whole, originating from a free choice, and made concrete as a particular center of our lifestyle with due emphasis and attention.”<sup>9</sup>

A few key phrases of note explain why this is the chosen definition for this paper. Van Bavel begins by stating that “spirituality is a permanent inner attitude of the human mind and heart,” implying that spirituality is an ongoing and present reality during one’s life. It is also significant that van Bavel

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<sup>6</sup> McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” 29.

<sup>7</sup> McGinn, 30.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Tarcisius van Bavel OSA, *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Henry Jackson (Philadelphia: Augustinian Press, 1996), 114.

identifies where this feeling is originating, in one's mind and heart. Van Bavel uses the term "attitude" as the base for his definition. This term can be interpreted in a variety of ways. Attitude is the way one responds to an external force or a new experience. Attitude centers around a connection to something greater than oneself; it is how people bridge the gap between the self and the universe. Furthermore, van Bavel speaks of the "attitude of the human mind and heart." The mind and heart are organs within the body. However, they are also symbols of the ways that the human mind processes and analyzes new experiences or questions. The mind symbolizes the space where knowledge meets wonder. Van Bavel also refers to the human heart that affects one's attitude. Heart symbolizes that instinctual feeling that can connect people through an intense bond. It is where one detects initial beliefs about things.

Van Bavel explains that spirituality is "obtained through a process of personal assimilation of an evangelical value, in dialogue with the world of the individual and of the human race as a whole." As mentioned above, some definitions of spirituality can be closely intertwined with theology specifically. "Evangelical" can specifically refer to the Christian denominations that use this word to define themselves, as well as to someone trying to promote the spread of Christian teaching. In his use of the term "evangelical," Van Bavel takes the stance that spirituality is elicited from the Gospels of the Christian Bible. However, van Bavel does not necessarily imply dogmatic or doctrinal messages from the Gospels. Instead, he highlights the central thematic contents of the New Testament: love, justice, and peace. The term "evangelical" is rooted within the Christian sphere. However, each person, regardless of one's association with Christianity, can "assimilate" or embrace these themes of love, peace, and justice. Throughout this paper, it is important to recognize that the author's personal experience is rooted within a Christian, specifically a Catholic, environment. That being said, this definition still can be applied to individuals who are not affiliated with the Christian or Catholic faith. Through engaging in conversation with others, and allowing time for personal self-reflection, people can identify their own spirituality.

The last part of van Bavel's definition states that spirituality "originat[es] from a free choice, and made concrete as a particular center of our lifestyle with due emphasis and attention." Spirituality cannot be forced on anyone, but instead is a choice made by the individual. While it is each individual's decision,

it is made through a deliberate and conscious choice to be made a central aspect of one's life. Each person chooses how much to invest in the exploration of one's spiritual life, as well as how closely it partners with an organized religion. There is a natural process of trial and error, where one can try out different practices. By paying attention to how those experiences resonate in one's heart, whether it provides a sense of peace or contentment, a caregiver can then discern what helps a child grow in their spirituality.

*Working with Children 8 - 12 years old*

The inspiration for this paper arose from a firsthand experience working as an educator and youth minister of children within the specific 8-12 age range. Traditionally this age range includes those from grades 3 to 6. This distinction was chosen because these are the grades and ages where children are typically starting to explore their processing and critical thinking skills both in academic and social settings. Why not also make that same connection with their spiritual environment too? In this paper, the spiritual life of children will be examined and unpacked such that the reader can ascertain his or her potential role in the guidance of this aspect of a child's life. This paper will also provide reflection for the reader to appreciate the reality and role of spirituality in the lives of children and consider the meaningful, but unassuming, steps that can be fruitful in their lives.

Children often are not thought of as having their own individual faith practice. One reason children are classified as such is because they require a guardian to help take care of them and ensure their needs are met. Children receive guidance from parents, grandparents, teachers, clergy, and other trusted adults. The title of this paper refers to "pastoral insight" on spirituality. Who could this insight be coming from, and just as importantly, who is the recipient? According to Paul E Johnson, pastoral refers to the "genuine concern for each person...in a face to face relationship."<sup>10</sup> As the word is traditionally used, it alludes to sheep and the shepherd, "pastor" in Latin, who tends to the flock.<sup>11</sup> "Pastoral insight" therefore refers to those who supply guidance within a faith community. The pastoral insight this paper

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<sup>10</sup> Paul E. Johnson, "A Theology of Pastoral Care," *Journal of Religion and Health* 3, no. 2 (1964): 171–75, accessed August 2023. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27504625>.

<sup>11</sup> Fr. Kenneth Baker, "What does it mean to be 'pastoral'?" *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, November 26, 2012, accessed August 2023, <https://www.hprweb.com/2012/11/editorial-what-does-it-mean-to-be-pastoral/>

will present simply speaks to the advice or guidance given to another from a space of caring and a desire to help the recipient. Anyone who finds themselves in a position to present care or guidance on the topic of one's spiritual life, could be identified as being pastoral, including those individuals important in a child's life, such as those mentioned above.

*Encouraging Spirituality in a Religiously Diverse Classroom*

The premise for this paper grows out of the author's own experience of teaching in a Catholic grammar school in Dorchester, Massachusetts. Within this specific classroom, the demographic of students is diverse: approximately 25% of students are active, practicing Catholics; around 70% are Christian (including Catholics who don't regularly attend Mass); less than 5% are either not Christian or not religiously affiliated. While the objectives within a Religion class at a Catholic school are to teach certain doctrinal Truths of the Catholic faith, teachers also have the responsibility to include all students, even ones who don't believe or practice that faith. It is not a teacher's job to convert or instruct students what to believe; teachers can however provide a safe and healthy space to explore and understand how to connect and open oneself to external forces greater than the self. A healthy, active spiritual life can contribute to one's religious practice. This is the difference between having a strictly religious approach, compared to a spiritual one in a classroom setting. It is important that the choice for children to engage with their own spiritual life is provided to them. Furthermore children would be able to apply that spiritual practice to religion. That however is one option, as children can be just as successful without making a connection to a specific faith practice. The goal of this paper is to encourage the thesis to be applied to a variety of settings, not just at a Catholic grade school.

*Engage, Deepen, and Develop*

An important term to unpack within the thesis is threefold: engage, deepen, and develop, all aspects of the process of personal assimilation mentioned in van Bavel's definition of spirituality.. Born with each child is the innate connection to a spiritual life, to something that is beyond the self. Without proper stimulation, guidance, and training, children can be totally unaware of their own potential by lacking the direction to encounter their true spirituality. Most grown ups are still navigating aspects of

their spiritual life, understanding what spirituality means, and how they feel spiritually nourished. How are kids expected to analyze a spiritual life on their own? Children should engage, deepen, and develop their spirituality, which means engaging, deepening and developing their experience and understanding of peace, justice and love. Chapter three will elaborate on these three dynamics and provide many examples.

Engagement is a hands on practice that can be done after the introduction of a topic. Think of it as the initial interaction with a new idea; the first time you see a math equation used or hear a new vocabulary word used in context. Deepening of a child's spirituality is the next logical step after introduction of a new topic. This step would include discussion, questioning, trial and error, experimentation. To deepen one's spirituality, children will be introduced to and guided through different activities and practices to explore. In addition to that, the children also will have their own independent practice, where they can determine what works and what does not.

Lastly, there is development of the child's spirituality. Gradual change occurs from exposure to different exercises that evoke different feelings from the child. It could be positive or negative, in the sense of finding a practice that resonates with the child or finding one that doesn't.

These three steps of engagement, deepening, and development should act as a seamless progression flowing to each new step. Through exposure, meaningful exploration, and active growth, children can work through in a very hands-on approach to understanding and taking ownership of their own spirituality. It is important to recognize that none of this engagement, deepening, or development can be forced on a child. Exposure to certain spiritual practices can be performed directly, specifically if done in a classroom or religious education setting. However it then becomes the choice for each child to engage with, deepen, and develop their spirituality. There is no determined linear growth or path. It will not necessarily be constant or continual. Children are allowed the freedom to explore and choose what sparks a flame and what feeds that fire.

### *Inherent Spirituality*

This argument claims children should interact with their spirituality through natural experiences and intentional activities. The implication of natural and intentional processes balance out this experience

that children can have. Considering that spirituality is an innate and inherent quality for children, the way they are exposed should be along those lines of inherency. Engagement should not be inauthentic or fraudulent; it should stem from the natural curiosity of the child. Children are disposed to ask inquisitive questions rooted in spirituality quandaries,<sup>12</sup> and they would benefit from a thought partner or a mature guide to assist them in their thinking. Working with what is given and already exists within the child is a natural approach, honing in to the questions lurking under the surface. Intentionality pairs well with this natural approach. The thought is that spirituality shouldn't be explored in a manner that is aggressive or narrow. The way that children could interpret their spirituality is as numerous as the number of children engaging with their spirituality. There should be intention behind the activities to take into account the vastness of spirituality and the nonlinear way that children will react to it.

Spirituality has gained a lot of traction as an identity, specifically with the label of being “Spiritual, but not religious (SBNR).”<sup>13</sup> This paper stresses the importance of reckoning how spirituality in this younger age group, if tended to beginning at a younger age, can blossom and be fostered into something more than what the studies currently report. Growing up in an environment where spirituality is more prevalent than religion, children are mainly disposed to a particular faith practice if it is an important part of their family's values. Children need targeted support within their spirituality, as they are the most vulnerable because they don't necessarily have the spiritual support in other parts of their lives. If a decreasing amount of adults from varying generations are not participating in church or religious services, they most likely aren't sending their children alone. Furthermore, children cannot go alone or without permission from their guardians. How then do they receive support to engage, deepen and develop their spiritual lives? There is a need for settings in which responsible, caring adults exercise pastoral care for the spiritual development of children.

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<sup>12</sup> Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child* (New York: Picador, 2015).

<sup>13</sup> Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz. “More Americans now say they're spiritual but not religious.” Washington, DC: PEW Research Center. September 6, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>

*Schneiders' Relationships between Religion and Spirituality*

It is important to take some time to explore the relationship between spirituality and religion. For those unfamiliar with these two concepts, oftentimes these terms are used almost interchangeably. However they are not the same and there are different opinions about their relationship. In her essay, "Religion vs. Spirituality," Sandra Schneiders addresses exactly what the title says - the tensions between these two powerful concepts. Schneiders posits three different dynamics that can exist in the religion versus spirituality debate. The dynamics are as follows: firstly, that religion and spirituality are strangers; secondly, that religion and spirituality are rivals; and thirdly, that religion and spirituality are partners.<sup>14</sup>

The first relationship that Schneiders introduces explains that religion and spirituality are at odds. As Schneiders writes, "the two [are] separate enterprises with no necessary connection." This can stem from a variety of causes. Religion refers to a specific practice with specific beliefs and methods of worship, while spirituality, as explored above can be interpreted in a plethora of ways, pertains to one's feelings or relationship with an external force. The implication that religion and spirituality are "rivals" and butting heads with each other is not one-sided, but instead is accepted by both those who identify solely as religious, and who identify solely as spiritual. Schneiders states, "on the one hand, [there are] contemporaries who respect the religious involvement of others but are simply not interested in participating in religion themselves, or of those, on the other hand, who consider correct and faithful religious practice quite adequate to their needs without any superfluous spirituality trimmings."<sup>15</sup> It is of note how these "strangers" interact with one another. "Interestingly enough, and especially among the young, this religionless spirituality often freely avails itself of the accoutrements of religion... Indeed, even the most secular types of spirituality seem bound to borrow some of their resources from the religious tradition they repudiate."<sup>16</sup> Even as separate entities, there is some overlap between these two

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<sup>14</sup> Schneiders, "Religion vs Spirituality," 163-165.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>16</sup> Schneiders, "Religion vs Spirituality," 164.

forces seemingly at odds with each other. While they borrow resources, the meaning behind them is different for each group.

The second relationship that Schneiders explores introduces a conflicting relationship between religion and spirituality. Schneiders goes as far to say the two are “rivals, if not enemies...as conflicting realities.”<sup>17</sup> This can be seen directly when individuals try to identify themselves with specific terms, as mentioned above. Recently there has been buzz with the phrase “spiritual, but not religious;” indicating the desire to push away from organized religion. There are multiple reasons why some consider religion and spirituality to be rivals. “This is the position, on the one hand, of many who have repudiated a religion that has hurt them or who simply find religion empty, hypocritical, or fossilized and, on the other hand, of those whose dependence on religious authority is threatened by spirituality which does not ask clerical permission to accept official restraints in its quest for God.”<sup>18</sup> These terms are so powerful that, without full understanding of each, it can be easy to assume they are mutually exclusive. However, Schneiders addresses this in her final explanation.

The third and final relationship between religion and spirituality that Schneiders discusses shows that religion and spirituality are “partners in the search for God.”<sup>19</sup> In this understanding, religion and spirituality are not in competition with each other. Instead, they both undertake the task of helping individuals get closer to God. There is a choice that falls upon each individual as they see fit, to extract what they need from each identity. Schneiders says they are “as two dimensions of a single enterprise which, like body and spirit, are often in tension but are essential to each other and constitute, together, a single reality.”<sup>20</sup> As Schneiders alludes, it might not be a perfect relationship, as tension can provide some give and take. However, this third dynamic understands religion and spirituality to have a similar goal and to be of like-minded nature.

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<sup>17</sup> Schneiders., 164.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 164.



In this paper, it will be important moving forward to recognize that this author adopts the third relationship that Schneiders discusses, that religion and spirituality are partners that complement one another. These two things are not at odds. Some people identify strongly with a religion, and at the same time grow in their spiritual lives. However, throughout this paper, when discussing the spiritual life of children and the practices recommended for helping the development of said spiritual life, it is not implied that any of the children are required to or in fact associate with a particular religion.

#### *Target Audience for this Paper*

As participation in religious services continues to severely decrease,<sup>21</sup> it is clear that there is an evident need for some sort of regeneration of spirit for those of all ages, but specifically children. The target audience is generally adults who find themselves, either personally or professionally, in a position to journey alongside children as they mature and start exploring the bigger questions of life and spirituality. This group might include parents, teachers, clergy, laypersons, as well as religious educators; this audience is not limited to a certain faith practice, nor is it exclusive of those not affiliated with religion in general. The goal of this paper is to bring awareness to this specific audience of the role they have in helping to foster the budding spiritual lives of children.

#### *Summary*

This paper claims that children have an inherent spirituality which should be encouraged to engage, deepen, and develop as a natural aspect of their childhood experiences through intentional activities as provided by trusted and caring adults. In reading this paper, the author hopes that educators, youth ministers, coaches, and parents can recognize the untapped spiritual life within children and work to introduce children to activities that will allow spiritual growth. Specifically focusing on children from the ages of 8 to 12 and using an example within a Catholic school, the manner in which these topics will be introduced are deliberate and student centered, allowing for the engagement and development to come

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<sup>21</sup> Jeffrey M. Jones, "U.S. Church Membership Falls Below Majority for First Time," Washington, DC: Gallup, March 21, 2021, accessed August 2023. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

from an authentic exploration. While there are many understandings of spirituality, this paper uses that of Tarcisius van Bavel; and is influenced by Sandra Schneiders' explanation of the dynamics of spirituality and religion.

## Chapter 2: Recent Research on the Spiritual Development of Children

Spirituality has been a growing concept in the religion and theology world. There has been increased attention in recent years to this topic. Most researchers look at those who identify as spiritual in a world that is moving farther away from organized religion. They try to understand the need for this new label and explore reasons for the wave of separation from religious traditions. Many studies focus on members from the millennial generation<sup>22</sup> who mark the initial movement to identify as “spiritual, but not religious.”<sup>23</sup> Bountiful research exists on individuals from ages 25-40 on what a healthy spiritual life looks like and how one fosters a spiritual life. In the past 10 years attention has started to shift, with more research about the spirituality of children. Specifically these studies are investigating the child’s natural disposition regarding spirituality and how adults play a role in passing on spirituality to their children.

Two key figures in the study of children’s spirituality are Dr. Lisa Miller from Columbia University and Dr. Christian Smith from the University of Notre Dame. The research conducted by Drs. Miller and Smith provide central focus throughout writing this paper. Both are proponents for recognizing the natural spirituality within children, although their backgrounds and approaches vary. They also have excellent recommendations and suggestions of practical steps that can be used to develop the spiritual lives of children.

### *Miller’s Definition of Spirituality*

Dr. Lisa Miller is a psychologist who focuses on the role that religion and spirituality have on the lives of children and their mental well-being. As a leading scholar on the topic of children and spirituality, it is necessary to understand what Miller’s definition of spirituality is. Miller defines spirituality as “an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and guiding. The word we give to this higher

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<sup>22</sup> Daniel A. Cox, “Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America,” Survey Center on American Life, March 24, 2022, accessed August 2023. <https://www.americansurveycenter.org/research/generation-z-future-of-faith/>

<sup>23</sup> Pew Research, “Millennials are less religious than older Americans, but just as spiritual,” Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, November 23, 2015, accessed August 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2015/11/23/millennials-are-less-religious-than-older-americans-but-just-as-spiritual/>

power might be God, nature, spirit, the universe, the creator, or other words that represent a divine presence. But the important point is that spirituality encompasses our relationship and dialogue with this higher presence.”<sup>24</sup> For Miller, spirituality is the connection that a person can have with something that is greater or more than the self. She also understands this connection to be positive and beneficial to the person. Moreover, spirituality for Miller is not about belief in something; it is rooted in the relationship and engagement between the two actors. It is important to consider van Bavel’s definition of spirituality alongside Miller’s, as they both share important characteristics within their definitions. Van Bavel defines spirituality as “a permanent inner attitude of the human heart and mind.” As explained in Chapter 1, attitude is the way one responds to external forces, and how an individual connects to something greater than the self. This parallels what Miller describes with her terms of “relationship to a higher power.” Both van Bavel and Miller recognize the need for an interaction, although not necessarily tangible, between the self and this higher entity. Both thinkers also highlight use of dialogue as a way of establishing said relationship.

Lisa Miller did a press tour surrounding the publication of her book *The Spiritual Child* during which she provided background information on her research and the layout for her approach to nurturing the spiritual life of children. Miller’s article, “How to raise a spiritual child: 3 exercises to try with your family”<sup>25</sup> for *Today* provides concrete steps that caregivers can adopt to help foster a spiritual life. In the concise, but powerful exercises offered, Miller introduces different approaches for caregivers to make these spiritual connections. Miller is explicit in her belief that “the most important thing we can do for our children is to support their natural spirituality.”<sup>26</sup> The three exercises offered are called “Hosting Council,” “Field of Love,” and “Trail Angels.” Miller explains the exercises, suggests a way of introducing them to kids, and offers insight into how each exercise can benefit children. It is valuable to note that Miller recognizes “parenting for strong spirituality can start with early childhood, but we can

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<sup>24</sup> Lisa Miller, *The Spiritual Child* (New York: Picador, 2015), 24.

<sup>25</sup> Lisa Miller, “How to raise a spiritual child: 3 exercises to try with your family,” *Today*, March 30, 2015, accessed August 2023, <https://www.today.com/parents/how-raise-spiritual-child-3-exercises-dr-lisa-miller-t11736>

<sup>26</sup> Miller, “How to raise a spiritual child: 3 exercises to try with your family.”

"jump in" at any point."<sup>27</sup> These exercises, an expanded understanding of "parenting," and other ideas, will be elaborated on further in Chapter 3.

In her article "Why Kids Who Believe in Something Are Happier and Healthier" published in Time Magazine, the first thing that Miller does is recognize "that children are born with an innate capacity for spirituality just as they are born with the capability to learn a language, read and think."<sup>28</sup> She then explains what the scientific research says about the impact that spirituality, or believing in something greater than the self, can have on children. Miller highlights the competitive, achievement based society in which children live, involving academics, athletics, and social pressures, which have taken a toll on the mental health and wellbeing of many young people. Miller explains that "kids with a strong spirituality overall have greater grit, higher grades, more optimism and persistence than kids without a strong sense of spirituality."<sup>29</sup> Not only does spirituality benefit the child in academics, athletics, and social environments, but Miller demonstrates there is a physical connection to the wellbeing of a child as well. Miller states, "Personal spirituality that includes a direct personal relationship with nature, a universal presence or higher power (by any name) has a clear correlation with physical wellness and recovery from depression and disease."<sup>30</sup> Miller cites 40% of teenagers are less likely to use drugs if they are in touch with their spiritual life.<sup>31</sup> The power of belief, rooted throughout this inherent quality of children, is expansive to multiple facets of life.

Robin Young conducted an interview done through NPR Station WBUR with Miller in a segment featured on the program "Here and Now." In the interview, which is titled, "What Does it Mean to Raise a Spiritual Child?" Miller discusses the ways people can nurture the innate spirituality within children. She reiterates the statistics detailing how children who lead a spiritual life "are 40% less likely to use and

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<sup>27</sup> Miller, "How to raise a spiritual child: 3 exercises to try with your family."

<sup>28</sup> Lisa Miller, "Why Kids Who Believe in Something Are Happier and Healthier," Time.com, April 17, 2015, accessed August 2023, <https://time.com/3825083/why-kids-who-believe-in-something-are-happier-and-healthier/>

<sup>29</sup> Miller, "Why Kids Who Believe in Something Are Happier and Healthier."

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

abuse substances, and have 60% less depression than other teenagers.”<sup>32</sup> Miller addresses how caregivers can support spirituality within children. Her words and ideas are reassuring as parents simply need to “show up and think of the child as a knower.”<sup>33</sup> Miller reminds the reader that it is okay to not know the right answer, there is power in being able to “sit by the child and let them explore.”<sup>34</sup> Miller helps to provide a basic understanding for parents and caregivers that it is important to journey alongside the child; not to have any answers or teach any lessons, but to simply support the child’s own exploration.

The final and key source from Miller is her lecture titled “The Child is a Spiritual Child” at the interfaith conference, Festival of Faiths.<sup>35</sup> The theme of the 2019 Festival of Faiths was “Sacred Cosmos: Faith and Science,” an apt topic for Miller to present her expertise where child psychology intersects with child spirituality. In this 20 minute lecture, Miller introduces and explains her argument, presents examples from her own life experience, and provides tangible suggestions as a takeaway for listeners. Miller reinforces her belief about where spirituality comes from, and the impact society can play. “Capacity for spirituality is one-third innate, two-thirds socialized; how we live, lives side by side with children and how they look at the world.”<sup>36</sup> She connects the interior “capacity” of a child’s spiritual life to the exterior forces that play a strong role in their spirituality, suggesting the influence that adults have with children. Miller reassures the audience that advanced knowledge in spirituality is not necessary to support the developing spiritual life of a child. Instead, Miller proposes accompaniment through uncertainty or times of searching.<sup>37</sup> She also suggests that providing unconditional love and transparency through one’s own exploration is fruitful. Perhaps the most powerful recommendation Miller provides is offering an invitation to an intentional, spirituality-rooted practice: asking something as simple as “Can

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<sup>32</sup> Lisa Miller, “What Does It Mean To Raise A Spiritual Child?” WBUR, “Here and Now,” October 1, 2015, accessed August 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2015/10/01/spiritual-children-lisa-miller>

<sup>33</sup> Miller, “What does it mean to raise a spiritual child?”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Lisa Miller, “The Child is a Spiritual Child” (video of lecture, Festival of Faiths hosted by the Center of Interfaith Relations in Louisville, KY, April 25-27, 2019), accessed August 2023 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYaFK4GtwAY>

<sup>36</sup> Miller, “The Child is a Spiritual Child.”

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

we take a moment to be thankful, to pray, or take a walk in nature?”<sup>38</sup> suggesting that “we are ambassadors”<sup>39</sup> with children in their spiritual journey.

*Smith’s Definition of Spirituality*

While Christian Smith has done a significant amount of research on the spiritual life of children, he is by trade a sociologist. He does not have on record a definition of spirituality in the same way that Sandra Schneiders, Lisa Miller, or Tarcisius van Bavel do. This could demonstrate that he sees religion and spirituality inextricably linked, that one’s spirituality is a characteristic of one’s religion being lived out.

Christian Smith’s work has expanded from initially studying spirituality in teenagers, onto religious parenting and its influence on children. Smith focuses on how simple interactions can have profound effects on a child’s spirituality. These ideas are attainable and accessible to any person, regardless of their educational background on the topic of spirituality. The ongoing theme Smith highlights is the power of the ordinary - not what is done on Sunday or specifically when talking about religion; but through one’s actions as a role model, as a friendly “nudge” in a positive direction. Smith recognizes the relationship between spirituality and religion, as one that can exist, but is not necessary for a successful and thriving spiritual life. If applying Schneiders’s threefold explanation of the relationship between religion and spirituality to Smith’s work, one would find that he recognizes the relationship as mutually supportive of one another. When Smith writes, he alludes constantly to religion, he considers spirituality to be a quality of practicing one’s own Christian faith.

In a recently published book, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation*,<sup>40</sup> co-authored with Amy Adamczyk, Christian Smith focuses on the role of parental figures and specifically the spiritual influence they have on children. Smith’s article, “Keeping the

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<sup>38</sup> Miller, “The Child is a Spiritual Child.”

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Christian Smith and Amy Adamczyk. *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021.

Faith,”<sup>41</sup> echoes much of what his book discusses. The primary argument being that “parents exert far and away the greatest influence on their children’s religious outcomes.”<sup>42</sup> Most often parents are associated with being responsible for dictating what the faith practice of a household will be. These practices can be limited to the home, like family prayer before meals or individual prayer before bed; or they can be expanded to a faith community, in which parents will determine whether children participate in any initiation rites or attend weekly services.

Smith, however, acknowledges an important misconception, “What makes every other influence pale into virtual insignificance is the importance (or not) of the religious beliefs and practices of American parents in *their ordinary lives* - not only on holy days but every day, throughout weeks and years.”<sup>43</sup> By saying this, Smith suggests that spirituality can be passed down through commonplace acts or interactions. This is significant since spirituality does not need to be associated with a specific religious practice. There are small, but meaningful, ways of engaging children in a way that is digestible for the young mind, that won’t overwhelm or be dramatic. Smith seemingly asks and answers the big question at hand: “What can committed, religious parents do to increase their chances of raising [spiritual, practicing] young adults? Simply be themselves.”<sup>44</sup> For Smith, guiding a child into a spiritual lifestyle does not have to be strenuous or overbearing, for the caregiver or the child. It instead can be a natural aspect of their development, seamless to the everyday ordinary life.

In an interview with a podcast for the Lewis Center for Church Leadership,<sup>45</sup> Smith reiterates the research he has amassed on children and the impact that parents can have on their spiritual development. Smith addresses the many voices that influence children especially in this day and age. Smith explains, “After kids turn 12, social media and peers become larger factors in their lives. Parents still have decisive

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<sup>41</sup> Christian Smith, “Keeping the Faith,” *First Things*, May 2021, accessed August 2023, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2021/05/keeping-the-faith>

<sup>42</sup> Smith, “Keeping the Faith.”

<sup>43</sup> Smith, “Keeping the Faith.”

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Ann A. Michel, host, “How Parents Pass Religious Faith to their Children” featuring Christian Smith, *Leading Ideas Talks (Video Podcast) Episode 93, Lewis Center for Church Leadership*, January 11, 2022, accessed August 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T3vvQniBX-U>



influence in the formative development of their teen's lives."<sup>46</sup> With a significant impact, even amidst other influences, parents and caregivers can pass on and promote spirituality to the next generation. Smith focuses on the "normalization of faith in daily life,"<sup>47</sup> highlighting the need for exposure in everyday moments. His suggestions imply that these steps are accessible to all. Smith explains, "You don't need a Masters of Divinity degree to influence your children. A lot of it is just being an authentic person of faith where it is important in your life, and talking about that, being open about that. Parents can't act something that you're not. We get what we are."<sup>48</sup> The role that parents play in how their child grows as a spiritual being is rooted in part in how the parent shares their own spirituality. This can be done in simple ways, through living out one's faith that can be witnessed by others. Authenticity is an important part in being able to accompany a child through the spiritual journey.

#### *Other Sources*

Lisa Miller and Christian Smith are two guiding lights in their field that help to shape the argument addressed in this paper. There are, however, other thinkers and sources that have significant influence on the important topics that serve as the basis of this paper - mainly the understanding of spirituality. Two major theologians who lay the foundation are Sandra Schneiders and Bernard McGinn. They both provide an encompassing understanding of the term spirituality by extracting the theories of different theologians and philosophers. Schneiders introduces an important distinction between Religion and Spirituality in her aptly titled article, "Religion vs. Spirituality: A Contemporary Conundrum," in which she looks at these two terms and explores the relationship. Schneiders points out that there are individuals who see religion and spirituality as competing forces, as discussed in Chapter One. Schneiders's own beliefs uphold that while religion and spirituality can be in conflict, they ideally partner nicely with each other.<sup>49</sup> As she makes her case on the relationship between religion and spirituality,

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<sup>46</sup> Michel, "How Parents Pass Religious Faith to their Children."

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Michel, "How Parents Pass Religious Faith to their Children."

<sup>49</sup> Schneiders, "Religion vs Spirituality," 176.

Schneiders presents definitions of spirituality from both herself and Peter Van Ness, so as to explain that religion and spirituality are not mutually exclusive.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Schneiders defines spirituality as “the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.”<sup>50</sup> Schneiders takes an open-minded approach in her understanding of spirituality, allowing it to be accessed by multiple groups. It is central to Schneiders that spirituality stems from intentional experience with real world constructs, as well as with the opportunity for personal processing. Schneiders nicely complements the definition presented by van Bavel. Van Bavel sees spirituality similarly as an “inner attitude of human mind and heart,” which partners with the “self-transcendence” Schneiders speaks of. Van Bavel also supports the importance of this “experience of conscious involvement,” as he explains it as “dialogue with the world of the individual and the human race as a whole.” Van Bavel does allude to the evangelical values, unlike Schneiders; however these two thinkers align in their understanding of spirituality.

It is important also to compare Schneiders’ definition with that of Miller. Miller has a simple definition viewing spirituality as “an inner sense of relationship to a higher power that is loving and guiding. Spirituality encompasses our relationship and dialogue with this higher presence.” Schneiders speaks of an “ultimate value one perceives.” This value could be seen as a comparable entity that Miller speaks to when Miller uses the phrase “higher power.” Schneiders also supports Miller’s ideas of “relationship and dialogue” through her terminology “the project of life-integration through self-transcendence.” These three thinkers, while different in their approaches, have definitions that complement each other.

Theologian Bernard McGinn is another source who provides key background information on spirituality. McGinn is a proponent of the third relationship that Schneiders speaks of, where religion and spirituality work as partners. In his article in *Minding the Spirit*, titled “The Letter and the Spirit:

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<sup>50</sup> Schneiders, “Religion vs Spirituality,” 166.

Spirituality as An Academic Discipline,”<sup>51</sup> McGinn shares this history, as well as the impact that teaching spirituality could provide. McGinn refers to a multitude of thinkers who provide their own definitions of spirituality, demonstrating that the concept is quite expansive, particularly when trying to navigate how to teach spirituality within a religious context.

McGinn himself is forthcoming in sharing the definitions from other theologians, shocked by the quantity he was able to find. “Without by any means making an exhaustive search, I recently turned up some thirty-five different definitions of spirituality, both “first-order” definitions, that is, ones concerned with the phenomenon itself, and “second-order” definitions treating of the study of spirituality.”<sup>52</sup> In addition to the multiple “orders” that these definitions can be sorted into, McGinn also looks at how Schneiders considers approaching spirituality, through a dogmatic or anthropological approach.<sup>53</sup> However he expands upon this by suggesting that “the picture is actually more complicated than that, because there is a third option, an historical-contextual one...it would be better to think of recent views of spirituality as trying to relate various theological, anthropological and historical-contextual ways of conceiving the connection between limited and unlimited value systems.”<sup>54</sup> McGinn appreciates the complexity of spirituality. Not only does he recognize the approaches that theologians take when trying to define it, but he also suggests another approach and categorizes the types of definitions. McGinn himself never directly provides his own definition. “I do not believe that we have any really adequate definition of spirituality at the present time-and we may never have (just as we will probably never have a fully adequate definition of religion).”<sup>55</sup> This however is not a hopeless reality for McGinn, so long as theologians can agree to use the parameters that exist to help organize the continuing process of working through this term.

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<sup>51</sup> McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit: Spirituality as an Academic Discipline,” 29.

<sup>52</sup> McGinn, “The Letter and the Spirit,” 29.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Both the Pew Research Center and the Survey Center on American Life share data pertaining to the topic of spirituality. While their studies are widespread and span significant aspects of religion and spirituality, they are used in this paper to analyze the attraction and adoption of spirituality as an important dimension of life. The specific Pew Research Center's study referenced is titled "Millennials are less religious than older Americans, but just as spiritual."<sup>56</sup> The Pew Researchers explain their own definition of spirituality by saying, "For the purposes of this analysis, spirituality refers to beliefs or feelings about supernatural phenomena, such as life after death, the existence of a soul apart from the human body, and the presence of spiritual energy in physical things such as mountains, trees or crystals."<sup>57</sup> This study speaks to the three-fold relationship between religion and spirituality as introduced by Schneiders, namely, religion and spirituality as strangers, as rivals, or as partners. Although targeting an older age range than this paper, this survey still establishes the reality of spirituality in the lives of young people. Likewise the Survey Center on American Life focuses on the growing generational departure from organized religion.<sup>58</sup> These surveys provide context that supports the existence of, and need for further development of, spirituality in our society.

Just as Miller and Smith advocate for awareness of and action toward the development of the spiritual lives of children, there are still others who work directly with this population and are able to present the findings from their own expertise. John Nimmo, Mona Abo-Zena, and Debbie LeeKeenan published a journal article on anti-bias education called "Finding a Place for the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Children and Their Families: An Anti-Bias Approach."<sup>59</sup> Nimmo and Abo-Zena, both professors of early childhood education, and LeeKeenan, an experienced educator, take into consideration

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<sup>56</sup> Pew Research, "Millennials are less religious than older Americans, but just as spiritual."

<sup>57</sup> Pew Research Center, "Attitudes towards Spirituality and Religion," Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, May 29, 2018, accessed August 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2018/05/29/attitudes-toward-spirituality-and-religion/>

<sup>58</sup> Daniel A. Cox, "Generation Z and the Future of Faith in America"

<sup>59</sup> John Nimmo, Mona M. Abo-Zena, and Debbie LeeKeenan, "Finding a Place for the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Children and Their Families: An Anti-Bias Approach," *YC Young Children* 74, no. 5 (2019): 37–45, accessed August 2023, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26842304>.

the different environments children are a part of and how spirituality coexists in those spaces, particularly ones that aren't naturally conducive to discussing issues of the spiritual nature.

As educators, Nimmo, Abo-Zena, and LeeKeenan have expert knowledge of what happens in a classroom setting and realistic commentary on how to respond in creating an anti-bias classroom for children to safely explore and share their religious and spiritual lives. In this article, Nimmo, Abo-Zena, and LeeKeenan provide their own understanding of spirituality saying, "Spirituality involves going beyond the self in search of connectedness, meaning, purpose and contribution."<sup>60</sup> This definition aligns with that of van Bavel, in that spirituality is a connection made with something greater than the self. They also categorize the relationship between religion and spirituality, in a way that Sandra Schneiders would appreciate, speaking to the overlap that can occur between the two. "Religion is a specific way of exercising that spirituality."<sup>61</sup> Nimmo, Abo-Zena, and LeeKeenan acknowledge that the classroom is a second home for many children, it is considered a safe place where "big questions about the metaphysical world and matters of faith" may arise.<sup>62</sup> The authors introduce and explain four domains that can be impacted by spirituality, and how those domains formulate in the classroom. This article covers the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical domains. Nimmo, Abo-Zena, and LeeKeenan describe the ways each of these domains present themselves in the classroom, along with the developmental benefits of the role that spirituality plays in those domains. For example, "Young children develop empathy for others and develop affinities through religious behaviors: 'My prayer shawl looks like grandpa's.'"<sup>63</sup>

This article suggests that rather than be uncomfortable with religion or spirituality in the classroom, educators can embrace it and use it as a teaching moment. The authors suggest that educators should encourage "religious literacy, which is the ability to discern and analyze the fundamental intersections of religion and social/political/cultural life through multiple lenses."<sup>64</sup> Choosing to support

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<sup>60</sup> Nimmo, et al., "Finding a Place for the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Children and Their Families: An Anti-Bias Approach," 38.

<sup>61</sup> Nimmo, et al., 38.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

religious literacy and being open to a child's spirituality, allows children to be accepting of others and further encourages the development of their own spiritual life. Nimmo, Ado-Zena, and LeeKeenan conclude by suggesting that through creating an anti-bias space of religion and spirituality "we also see the enormous potential to engage families more authentically, to honor young children's spiritual lives, and to take a stand against injustice."<sup>65</sup>

Two final sources that supported and helped round out this paper are two books written almost as a "How-To" manual for guiding children along their spiritual journey. These books share practical suggestions that allow children to explore spiritual life in a direct way, differentiated with activities rooted closely to organized religion and that can be done without any affiliation. The first is *Opening Your Child's Spiritual Window* by Cherri Fuller.<sup>66</sup> Fuller uses a metaphor throughout the book to describe how to help children grow in their spiritual life. The metaphor she uses is of a spiritual window. She describes the spiritual window by saying, "These windows are pathways to your children's hearts during their growing-up years, when their hearts and minds are most open to experiencing the wonder of God's creation...talking and listening to him through prayer, serving him, and participating in the church community. These windows are best opened early in life, though as you'll discover, if a child's personality or circumstances keep them from a specific stage in the process, any time in life can be the right time to catch up."<sup>67</sup> It is important to recognize that Fuller is approaching this topic from a religious, specifically Christian identity. She specifically refers to four spiritual windows that act as natural pathways for children, each leading to the next window. The Spiritual Windows include "Enjoying God, Loving God, Following God, and Serving God." Fuller echoes Smith's argument that caregivers play a part in being a model and mentor on how to get in touch with a spiritual life.

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<sup>65</sup> Nimmo, et al. "Finding a Place for the Religious and Spiritual Lives of Young Children and Their Families: An Anti-Bias Approach," 44.

<sup>66</sup> Cherri Fuller, *Opening Your Child's Spiritual Window: Ideas to Nurture Your Child's Relationship with God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 2001).

<sup>67</sup> Fuller, *Opening Your Child's Spiritual Window*, Page 7.

In Valerie Hess's book, *Habits of a Spiritual Child*,<sup>68</sup> she provides commentary and differentiated lessons for children to enable them to develop their spiritual life. The objective for Hess is to “cultivate the life-affirming possibilities of the spiritual disciplines - or “holy habits,” as they’re sometimes known - in your children.”<sup>69</sup> In this well-organized book, Hess includes practices that are separated based on age, with clear directions and suggestions for differentiation, which demonstrate the accessibility of these practices to different faiths. Hess covers twelve “disciplines” that are habits of spiritual individuals; including meditation, prayer, simplicity, and service, to name a few. This book is written by a Christian author, and refers to the Bible and God specifically. Even still, many of the activities suggested for each age group are not rooted in Christianity. They are practical things not associated with religion, like going outside and listening to nature for five minutes (as a meditation practice) or decluttering your dresser (for a simple practice). In this way, Hess would agree with Schneiders’ third dynamic of the religion and spirituality relationship as mutually supportive of each other. Each section has an introductory lesson to “understand the discipline,” before moving forward to “practicing the discipline.” In doing so, Hess is ensuring that there is understanding and dialogue regarding a topic on a cognitive level, before putting them into practice; this speaks to reaching the child on a holistic approach. The examples and practice Hess describes will be unpacked further in the next chapter.

### *Summary*

The primary thinkers who have extensive research relating to the spiritual lives of children and who are relied on heavily throughout this paper are Lisa Miller and Christian Smith. Although they approach this topic in their own manner, Miller and Smith both provide substantial data that support and encourage the development of a spiritual lifestyle within children. Miller references the data that a healthy spiritual life not only correlates to a lesser likelihood of using drugs or alcohol; but also leads to a positive mental and physical well-being. Smith recognizes the amount of young people identifying as spiritual or

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<sup>68</sup> Valerie Hess and Marti Watson Garlett, *Habits of a Spiritual Child: Raising Your Kids with the Spiritual Disciplines*, (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Hess, *Habits of a Spiritual Child*, 10.

religious is dwindling. He puts forward the argument that adults have an important role in helping children reclaim their spirituality through even the most ordinary, mundane activities or conversations. Both Miller and Smith demonstrate that spirituality is a term that should be used with children and can be naturally incorporated into their lives.

This paper also relies on additional thinkers to help lay the foundation for this conversation about spirituality, specifically when involving children. Sandra Schneiders helps establish the relationship between spirituality and religion. With Bernard McGinn, Schneiders provides a fuller understanding of what the author means when referring to spirituality. Other active players, like Cherri Fuller and Valerie Hess, are already producing materials to be used to help incorporate spirituality in the lives of young people; both of whom have published their own books, which read almost like how-to manuals on the subject. While John Nimmo, Mona Abo-Zena, and Debbie LeeKeenan express concretely how spirituality can be introduced into a socially and culturally responsive classroom environment. All these sources complement one another to round out the necessary background information for this topic.



### Chapter 3 The Place of Spirituality in the Classroom

The title of this paper is “Pastoral Insight for the Development of the Spiritual Life of Children.” One goal is to provide examples and commentary on various exercises used in classrooms or youth group meetings, as well as in the home, to nurture the child’s natural interaction with their spiritual life. As explored in Chapter 1, there are many opinions when it comes to spirituality. However van Bavel’s definition is the anchor in this paper for understanding the spiritual development of children. “Spirituality is a permanent inner attitude of the human mind and heart, obtained through a process of personal assimilation of an evangelical value, in dialogue with the world of the individual and of the human race as a whole, originating from a free choice, and made concrete as a particular center of our lifestyle with due emphasis and attention.”<sup>70</sup> The exercises and activities examined all relate back to van Bavel’s understanding of spirituality.

In addition to leaning heavily on van Bavel’s thinking, this paper recognizes the commentary on spirituality provided by Sandra Schneiders. Schneiders explores three dynamics of the relationship between religion and spirituality. Considering the author’s specific experience, Schneiders’ claim of a religion and spirituality engaged in a working partnership is most appealing. There are occasions where the highlighted exercises are religious. As will be indicated in both the explanation and analysis, options for differentiation are provided so that children of all belief systems can comfortably engage with the activity. Religiosity does not override spirituality; instead the two work together and children are able to tie into their religious beliefs when necessary or desired. Religious affiliation is welcome, but not a prerequisite.

Working with young people, especially post pandemic, has been a challenge for many educators in particular. There are wide learning achievement gaps as a result of virtual learning and inconsistent access to academic resources, which isn’t a new issue. More prominently there has been attention drawn

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<sup>70</sup> Tarcisius van Bavel OSA, *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Henry Jackson (Philadelphia: Augustinian Press, 1996), 114.

to the importance of social-emotional learning of children as a result of safety measures during the pandemic. Now, with several years of perspective from the height of the pandemic, experts are increasingly aware of the social emotional needs of children particularly in how these needs are materialized in the classroom setting. Educators and administrators are looking for ways to care for the whole child while at school.

This care can take shape in a variety of ways. With respect to the experience of the author, it did so in a private religious sphere, specifically a Catholic K-8 grammar school.<sup>71</sup> After experiences of virtual and then hybrid learning, students demonstrated a clear struggle with relational skills, including conflict resolution and coexisting with others, as well as executive functioning, such as personal problem solving and coping skills. Small issues, such as a forgotten pencil or not wanting to work with a certain student, required guidance from a teacher to work through. It was clear that social emotional skills were missing or needed to be strengthened. These skills include self-awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship skill, responsible decision making.<sup>72</sup> These social emotional skills mirror qualities that are present in the spiritual life. Therefore, the author's classroom challenges to respond to the social, emotional needs of the children linked very well to this complementary need for supporting the spiritual lives of children.

It became clear, especially in connecting van Bavel's definition, of how to bridge this gap between social emotional learning and spirituality. As defined by van Bavel, "spirituality is a permanent inner attitude of the human mind and heart, obtained through a process of personal assimilation of an evangelical value." Personal assimilation includes the social emotional fundamentals of self awareness and self management, how one feels and how one can control those feelings. Students need to learn how to identify how they feel in certain situations; the organs of the mind and heart help them process emotions and beliefs. Evangelical values of justice, peace, and love are in the forefront of the child's brain

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<sup>71</sup> The author's school is called Saint John Paul 2 Catholic Academy in Dorchester, Massachusetts.

<sup>72</sup> Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, "Fundamentals of SEL," accessed August 2023, <https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/>

even in school when they are developing friendships, trying to get along with others, and navigating what they think is fair or unfair.

This attitude of van Bavel is cultivated “in dialogue with the world of the individual and of the human race as a whole.” This speaks to the social awareness of children, as well as their relationship skills. Students learn how to recognize emotions of others they are close with, but also children start to think about their role in the big picture of their school, their community, their city. By tending to their spiritual lives, children can take those steps in progression. In the classroom, children also strengthen their responsible decision making skills. Van Bavel’s final piece of his definition of spirituality is that it “originat[es] from a free choice, and [makes] concrete as a particular center of our lifestyle with due emphasis and attention.” Practices in spirituality provide carefully constructed opportunities for students to experiment with responsible decisions in the safe and nurturing environment within their classroom.

As a teacher in a Catholic school, finding a way to help bolster the social-emotional skills of students, and likewise their spiritual life, was interwoven naturally into the religion curriculum. As much as teaching Catholic doctrine was an expected learning outcome in lessons, the emphasis and importance placed on educating and exposing children to spiritual wellbeing became equally significant. In recognizing that space where this tie in could occur, it also became clear that the material should be accessible to all the children. Even though it is a Catholic environment, all children should be able to benefit from the activities and exercises. Embedded into different activities, whether through adapting a lesson or word choice, there are ways to engage children of all faith practices or identities.

As the reader will see in these lesson plans below, there are some activities that are naturally more aligned to the Catholic religion; however the hope and intention is that all students participating can extract from the activity what resonates with them and apply it to their spiritual life, which may or may not be associated with a religion.

Each lesson plan is outlined to include any objectives or desired goals from the activity. There are also associated standards that the lesson will hit. These standards are pulled from the Faith Formation standards of the Archdiocese of Boston. Also listed are any materials that could be used during the lesson

plan. The next section of the lesson plan lists the major content for the lesson. It is organized and broken down based on the natural scaffolding of a lesson, which can include several sections. An activating activity engages students and prepares them for the exercise. A Guided Practice involves the teacher and students working together on learned material, whereas Independent Practice is time for students to work independently on a task. Finally, a Closing Activity formally closes a lesson by assessing what students have learned in the lesson, or providing time and space for reflection or sharing.

### *Lesson Plans*

#### **Lesson Plan 1**

**Lesson Title:** Intentions

**Objectives:**

Students will write out or mentally reflect on a specific intention.<sup>73</sup>  
 Students will practice settling their mind and reflecting on issues important to them.  
 Students will be engaged with intentional inner processing.

**Standards:**<sup>74</sup>

4.05.01 State that God is faithful and loving, no matter the circumstances of human life  
 4.05.02 Identify prayers of praise, thanksgiving, petition, and forgiveness.  
 4.05.03 Describe prayer as raising our hearts and minds to God.  
 4.05.05 Exhibit capacity for silent prayer. (CCC 2709)

**Materials:**

- Yarn/Pieces of string
- Index Card/Post-it Notes
- Pencil

**Activating Activity:**

1. Introduce the main idea of the new chapter. Provide students with an overview of real life implications and introduce new vocabulary
  - a. For example, in a chapter about conscience the leader can define conscience, make allusions to the animated depiction of conscience as the angel and demon on shoulder, allude to a time they had a hard choice to make, or use an example from a character in a book/movie.
2. Model thoughts for students that they can borrow during intention time.

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<sup>73</sup> An intention as a term in the Catholic faith refers to a specific offering or purpose for prayer. Intentions can be offered at mass in remembrance of a loved one who has passed, for special prayer for someone in need, or for wellbeing (ie. prayer for peace in the community).

<sup>74</sup> Archdiocese of Boston, "Faith Formation Standards: Preschool-Grade 8." Braintree, MA. September 2016. <https://files.ecatholic.com/34165/documents/2023/1/Faith%20Formation%20Standards.Fall2016.pdf?t=1675087537000>

- a. “You can think about a time when you have to make a decision between two conflicting choices. Remember what you ultimately chose, and whether it was harmful to anyone else.”
- b. “You can pray for strength to make a good decision, especially when you are tempted to choose the option that seems more fun even though you know it might be wrong.”
3. Have students choose their medium for the intention activity. Options are as follows:
  - a. Students can write their intention on a piece of paper, such as an index card or post-it to be affixed to the classroom intention wall.
  - b. Students can take a string as a physical representation of their prayer to be affixed to the classroom intention wall.
    - i. Students may choose to tie a knot in the string for each intention.
4. Review routines during intention time. Ask students to supply answers or demonstrate the routines.
  - a. Calm bodies (no walking around, no bathroom breaks)
  - b. Quiet classroom (no talking or whispering to classmates)
  - c. Spiritual/Religious Differentiations:
    - i. Students can sit calmly and quietly, appreciating the stillness, being present
    - ii. Students can listen to the song playing in the background, reflecting on its relationship to the main idea of the new chapter.
    - iii. Students can have a conversation with God, expressing gratitude and thanks, putting forth an intention, etc.

#### **Independent Practice:**

1. After preparing the class for intentions, pass out necessary materials and play reflection song for intentions activity.
  - a. When possible, songs chosen will relate to the lesson or overall theme of the chapter.
  - b. Songs will vary from secular to sacred. Sacred songs will span from contemporary Christian rock to traditional Catholic hymns.
2. As the song reaches its end, the teacher will walk around and collect “intentions” from students.
  - a. Strings of yarn and sticky notes will be collected in a small basket to be put on the intention wall at a later time.
  - b. Depending on the size of class or group of young people, students may put their intentions on the wall after a designated time. Note that routines still should be followed until the conclusion of the song.

#### **Closing Activity:**

1. At the end of the intention activity, thank children for using this time to be intentional and respectful to themselves, others, and God. Also remind children that by setting these intentions and having them shared on the intention wall, the collective group keeps all those intentions set by their peers, even though they might be private.
2. Option to invite students to share their intentions with the class.

#### Analysis of Lesson Plan 1 in Conjunction with Research

This activity of setting intentions is a simple, yet powerful, exercise used almost biweekly in the author’s classroom. Benefits of this activity include the simplicity of it. It requires few materials, and could be modified to be done without any; it is not complicated to explain or give directions on; and does

not require a lot of time, making it digestible to younger children. There is an element of independence given to the children and there is no pressure on having a final or complete end product. It also allows children to experience a creative opt-in to the spiritual life, through the expression of music as a way to connect to their spirituality.

The practice of setting intentions is not inherently religious. However, such a practice can strengthen the spiritual life. The work done by van Bavel, Schneiders, and Miller on spirituality relates to this particular activity of setting intentions to help demonstrate how it can impact one's spiritual life. Through this activity of setting intentions, children are practicing to strengthen their "inner attitude of the human mind and heart," specifically through the "evangelical values" of love, peace, and justice. When setting intentions, children are given direction to think of a specific person, real problem or struggle, that they would like to ask for help for or hold in their hearts for the duration of the activity. This process allows children to devote their thoughts and feelings towards those recipients of the intention; to dedicate the values of love and peace to those people or issues. It allows children to be altruistic, not just in actions but in their thoughts and hearts too.

Children also are able to strengthen their spiritual life by "the process of personal assimilation of evangelical values." This personal assimilation, the embrace of love, peace, and justice, occurs through the intentions students are able to make, and in the ways that children engage in this practice on their own. This activity is done at the start of every new chapter in class, approximately every two weeks. Due to the frequency and reliability of this activity, it becomes routine for students in that they don't always need the teacher's instructions. The Intentions Wall is a significant space in the classroom that students walk past every day, that is incorporated with this activity. It is also a classroom norm that students can add to it when they need to. When a child is dealing with something and chooses to process their feelings by using the intention wall, they are going through this "process of personal assimilation." They are taking an activity that once was an educational experience and making it part of their own method of operating, ultimately making it a part of their spiritual practice.

Children who participate in this activity, whether they are enjoying it or not, are giving it “due emphasis and attention.” They are engaged with the activity, through the different mediums of music, writing, string, and choosing an intention. By taking the time during this activity and devoting it to the intentions that they are making, children are practicing one way of being honed into their spiritual life. This can be seen the next time the class sets intentions and continues to devote emphasis and attention to the activity.

The way in which the educator introduces the activity supports the spiritual development of the children, especially considering the children who do not affiliate with religion. The educator can introduce this activity as an opportunity to talk with God, or as a meditation time, or as quiet and reflective time; still setting intentions for oneself, for the day, or for the week ahead. Schneiders focuses on “the experience of conscious involvement through self-transcendence.” Children have an awareness and a purpose or objective when first introduced to this activity. Regardless of whether students are having a conversation with God or reflective meditation time, they are connecting with what is beyond the physical self in their classroom.

Miller also supports this, as she sees spirituality as the “inner sense of relationship to a higher power.” The inclusive word choice of the educator can direct students to all be able to participate, and to navigate the relationship between religion and spirituality. Miller also describes the higher power as “loving and giving.” Children can use intentions to ask for help, seek guidance, express gratitude, or just check in with God or their higher power. This is done with reminders that participating in this activity is a safe time and space. The contents of their intentions are private and don’t have to be shared with their class. In this specific Catholic environment, it is taught that the class is a supportive community, which honors God as loving all humans and where all persons are treated with dignity.

The ease at which this activity can be done is demonstrative of Miller’s overall claim that spirituality is inherent within children. All kids need is a brief explanation, a song or some quiet, a physical way to express their thoughts and feelings (whether through writing or a string). It is a simple practice, which when repeated with consistency and openness, can be easily adopted by children on their

own. Furthermore it can be brought by children to their homes, to their places of worship, or to different social settings.

## **Lesson Plan 2**

**Lesson Title:** OneBoston Day - Acts of Kindness

### **Objectives:**

Students will brainstorm ways of demonstrating love and kindness to others.

Students will practice acting out compassion to others.

### **Standards:**

3.07.06 Articulate that all people are called to holiness by living their lives close to God.

(CCC 2012–2016, 2028–2029)

4.06.09 Recognize that as members of a parish we have responsibilities, which we call stewardship. (CCC 299, 307, 339–340, 344, 952, 2402, 2417, 2456)

5.03.01 Recognize Christian morality as an invitation to respond freely to God’s love.

(CCC 1749–1761)

5.03.02 Identify sense of personal goodness and self-worth as being responsible and loving.

### **Materials:**

- Cardstock
- Coloring utensils: markers, colored pencils
- Sidewalk Chalk
- Other necessary arts and crafts materials

### **Activating Activity:**

1. Introduce the meaning behind OneBoston Day and how the city decided to remember the anniversary of tragic events by establishing it as a day to spread positivity and kindness.
2. Brainstorm things others have done for them to make them feel better. List out ways students could help spread positivity to other students, teachers, people at school.
3. Choose one or two projects to work on.
  - a. In the past, projects have included making cards with positive messages inside, making paper flower bouquets, planting daffodils in the front lawn, writing positive sayings in chalk on the sidewalk.

### **Guided Practice:**

1. Demonstrate the first example to the whole class. Go through the process, explaining step by step.
2. Set up small group tasks to work as an assembly line to complete the projects.

### **Independent Practice:**

1. Allow students to deliver cards and flowers in partners, until everything has been delivered.

### **Closing Activity:**

1. Take a few minutes at the end of class, once all students have returned, to share any interactions with teachers or to share how this exercise made them feel.
2. Give time for students to reflect on how they could take this experience and replicate it at home or in their own community.



### Analysis of Lesson 2 Plan in Conjunction with Research

Random acts of kindness (RAKs) are a common practice encouraged by many organizations with the intent of spreading kindness to others. Many that are performed remain personal between individuals, but at times a special act of kindness can gain viral status via the news or social media. RAKs are powerful because just about anyone can perform one wherever and whenever they choose.

Each year April 15 or “OneBoston Day” is a special date where the city collectively encourages people to participate in random acts of kindness to honor the lives affected during the Boston Marathon bombings in 2013. While many children were not alive or have no memory of the events, it is important to explain the story behind why random acts of kindness are encouraged and performed throughout the city, thus teaching a powerful lesson of how to find the good in a seemingly bad situation. There are also other globally recognized days, such as World Kindness Day and even Random Acts of Kindness Day, where children can participate.

Van Bavel’s understanding of spirituality is present in this activity through his explanation of “the process of personal assimilation of evangelical values.” These evangelical values of love, peace, and justice are the exact concepts being actively lived out upon completion of this activity. The Random Acts of Kindness, which the students spread around the school, are done so to spread positivity and kindness. Van Bavel also cites spirituality being done “in dialogue with the world of the individual and of the human race as a whole.” Through this exercise students are invited to work as partners with their classmates to create and distribute the RAKs, in addition to interacting with the teachers, staff, and greater community who would benefit as the recipients of these actions. Oftentimes the abstract or mental aspects of spirituality become real for students when they are able to incorporate their beliefs and their relationships with a higher power through actions.

This activity also demonstrates concrete aspects of real life, how people experience something terrible and choose to turn it into an opportunity for good. When considering the social emotional learning impact, the mindset in this particular backstory for OneBoston Day is significant for children to be

exposed to. Sandra Schneiders and Lisa Miller recognize this in their understandings of spirituality. Schneiders explains that spirituality is formed by “life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.” This specific example of random acts of kindness allows children to integrate these practices into their lives. Also the reciprocity in these acts starts the process of self-transcendence in children, where they begin to realize how their actions have an impact on beyond the self. In her WBUR interview on Here and Now, Miller suggests parents ask their children to reflect on where in a negative experience is their connection to something greater, which allows parents to be a part of their child’s journey but leaves the control with the child.<sup>75</sup>

Christian Smith’s claims are also supported in this exercise. Smith highlights the importance of children seeing a healthy spirituality through everyday practice from adults. The phrase he uses is “everyday holiness,” suggesting that the day to day lifestyle choices and lessons are more impactful than those done on traditional holy days. When brainstorming and sharing examples of RAKS as a class, part of the discussion can be not only what a RAK is, but also who is doing them? A popular example is where a customer at a drive-thru or a coffee shop offers to pay for the person behind them in line, where they can leave the environment without thanks or acknowledgement. Suddenly, a normal daily routine of getting coffee or stopping at the drive-thru becomes a memorable story of “everyday holiness.”

Students love to take ownership of activities like this one, from brainstorming ideas to actually creating the final product. In part, it is exciting that it is not a traditional lesson where academic learning is being completed in a worksheet. Another reason is that they are able to visit other teachers or staff with whom they have preexisting and meaningful relationships. When prompted with the task of getting to show someone they care about them, students act as if an internal lightbulb has gone off in which they’ve realized they need to express that love in a tangible way. Once students have scurried off to deliver their message of kindness and love, they rush back to the classroom immediately asking if they can go again. Most powerful however are the students who are assigned to staff members that they don’t know well or

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<sup>75</sup> Miller, “How to raise a spiritual child: 3 exercises to try with your family.”

have a strong connection with, like the cafeteria staff or the ‘scary’ middle school teachers. More often than not, those are the recipients who express the most appreciation, and those brave enough to make the delivery come back feeling the most surprised and proud.

### **Lesson Plan 3**

**Lesson Title:** Parable Performances

**Objectives:**

Students will read a narrative excerpt from the Bible

Students will make connections to today’s society and draw comparisons to their own lives.

Students will dramatize a story from the Bible in a creative way.

**Standards:**

Will vary based on the chosen parable.

**Materials:**

- Parable (excerpt from the Bible and rewritten as a drama)
- Costumes
- Props (as needed based on the parable)

**Activating Activity:**

1. Pass out parable performance narrative and script. Students will read the narrative excerpt from the Bible first, then will reread the parable written as a play.
2. After reading the parable, students will watch an animated cartoon of the parable as a class.
  - a. Saddleback Kids on YouTube is a good resource for these videos.

**Guided Practice:**

1. Comprehension Check
  - a. Ask basic review questions about the parable
  - b. Who is in this parable? Where is it taking place?
  - c. What are they doing?
  - d. Why does Jesus choose this to teach others? What is the lesson?
2. Assign roles to volunteers and pass out costumes or props as necessary, explaining significance.
3. Read through the script twice from seats; then once students have practiced, allow them to stage the parable and perform it twice.
  - a. Students are not expected to memorize, but read from their papers

**Closing Activity:**

1. Final review check, which can be done as a whole class or in partners/small groups
  - a. What lesson is Jesus teaching?
  - b. Do you see yourself in any of the positions from the parable?
  - c. How does that lesson relate to what our class is studying in religion?

### Analysis of Lesson Plan 3 in Conjunction with Research

For the sake of this analysis and in order to see the full scope of this activity, this lesson plan will use the parable of the Good Samaritan to illustrate how children can develop their spiritual life through this activity. The parable of the Good Samaritan is told in the Gospel of Luke 10:25-37. In response to a question about who one should consider their neighbor, Jesus tells the story of a Jewish man who was attacked on the road to Jericho. A Jewish priest and a Levite, both men of status, chose to avoid and walk past the attacked man. When a Samaritan encountered the man, he went into the ditch with the victim, cleaned his wounds, brought him to a place to stay, and left money to ensure his well-being. The powerful message is that even though historically Samaritans and Jews despised each other, this Good Samaritan put aside those differences to care for the injured person. The story alone is a memorable parable from Christian tradition; it also has been alluded to by many as the name of non-profit organizations and a phrase colloquially used to describe a do-gooder.

The activity of the parable performances are beneficial for children because they take themes that are embedded with cultural and political contexts of ancient time and highlight the important messages in a digestible approach. This paper accepts the claim that religion and spirituality are partners, but tries to recognize spirituality experiences that can be applied to one's religion. For this activity, parables are stories that come directly from the Bible, specifically the New Testament as a teaching from Jesus. This exercise is derived from a lesson done in a Catholic grade school setting, and thus performing a parable from the Bible fits with the curriculum there. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, the author recognizes there are ways to differentiate this activity by choosing alternate stories from different cultures to achieve similar experiences.

Due to the kinesthetic and interactive nature of this activity, it is a crowd favorite among students. As children read through the parables, they identify and share which figures they most identify with and want to perform as. In addition to acting out a role, which engages children with strong imaginations, students are able to wear costumes or use props; some even get to add audio-visual effects by controlling the sound effects or lights. This activity gives the students performing and the classroom "audience" a

strong and specific memory that they attribute to the story and the lesson it carries. Children see themselves or their friend acting out this famous interaction, making a personal connection to a spiritual lesson of who to think of as your neighbor.

There is a reason that storytime is popular with children, especially as a way to educate. Whether as a story read aloud to children or that they can read themselves, the approach to stories is such that children can make connections to what is happening in the book. Similarly, by taking stories from a holy book like the Bible, children are learning and connecting to those parables. This is in the nature of the spiritual practice of *Lectio Divina* or imaginative prayer that is used, being able to picture oneself within a scene from the Bible and identify what resonates from that scene.

When acting out the different parable plays, and then having guided reflection afterwards, children are able to identify where and how that lesson applies to a scenario in their daily life. For the parable of the Good Samaritan, the teacher might ask students to reflect on a time when they were hurt or sad, and a friend did not offer to help them; or was there ever a time the student helped someone in need who was different from them. By reflecting on their feelings from those situations, students can form an inner understanding of what it means to love your neighbor.

This too is an opportunity for children to use their “inner attitude of the human heart and mind,” as van Bavel describes spirituality. Depending on the age and maturity of the children, they can reflect on moments of omission (where they may have forgotten to show love to someone). In so doing, students can learn to tie these human experiences to social-emotional skills and, in the process, develop their relationship skills. The development of these skills equate to the “process of personal assimilation of evangelical values.” Educators can take these moments further and bring in the spiritual life with real life situations of helping students through conflict, by phrasing and making allusions to these stories that have been explored in class. Teachers could ask their students if they are showing love or justice (fairness) to their classmate, or could ask them to think about how they could treat their neighbors better in a challenging situation.

Many of the parables in the Bible are set in an average, everyday scenario: workers in a field, fathers and sons, people going on a journey. This activity of parable performances showcase the ordinary moments that can become holy, or rather how ordinary people exist within the realm of holiness. This supports Christian Smith's preposition, as an advocate of everyday holiness, for adults to model and incorporate the spiritual life into not necessarily spiritual experiences.

*Final Comments on Spiritual Development*

One of the reasons that working with children is so meaningful and paramount is because at a young age children are malleable to the many influences around them. The reason for mentioning this is two-fold. First, this is an opportunity for caregivers of all kinds, whether they be parents, teachers, or other trusted adults, to make a positive impact in the life of a child. Introduction to a spiritual life is not the forcing of beliefs or requiring proscribed behavior; instead it is providing the recognition of or the possibility for an understanding of the expansiveness of life. To use van Bavel one last time, teaching children about their potential spirituality is allowing them to "dialogue with the individual and the human race" and incorporate their own understanding of "evangelical values" in their lives; in doing so, from a young age these children are "free[ly]" solidifying "a permanent inner attitude of the human mind and heart" by adapting it to "a particular center [their] lifestyle with due emphasis and attention." This quality, the awareness of the power of intention and values, that children can learn about and then apply in their lives as they mature, can only help them as they go on to navigate the good and bad of life. Miller and Smith both address the benefits that a spiritual life can have on adolescents. In addition to the correlation of a positive spiritual life with a lower likelihood of substance abuse,<sup>76</sup> there also is the link between an active spiritual life and good mental health.<sup>77</sup> When introduced and implemented in a young child's life, spirituality can be very beneficial.

The second reason in highlighting the importance of doing this work with young children is best told using a metaphor. To borrow a hackneyed one, teaching children is much like gardening. It is

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<sup>76</sup> Miller, "What does it mean to raise a spiritual child?"

<sup>77</sup> Miller, "Why Kids Who Believe in Something Are Happier and Healthier."

planting seeds that one day may grow. It is impossible to know when or if the seed will take root, but there is someone there to water and tend to it to give that seed a chance. Teachers, parents, or caregivers cannot decide who any child will grow up to be or what will be important to them. It is possible though for adults to walk alongside children through their journey of adolescence to provide help or guidance when needed, much like a gardener watering the seed.

As an educator, this author recognizes the approach in taking care of the whole child. Oftentimes the physical well-being of the child is prioritized, but there are other aspects of care that need to be taken into consideration. They include the social well-being, emotional needs, as well as the cognitive and creative outlets.<sup>78</sup> There is a great responsibility that comes with working with a vulnerable group like children, such as keeping them safe, helping them grow, and taking care of their needs. When spirituality is introduced to the mix, it gives children the power and autonomy to guide them to do exactly that. It starts the conversation for their independence, for their understanding of identity, for their development as social beings. The old proverb says if you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; but if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime. By providing intentional activities for children to be physically, socially, emotionally, cognitively, and creatively taken care of through exposure to a spiritual life, trusted adults and caregivers are allowing children space to engage, deepen, and develop their natural tendency to be spiritual.

### *Summary*

This chapter explains and dissects different activities that can be used specifically in the classroom to help children grow in their spiritual life. These exercises could easily be applied to a youth group or retreat setting, and could be adapted to use at home with family. This chapter demonstrates that these activities are simple, yet powerful in message and theme. The lesson plans provide an explicit breakdown of the activities, including objectives, materials, and a step by step guide for each exercise.

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<sup>78</sup> Joanne Hendrick and Patricia Weissman, *The Whole Child* (New York: Pearson, 2013), 11. <https://www.pearsonhighered.com/assets/samplechapter/0/1/3/2/0132853426.pdf>

The commentary and analysis supply insight on why the activity is beneficial for spiritual development, how it is engaging for students, and the social emotional learning that it overlaps with.



#### Chapter 4 Limits and Other Applications of this Research

The main focus throughout this paper is to analyze the programming, specifically performed in a Catholic elementary school, to argue how it can further the development of the spiritual lives of children. This author recognizes the limitations within the scope of this paper and will use this chapter to identify additional aspects of this topic to be explored. Derivative ideas and remaining questions from this paper include activities for youth group organizations, how to address the religious diversity present in communities through differentiation, the efficacy of these activities and how to measure their effects, and unpacking how the “Spiritual, but not Religious” phenomenon has played a role in the spiritual lives of children.

##### *Youth Group Organizations*

There are many other ways outside of a Catholic elementary school classroom to teach children, and specifically to foster a healthy spiritual life. This can be done in the home, in a youth group, on a sports team, or at a community center organization. Again, because spirituality is not inherently limited to a religion, the space does not have to be religious to incorporate these activities. Below is a simplified activity overview that could be used in a youth group setting to promote a spiritual life.

First it is important to briefly outline what a Youth Group might look like. Generally speaking, it is a safe, welcoming opportunity for children or teenagers to spend time together and build community. There are snacks, opportunities for kids to socialize, and different activities or times for reflection. Youth group organizers or youth ministers run their programming differently; some will coordinate service projects, others can offer retreats, still others partner with organizations to plan themed events. Youth group meetings are not mandatory. Rather, they are an open invitation for children and families to accept when it best serves them. However, most children who attend a youth group, do so on their own volition. Ages served and religious affiliation all influence what that Youth Group experience is.

Youth Group organizations usually do not have a structured curriculum to follow. However, what follows is a detailed outline, similar to the lesson plans in Chapter 3, for an activity that can be used

during a meeting. This outline includes basic materials needed for the activity and a step by step explanation of what a youth minister can do or say while guiding children through the exercise. Also included are a few anecdotes and examples that can be used.

**Program Title:** Trail Angels

**Materials:**

- Music
- Print out “trail angel” wing

**Activity:**

1. Provide backstory on what a Trail Angel is:
  - a. The Appalachian Trail (AT) goes from Georgia up to Maine. There are people every year who hike from Georgia to Maine in one attempt called thru-hikers. Because the trail is over 2,000 miles long, hikers stop from time to time to restock on food, take a shower, get a good night’s rest, at times on their journey.
  - b. A Trail Angel is someone who goes out of their way to provide help to a thru-hiker. It could be a ride to the start of the trail, a place to sleep or shower, a home-cooked meal. It is provided totally by surprise, unplanned, and at random to hikers.
  - c. An example of grace. Receiving something without asking, without reason
2. Not everyone is going to hike the Appalachian Trail, however we do experience our own “trail angels” during our journey of life. Trail Angels operate in the simplest of ways sometimes:
  - a. A trail angel could offer help to you when you are feeling overwhelmed and stressed.
  - b. A trail angel could make you smile when you’re feeling sad.
  - c. A trail angel gives you what you need even when you’ve done nothing to deserve it.
3. After listening to a song or having quiet time to think about a trail angel from this past week. Give time to go around the room and share your trail angels.
4. You also can ask children to think of a time that *they* were a trail angel to someone else.

**Closing:**

1. Encourage students to spend time in the upcoming week recognizing places where they can act as a trail angel to others; and noticing times when others are trail angels to them.
2. This can be a weekly close-out to youth group meetings.

Analysis of Trail Angels Program in Conjunction with Research

Different limitations exist when considering the approach to an elementary school versus a youth group setting or even a home. School is a required experience; children have to participate in the classes offered at their school. Children tend to react positively to the subjects they prefer and adversely to ones they dislike. Consider too, how when they are at school, children are surrounded by the same people all day, five days a week. Oftentimes classmates remain constant from year to year. All of these

circumstances can affect these activities when introduced in a classroom setting. This speaks to the attitudes and assumptions that children bring into the activity. In a youth group setting, children are interacting with different people than they normally are exposed to - not only different in who they are, but of different ages and possibly different schools. Having an opportunity to engage with young people who are a bit older or more mature can affect how a child internalizes activities or takeaways from those activities.

There are also conditions that influence the educator or youth minister running the activity. In a classroom setting, there are objectives and pacing that need to be followed as put in place by a supervisor and the curriculum mapping of the Archdiocese or the Catholic school system. Within a specific school, there are limitations of what can be said. For example, in a public school, a teacher is very limited and restricted about how to involve the practice of religion when explaining a lesson. Likewise in a Catholic school, there are aspects of that faith that non-Catholic students might find strange or alien, and that could make them feel ostracized.

It should be noted that the objectives of a religion class and a youth group meeting are very different. In an academic class, students are learning something new and often being assessed on their understanding or mastery of the material. In a youth group context, children are having fun and building community. They are learning how to socialize through activities and space for conversation. There is not as much pressure on children in a youth group setting, as there might be in a classroom. Without grades or the pressure of performing well, children tend to approach the activities of a youth group more receptively - especially if they don't typically do well in school.

### *Religious Diversity*

Due to the nature of the author's specific situation, many activities and subsequent analyses were tailored to a Catholic experience. It is important to consider the religious diversity that these activities could and should reach. While word choice can be a simple way to make different activities accessible to different faith practices, there also is the option to be inclusive by providing examples or explicitly

identifying them. The suggestions on how to acknowledge this diversity will specifically allude to the classroom lesson plans within Chapter 3.

For Lesson Plan 3: Performance Parables, a religion class at a Catholic school used a parable from the Bible as the anchor for a lesson teaching children about showing love for their neighbor. Many cultures and faith traditions have stories that they use to teach in their community. In the Buddhist tradition there are the Jataka tales, which tell the birth stories of the Buddha, and are used to teach people the lessons from the Buddha.<sup>79</sup> Just as children can perform a parable from the Bible, they could read and then act out tales from the Buddha. Each has a lesson or moral such as in the story, “Little Prince No-father,” whose moral is “the truth is always stronger than a lie,”<sup>80</sup> which also is one of the “evangelical values” of van Bavel’s definition of spirituality.

This is only one example of including other voices through alternative stories. There are also traditional tales from the Native American tribes, many of which have been written into children’s books. These legends explain how different things came to be in nature or in human’s relationship with nature. While these performances can come from different heritages or faith practices, they also can be scenarios directly from a social emotional learning approach. The Compassion Project is an organization that focuses on teaching SEL skills to students through videos and skits.<sup>81</sup> They developed scenarios for students to act out and then reflect on where in those situations they observed kindness and compassion, or how it was lacking.

Spirituality is vast in its reach. While the examples provided in Chapter 3 originate in a traditional Catholic environment, there could be more research done on ways to include and incorporate a more diverse approach. A religiously-affiliated school could expand the stories used in the classroom; private

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<sup>79</sup> Ven. Kurunegoda Piyatissa, *Buddha’s Tales for Young and Old. Volume 1*. (Buddhanet.com, Buddha Dharma Education Association, Inc.), accessed August 2023, [http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/jtwebv1p.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/jtwebv1p.pdf)

<sup>80</sup> Piyatissa, *Buddha’s Tales for Young and Old*, 40.

<sup>81</sup> The Compassion Project, *Lesson 1: Defining Compassion* <https://thecompassionproject.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Lesson-1.pdf>

or independent schools could incorporate a diverse selection of stories; and at public schools, intentional choices of style of stories and explanations of selected stories can be applied.

### *Measuring Impact*

An area that could be very beneficial to this topic is in measuring the effectiveness of these activities. Children absorb information at a fast pace, but in an academic setting teachers constantly assess their level of mastery or understanding. With developing a spiritual life, how does one capture or evaluate someone's spirituality? Even with an activity, like setting intentions, that might be done biweekly, it is hard to know how that lesson has affected a child. Are they setting their own intentions at home or at their worship services? Even so, are they feeling fulfilled? Is that practice strengthening their inner attitude or relationship with a higher power? This paper does not monitor or record how any of these activities influence children after the fact.

It would be interesting to find a way to measure both the qualitative and quantitative impact that these activities, and ones like them, have had on children. By measuring what practices children adopt into their own spiritual life, in addition to where or how often they are applied, this data gathered would provide valuable insight to the efficacy of the activities. The National Catholic Educational Association<sup>82</sup> is a group whose goal is to support Catholic education and faith formation. The NCEA has a specific section of its mission dedicated to the assessment of faith formation programs, called RISE. While this is a Catholic association, it might be worthwhile collaborating with or exploring their process for assessment and whether it could be applied to non-Catholic communities or programs.

Hospitals and other holistic health care settings use their own assessment tools to evaluate the spiritual dimension of a patient. Two different assessments include FICA<sup>83</sup> and HOPE<sup>84</sup> Questions. These

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<sup>82</sup> National Catholic Education Association, "NCEA Rise: Faith Assessments," Accessed Month DD, YYYY. <https://www.ncea.org/>

<sup>83</sup> FICA, which stands for Faith, Importance of spirituality, spiritual Community, interventions to Address spiritual needs, is used as a way for health care institutions to build trust with patients and help assist them with stress, illness, or end of life care. (The GW Institute for Spirituality and Health).

<sup>84</sup> HOPE Questions, stands for Hope, Organized religion, Personal spirituality, Effects on medical care, are a survey given to patients after a strong correlation was found between a patient's spirituality and their health outcomes. It provides patients the knowledge that their health-care staff is respectful of their spiritual life and preferences.

tools have been successfully applied in nonsectarian situations, like hospitals. The application can easily be transferred to work in different school settings.

### *SBNR*

“Spiritual, but not Religious” is an identity that has grown significantly in popularity. This dynamic is alluded to throughout the paper and highlighted because of Sandra Schneiders’s commentary on the dynamic between these two terms. While this paper addresses how religion and the spiritual life can coexist, it is not the main argument. This paper centers on the development of the spiritual life of children and focuses on trusted adults, with specific attention given to educators, in a dedicated learning environment. As is true with the nature of academic instruction, teachers are only with children up to a certain point in the day. The time children have outside of school or instruction is crucial to their development in everything they are practicing at school - academically, socially, emotionally, and spiritually.

The environment children go home to is significant in its influence on them. When discussing spirituality, some children are from families with a strong religious identity where applying their spiritual practices comes naturally. Some families have a spirituality built in as a part of their family identity. For example, a Christian family may attend weekly mass or worship service. In a Buddhist family, they may have a dedicated shrine in their home. These traditions and routines might not be as evident in a family with parents that are spiritual, and not religious. While there certainly are still ways that these families could practice their spirituality, it will look different from the religiously affiliated families. It would be interesting to explore how those differences might translate to the development of the spiritual lives of children.

### *Summary*

The main goal in this paper is to recognize strategies and best practices for bolstering the spiritual development of children. There is significant research from experts of the field included as evidence to support a need for the spiritual development of children and to demonstrate its value. Commentary on the spirituality of children and suggestions for best practices contribute to the bulk of this paper, but there are

some areas regarding this topic that can be expanded upon. Important follow-ups from this paper include exploring these activities in religiously diverse communities, measuring the effectiveness and impact on children's spiritual life, and dissecting how "Spiritual, but not Religious" influences children.

## Chapter 5 The Promise of Spirituality for Personal and Social Development of Children

The Parable of the Sower teaches that while many seeds can be planted, there are many factors that are beyond the planter's control. This experience is much like the efforts of educators and parents who plant seeds for children, but do not have ultimate control of what takes root and what develops.

There is a folktale from China called "The Leaky Bucket."<sup>85</sup> The story tells about a woman who travels back and forth from a well each day collecting water for the day. She fills two buckets with water and carefully carries them, so as not to spill. Upon arriving home, she starts to notice that one bucket always seems to be half full after walking back. She tries to fix the leaky bucket, but is unsuccessful. Finally the leaky bucket apologizes to the woman for always leaking and losing water that she needs and works hard to get. The woman does not chastise or blame the leaky bucket. Instead she explains that on the side of the road where the leaky bucket would spill water, the woman had also dropped some seeds in the ground and now having been watered by the leak, flowers have bloomed. The woman recognized an opportunity and took advantage of creating good in that space.

The Parable of the Sower and the Leaky Bucket converge to summarize an important takeaway from this paper. Anyone who works with children is in the position of the sower and the woman carrying the leaky bucket. They plant seeds which they hope will one day bear fruit. It is unclear which activities or lessons will benefit children in the end, but still they make the choice to seize the opportunity. The woman with the leaky bucket does exactly that. There are plenty of "leaky bucket" moments in life. The leaky bucket could be in a classroom, around the family dinner time, during a long car ride, or after a bad day. Caregivers, educators, or youth ministers can make the choice to talk about spirituality, to provide exercises to practice that spirituality, and give children the space to let it blossom into their own spiritual life. Just like our gardener and woman with the leaky bucket who decided to drop some seeds in the ground; all there is to do is add a little water and wait to see what would happen.

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<sup>85</sup> Rebecca Sheir, "Shortie: The Leaky Bucket," WBUR Circle Round, June 23, 2020, accessed August 2023, <https://www.wbur.org/circleround/2020/06/23/shortie-the-leaky-bucket>



*The 'Why'*

This paper stemmed from a personal desire to take advantage of everyday opportunities in order to respond to the varying needs of students in the classroom. Students' needs include academic support, social emotional guidance, and the development of personal skills. Classic tropes of elementary school include navigating challenging social situations or the coming of age journeys of identity. The social vacuum that arose from the pandemic became the challenging context for these educational and developmental goals. Upon re-entering the classroom after the 5 month hiatus of virtual learning, in addition to the overwhelming presence of technology and social media in the mix, it was evident that children were missing skills crucial to the cooperation, collaboration, and coexistence amongst their peers. Simply put, it was clear that "we've forgotten that we belong to each other."<sup>86</sup>

There were situations that arose in the classroom setting which demonstrated the growth that needed to be done. When assigned partners to work with, students were unwilling to even consider working with certain people. Instead, they repeatedly requested to work independently and preferred to take on a heavier workload in order to avoid specific people. When challenged by an assignment or a teacher, students would break down without even attempting to begin, fully reliant on a grown up to guide them. Even outside of the classroom during more social events, students could not navigate how to express themselves appropriately. When a classmate wanted to play a different game; when a friend wanted to invite someone else to join them; when there was disagreement or a challenge to their idea, the students could not problem solve cordially. Instead it required intervention from a teacher, guidance counselor, or administrator. These types of reactions were common across various grade levels and all types of learners.

Teachers who recognized these patterns were not sure what was causing these reactions, but all could agree that it should not be accepted as the norm. There are about as many different approaches for how to respond to this need as there are people brainstorming solutions. Some believe in a specific social-

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<sup>86</sup> This is a famous reflection from Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

emotional learning curriculum, others see value in structured play or team games, still more thought a retreat setting could be productive. This paper does not set out to prove which is the best strategy for addressing such challenges. However it does outline how a spiritual approach can touch on each of these challenges. By developing the spiritual life of a child, those skills practiced slowly seep into other areas of life, where they can be practiced and benefit the child.

*The 'What'*

This paper advocates the necessity for the development of a spiritual life amongst children. A spiritual life is most commonly identified by one's spirituality and relationship with a higher power, but also can be translated into social behaviors at home, in school, with peers, and with the self. The understanding of spirituality used throughout this paper comes from Tarcisius van Bavel, as he explains that "spirituality is a permanent inner attitude of the human mind and heart, obtained through a process of personal assimilation of an evangelical value, in dialogue with the world of the individual and of the human race as a whole, originating from a free choice, and made concrete as a particular center of our lifestyle with due emphasis and attention."<sup>87</sup>

One major hope in writing this paper is that readers can feel empowered and recognize their role in the development of the spiritual lives of young people. While this paper highlights those who are parents and caregivers, or those in professions interacting with children including educators, youth ministers, clergy, and coaches, other persons who interact with children and care about their development can benefit from and utilize the material covered in this paper.

Children have an untapped potential in their spiritual life that would benefit from others helping to guide and nurture this exploration. Research has been conducted to demonstrate the positive effects that a healthy spiritual life can have on children. There is a plethora of suggested and recommended activities for children to understand and further develop their spirituality. Tools and resources needed to guide children along this journey are available. All that needs to be done is implementation!

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<sup>87</sup> Tarcisius van Bavel OSA, *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, ed. John Rotelle, trans. Henry Jackson (Philadelphia: Augustinian Press, 1996), 114.

As alluded to already, private religiously affiliated institutions have a golden opportunity before them. These schools can take advantage of the flexibility they have in being able to discuss topics of faith and religion. They then can apply what this paper has presented as a part of their curriculum or incorporate elements in a more supplementary way. Religiously affiliated schools should seriously consider paying considerable attention to ways educators can support students specifically through their spiritual lives. Not only is it beneficial for the students, but it provides them with a practical application that connects all the different things that they are learning.

The same is true for youth group organizations, or other small groups organized by civic communities, churches or faith practices. The basis for meeting groups like this is to provide a safe place where children can socialize and spend time with friends and other people in their community, to play games or participate in fun activities, and to live out their faith in a practical way. A youth group is generally understood and accepted as a space where children can have fun, but is balanced with intentional activities designed to encourage children to think about their identity, their faith, or their actions. Some parishes will have game nights, a movie showing, service events, or worship nights, to share a few examples of ways children are already engaged in developing their spirituality.

*What now?*

Considering the positive correlation between cultivating a spiritual life and the overall well-being of children, an increase in education and awareness regarding the spirituality of children would be a very encouraging development. While this topic could be adapted naturally in private, religiously affiliated schools, other private or independent schools should consider integrating spirituality into their school culture. An approach towards incorporating spirituality into school norms is to connect the development of a child's spiritual life to their social-emotional skills. The integration of spirituality into the classroom setting provides a structured, safe, and contained atmosphere to normalize the cultivation of a spiritual life. The development of the spiritual life will cross-fertilize the children's personal and interpersonal skills.

The period of childhood and adolescence contain stages of significant growth and change. During these periods, children are susceptible to the influences around them, even if they are unable to discern whether they are positive or not. With the recent influx of connectivity due to technology and social media, children have more access to information than before. Children have so much going on: staying in touch with family and friends, balancing schoolwork with extracurriculars, in addition to exposure of content online or on social media. Solitude, time for interiority and self-independence are not sought after or available as regularly to children during this age of connectivity. The irony of connectivity and social media is that it can have negative effects on one's social life. Instead of making people feel connected and happy, it does the opposite. Dr. Jean Twenge has conducted several studies and has a TEDTalk on the effect that Smartphones and social media have had on children, their well-being, and their social behaviors.<sup>88</sup> Introducing practices that cultivate the spiritual life can give children the space to unplug from their devices and focus on the self, so that in turn they can grow in other social-emotional skills and be social beings.

It is clear that there is a need to better support children during their coming of age - to provide guidance and tools as they navigate their own identities and relationships in life. One possible solution is to nurture the spiritual life. Life is so busy, loud, and interconnected these days that people need time to focus on the self. This is especially true for children. Children need pathways where they can interact with others, but also can take time for themselves to recognize their relationship with the world at large. Children need to identify practices they can use when they are experiencing various emotions or life events. Children need space to take ownership of their beliefs and wrestle with how they will incorporate that into their daily lives. There is no telling how exactly it will happen for a child, or even if each child will establish their own spirituality. However it is evident that a solution is necessary and that tending to the spiritual life has broad benefits in a child's life. The cultivation of a spiritual life is not just for

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<sup>88</sup> Dr. Jean Twenge, <https://www.jeantwenge.com/>

children, but imagine how loving, just, and peaceful our society could be by focusing on children to remember and rekindle that we do belong to each other.

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