What Five Students of the ENCOUNTER

Adventist Bible Curriculum Taught Us About Their Spirituality

BY BARRY HILL and PHIL FITZSIMMONS

The concept of spirituality is a vital element of Adventist education. Developers of the *Encounter* Bible curriculum have shown its centrality by placing an "authentic incarnational spirituality" in its curriculum, harnessed "to a concept where God is abiding and enabling of meaning, identity, purpose and character in the individual's life."[1] The following case study explores how student spirituality has manifested itself in one school in response to the intentions of curriculum developers and Bible teachers.

Research Procedure

In 2017-2018, the authors engaged in qualitative research to understand how the educators in Australian Adventist schools were teaching the *Encounter* Bible curriculum. Lanelle Cobbin's "Transformational Planning Framework" underpins this curriculum.[2] Cobbin directed the writing of its primary school units, while Nina Atcheson directed the writing of secondary units. The writing process began in New Zealand in 2006, moved to a collaborative effort with Australia in 2007, and then to North American Adventist education in 2014. In Australia, a committee of 12 oversaw a planning and writing process that involved six writers and numerous teacher groups, who collectively completed the writing of 132 Year 1-10 units in 2012. Nine locations around the world now use the *Encounter* curriculum.[3]

In this study, respondents comprised 45 groups of students, averaging six in number, in classes from Years 3 to 10 at 12 primary and 10 secondary school campuses.[4] We used a "focus-group interview" approach with a set of questions to guide the discussion. However, these questions were adaptable to allow us to explore interesting or idiosyncratic responses.[5] Questions covered student perceptions of *Encounter*, the word *encounter*, teaching methodology, engagement with learning, unit content, and aspects of spirituality.

As part of a multiple case-study approach, the following individual case discusses responses to three questions in one of four student interviews in one school. We note that generalizability and transference of findings are not core components of the case-study paradigm. Instead, it seeks to unearth patterns of awareness that teachers may want to consider in designing classroom experiences. In this instance, we interviewed a group of five Year 5-6 students (aged 11 and 12) selected from two classes. Their religious affiliations were Adventist, Baptist, Christian of no denomination, Buddhist, and Hindu. The pattern of religious composition in this group is typical for many Australian Adventist schools.

Literature Review

The term *spirituality* is difficult to define, often described as a moving target,[6] and "elusive, diverse and sometimes ambiguous."[7] Although elusive, it does have a core, namely a "sense of felt connection."[8] Described in numerous studies of children's spirituality as "relationality," the essence of this connection is "an inner sense of a living relationship to a higher power."[9] In this vein, David Perrin described Christian spirituality as "dependent on the dynamic relationship between the Spirit of God and the human spirit."[10]

Spirituality is closely related to religious faith and is often confused with

it. In reviewing the literature on their respective properties, Hill[11] found that the two concepts have much in common. For example, both include trust, belief, commitment, relational connectivity, value priorities, a search for meaning, a desire to sense God's presence, a quest for transcendence, prayer, knowing God through daily experience, and altruistic service. However, despite these commonalities—and in agreement with Rossiter's[12] perspective—Hill concluded that the terms differ in emphasis. He has found religious faith to be primarily oriented to trust, belief, knowledge of God, and worldview. At the same time, spirituality leaned toward spiritual identity, life meaning, relationality, awareness of God, and spiritual sensitivity, elements that recent children's spirituality literature has frequently explored.

There are sound reasons to clarify the relationship between faith and spirituality. First, understanding the evolving spirituality literature can assist the teaching of both spirituality and religion. The spirituality field has developed considerably in the past two decades,[13] which, according to Miller,[14] has established child spirituality as a relative certainty. In contrast to earlier studies, recent research has gathered children's perceptions of their spirituality ethnographically, resulting in an emerging picture of a spirituality that differs from the adult perspective and embraces different spiritual needs.[15] Second, Tacey has explained how clarification can help teachers to better use spirituality as a gateway to developing student faith that can in turn anchor students' spirituality.[16]

Because spirituality is complex, researchers tend to describe its components or themes rather than define it.[17] For example, in a comprehensive review of early childhood spirituality literature, Adams, Bull, and Maynes[18] described 12 themes for middle childhood. These were: the innateness of spirituality, relationality, connectedness as a deeper aspect of relationality, spiritual identity, search for life meaning and purpose, transcendence, a journey toward unity with the Other (God), the "here and now" experience of spirituality in daily life, creativity and achievement, moral sensitivity, awe and wonder, and the darker side of spirituality. We will now discuss seven of these themes and two others.

The quality of love, intimacy, and assurance experienced by young children in their relational attachments to family or caretakers appears to shape their ongoing faith development significantly. In discussing the possible impact of divorce on this faith journey, Chris Keisling[19] has cited the well-known research of Granqvist and Kirkpatrick,[20] who drew on attachment theory to show significant relationships between the quality and styles of childhood attachment and their impact on children's prayer behaviors, images of God, and attachment to God.

In their attempts to pursue self-transcendence, children are inclined to look for God's presence in the ups and downs in everyday life, expressing their spirituality as "here and now" experiences that contrast with the approaches of many adults.

As part of attachment, children's sense of connectedness and relationship are also vital components of their spirituality. The writing of Parker Palmer,[21] David Hay and Rebecca Nye,[22] and Ruth Wills[23] illustrate the rich literature on this topic. Numerous studies have examined Hay and Nye's version of relationality, "relational consciousness," believing it to be the core of children's spirituality.[24] While analyzing data, Nye realized that "relational consciousness" had emerged as a common thread tying together the spirituality of the schoolchildren she was interviewing.[25] She called this kind of consciousness "an unusual level of consciousness, something distinctively reflective, and that referred to the child's sense of connection to self, others, things, the world and God."[26]

Hay and Nye believed awareness was synonymous with consciousness, describing it as being children's wholistic awareness of a reality that is "more like sensory awareness."[27] Further, they elucidated three interrelated types of spiritual sensitivity that contributed to this awareness: awareness sensing, mystery sensing, and value sensing.[28]

Children's relational orientation merges with their quest for transcendence, defined as "being meaningfully involved in, and personally committed to, the world beyond an individual's personal boundaries."[29] In their attempts to pursue self-transcendence, children are inclined to look for God's presence in the ups and downs in everyday life, expressing their spirituality as "here and now" experiences that contrast with the approaches of many adults.[30]

Various studies have explored children's relationship with God as an aspect of transcendence. For example, Mata-McMahon[31] reviewed five studies of children's spiritual meaning-making and relationships with God, noting that in a study by Moore et al.,[32] prayer was the most commonly discussed theme. Overall, she concluded that irrespective of religious background, "God, and the child's relationship to God, tends to have a strong presence in early childhood. Spirituality, and particularly the notion of God, consistently was found to comfort and even improve children's wellbeing."[33]

Another aspect of children's spirituality is their search for meaning and purpose,[34] a search assisted by the development of spiritual language[35] and



Examples of the *Encounter* Adventist Bible Curriculum teaching units and lessons for different levels.

aspects of the communication process that create meaning.[36] Further, making meaning is tied to the formation of spiritual identity. For Gibbs, "identity formation was clarified within multiple scenarios of relational connectedness."[37] Such identity is seen as a core component of spirituality in that it enables children's reflection related to a sense of self, and a grasp of their place and purpose in the world.[38]

Spirituality also involves a valuing process that includes value sensing[39] and prioritizing life values relating to what we hold sacred.[40] Hay and Nye[41] cited Donaldson, who wrote of people's progression "from self-centred emotion to an experience of value that transcends personal concerns." Children's moral valuing, relationships, and search for transcendence collectively lead them to express another aspect of their spirituality, namely performing acts of altruistic service, contributing to the greater good, and treating others well.[42]

Having sketched a partial research profile of children's spirituality, we now turn to our interview with them. Student names are pseudonyms to ensure anonymity.

Discussion

After we commenced with our "ice breaker" question: **"What do you think of *Encounter* Bible?"** Georgia quickly responded, "*Encounter* is very confronting. I like it because you have to like reflect on yourself, and really it's very interesting." In expressing the idea of being confronted, she illustrated Otto's assertion that religious, spiritual experience could both fascinate/attract, and disturb/shock.[43] Given our overall analysis and the unpacking of the responses from this cohort, we believe *Encounte*r was highly effective in confronting and stimulating reflection. Further, her self-reflection exhibited a higher reflective consciousness that helps enable spirituality.

Stephen followed with a similar observation that "It's very interesting, and like it's part of our lives, and sometimes like it helps us get well from illness, or anything that you might struggle with, or like a depressing moment." Not only were his perceptions affirming of the *Encounter* Bible curriculum, but they also indicated that children's spirituality expresses itself in the context of their everyday life experiences—including the ups and downs and "here and now" life struggles of their social world.

The next response, from Chloe, was "Um, 'cause I'm not Christian, so I haven't learned about these things in the past. I am new, so I mean it is good to learn about it and what God has said." Although not a Christian, Chloe was still open to learning about God and positive about *Encounter* Bible. While she attended this school, her openness and desire to learn were a gateway to finding her true identity

and the meaning of her life.

Sarah declared her religious heritage by saying, "I am a Christian, an SDA. I just love *Encounter* because it's just a time for me to, you know, build my relationship with God, and feel His comfort, and you know, I feel He's there for me." By affirming her assurance and comfort in sensing God's nearness and consciously building her relationship with God, Sarah demonstrated the relational core of her spirituality.

Finally, Daniel concluded, "It's great to learn new things about Him and things that He has done." In numerous interviews at all year levels in our research, a common theme was students' love of learning new insights from the Bible. It is part of their thirst for deep meaning, itself a component of spirituality.

Besides showing interest and enjoyment in *Encounter* Bible classes, these students had already started to reveal their spirituality in various ways by simply responding to one question that related only indirectly to it.

Our second question was, **"Does *Encounter* Bible help you think about life?"** Chloe started by relating her day's experience to a Bible memory verse: "Yeah, 'cause we sometimes look up Bible verses, and for our homework we have a Bible verse to memorize. And like when I'm sleeping, before I go to bed I always go back on my day, and then I remember the Bible verse. 'Oh, I could have done that instead of that. Why did I ever do that?'"

The inclination to reflect on a day's experience is spiritual. In the process of integrating the meaning of a Bible verse with her experience, Chloe showed the kind of reflective self-awareness that engaged her sense of spiritual accountability and openness to improvement. Such reflection both accesses and engenders higher spiritual consciousness.

Daniel then showed a thoughtful approach to the Bible through the lens of history. "Well, I do think deeply a lot about life. Bible classes do make me think deeper, which is opening a lot more ideas, experiences, and the like . . . different ideas of history and what's coming and what's gone." This response was spiritual in that he not only sought to make sense of his life through a historical framework, but also treasured the diversity of new ideas and experiences in Bible as part of deeper meaning making. And his linguistic mastery helped sharpen his spiritual perception.

Georgia found the emotion and meaning of music in *Encounter* Bible deeply moving. In her words, "Yeah, I definitely do think about life, like some bits in Bible topics are really one on one with God. And like there'll be some songs that the teacher will play on the screen, and you'll have the lyrics with you, and just those words in the song. They're really touching, and you really feel God speak to you during those moments. And it's really like if you're having a bad day it will really just help you to see life from a different perspective, and you really realize how you can fix it all, and that God is always with you." Here Georgia strongly engaged the relational domain of spirituality (one on one with God). First, she showed emotional and valuing sensitivity by being touched through exploring song lyrics. Then her strong emotional feeling spring boarded her allusion to God's nearness, even to an expression of closeness that had an intimate, transcendent feel. The assurance of connection with God then transferred to her experiential struggles and changed her perspective on dealing with them. This whole spiritual process showed a sustained sense of God's presence that enabled her to gain a sense of control of some difficulties in her life.

Having been immersed in children's responses, we tend to believe that admitting to struggling is spiritually authentic. The literature has established that the expansion of children's spirituality can involve life dilemmas, inner struggle, conflict, and difficult mental work.

Stephen then reflected on his spiritual struggle. "So yeah, I know *Encounter* Bible has really helped me through struggling times, like when my dad was sick I really prayed, and I never used to do that, so it helped me get through a lot." Having been immersed in children's responses, we tend to believe that admitting to struggling is spiritually authentic. The literature[44] has established that the expansion of children's spirituality can involve life dilemmas, inner struggle, conflict, and difficult mental work. Further, Stephen had made a significant life change that could indicate the influence of the Holy Spirit in his life.

Following Stephen, Sarah talked us through three aspects of her reflections about life. "*Encounter* Bible [class] absolutely makes me think deeply about my purpose in life, and it just makes me think deeply about things I haven't explored yet, like questions I haven't answered myself, and especially when my grandmother was in hospital. . . . I would pray and pray and pray and she actually got better. . . . Also, every night before I go to bed I open the Bible and look at a memory verse . . . or this Bible book that I read."

Sarah's response illustrated the presence of spirituality in each aspect of her experience. The search for life meaning and purpose was spiritual, as was her sensitivity to the mystery of life. Hay and Nye would call this mystery sensing.[45] Her prayer and the conviction of answered prayer as the assurance of God's intervention were both spiritual. Finally, being reflective about a day's experience in conjunction with the meaning of a Bible

verse was also spiritual, something we noted earlier about Chloe.

Our third most difficult and probing question was **"What does it mean to be spiritual?"** Daniel thought for a minute, then declared, "It's not just being—you know, I'm a Christian, and I'm going to learn all about this. It's more about getting really deep and having a relationship with God, so getting connection, having connection there. It's more, something more, yeah." For Daniel, spirituality was all about his relationship with God. His relational spirituality called for depth in the sense of focusing intently on God, making an effort, despising the superficiality of simply learning about Christianity and assuming a Christian identity. His use of the word *connection* was also repeated many times in other schools by students at all levels we surveyed.

Chloe chipped in with "I really love what he has said, and it's so true. It's just like that. . . .You can't just be like 'Oh, nah, I'm just gonna do something else. I'm now playing the latest video game.' No, you have to put aside your priorities and your distractions and actually put your all into it. You actually have to commit something to be spiritual." This description of spirituality took another angle on avoiding superficiality, the angle of deep commitment ("you have to actually put your all into it"). As a component of human faith, commitment also spills over into spirituality in students' minds.

Georgia echoed the sentiments of her two classmates. "Yeah, to be spiritual, it's not like I go to school every day and learn about [the] Bible. That doesn't make you spiritual. It's more like you need to dig deeper, and you really like pray, and you need to talk to God, and you need to ask Him, and stuff like that. You need to have that relationship with God." The theme of "digging deep," avoiding superficiality, was perpetuated in this third relational account. But here it was linked with prayer as the conversational, communication aspect of spiritual relationship.

Sarah then engaged us with nature. "Well, my grandparents are very spiritual, like they point out the littlest things that are so beautiful. And it's like they point out this smooth rock and say, 'Oh you can paint on that, you can make a beautiful picture.' . . . That's really, I don't know, it's just amazing." In her enthusiastic affirmation of her grandparents' spirituality, Sarah was displaying two aspects of her own spirituality. The first was her close relational attachment to her grandparents, and the second was her use of an aesthetic framework to express her sensory connection with beauty in nature.

Finally, Stephen's reflections centered on the relationship between Christian and non-Christian spirituality. "I think spirituality is to do with Christianity, but not always, not in all contexts. You can be spiritual in other religions. Yeah, many other ways. It's not just Christian. So this is a hard one." Stephen was raising a question about the relationship between Christian faith and spirituality, and by implication about the challenge for *Encounter* Bible in teaching faith and spirituality in classes where Adventist students are a minority. His observations reminded us that we are in the 21st century, a time when according to Tacey, there is a spirituality revolution occurring in which "our social scene is full to the brim with individual and esoteric spiritualities."[46]

Conclusion

One 40-minute interview with a group of five students showed us much about their spirituality. This served to confirm other student perspectives from other schools across Australia. Furthermore, the qualities of spirituality on display resonated with discussions in current children's spirituality literature. More importantly, *Encounter* Bible was doing what it should for these five students.

Rebecca Nye[47] commented that there is a continuum in the way in which children everywhere express their spirituality. At the first and most basic level, they refer to "first questions" or broad principles. Then they begin to talk about religion and make conscious associations with religious traditions. Finally, they reveal religious insights that express their experience of spirituality directly. The students we interviewed clearly fitted the third category. For this group—and for that matter, every other group we interviewed—*Encounter* Bible was giving them a spiritual life advantage, and spiritual wellbeing.

Finally, a challenge in Australian Adventist schools is the presence of numerous students of other faiths or no faith in Bible classes. When we asked the group if they liked having students of different religious faiths in class, responses were lively and unanimous in sentiment. Students all respected other perspectives and worldviews, saying things like, "You do respect them; don't put each other down," and "I feel that we really put aside our differences when there is Bible." The valuing of comparison that invites openness to difference, the divergent, and the new reveals a different search for meaning that now characterizes children's spirituality.

This article has been peer reviewed.



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Recommended citation:
Barry Hill and Phil Fitzsimmons, "What Five Students of the *Encounter* Adventist Bible Curriculum Taught Us About Their Spirituality," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 83:3 (2021): 4-9.

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