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Age-Appropriate Experiences and Rituals That Help Students Encounter God, Part I

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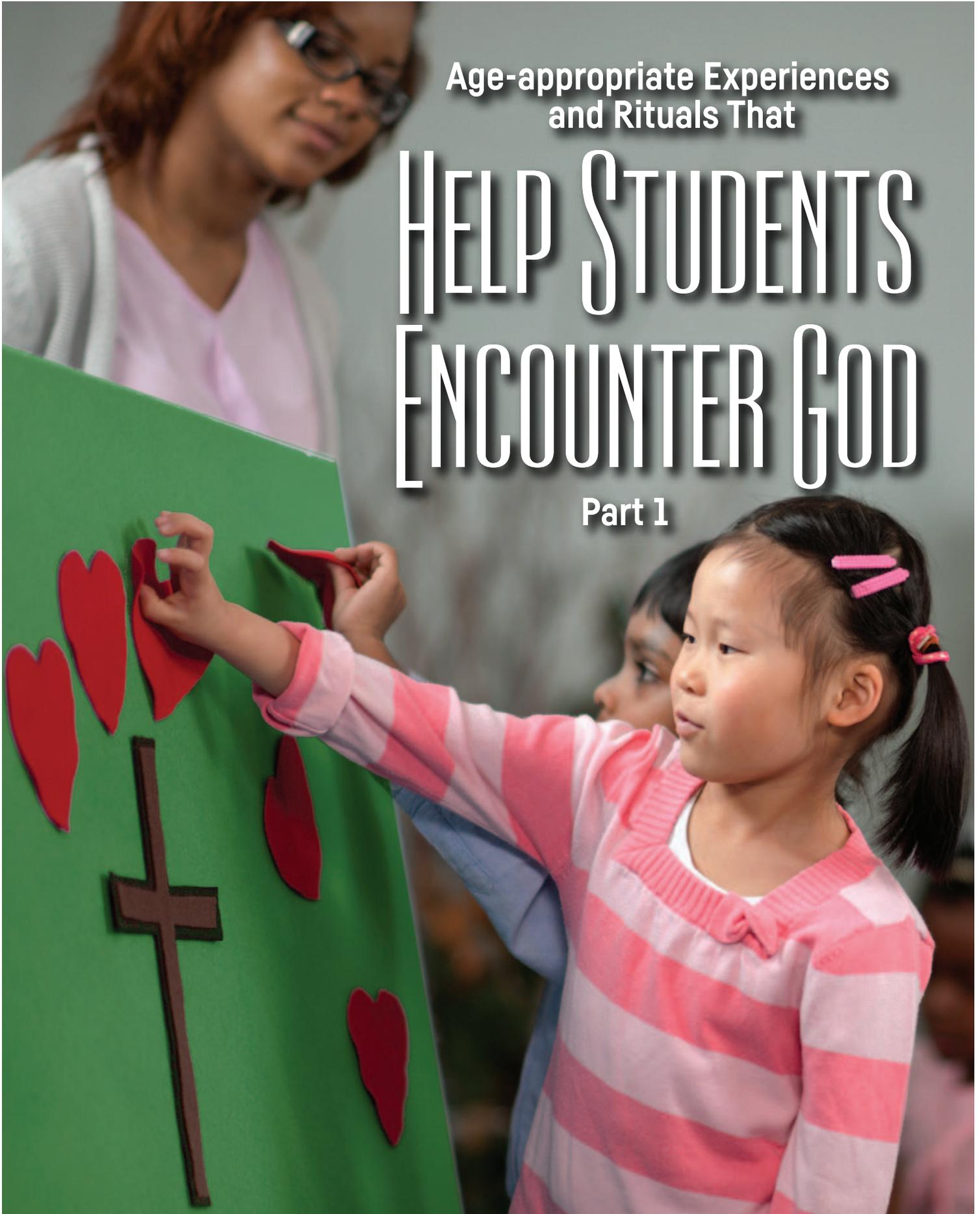
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Age-appropriate Experiences
and Rituals That

HELP STUDENTS ENCOUNTER GOD

Part 1



Christianity is about experiencing a personal relationship with God, and salvation encapsulates this experience. After the initial decision to accept salvation offered by Jesus Christ, Christians renew that commitment on a daily basis, gradually maturing in their understanding of God’s love and grace. Experiencing salvation is a process that involves daily, lifelong learning and communication with God.

Salvation is God’s gift to everyone, irrespective of age, but how students experience salvation is generally age-specific. Habenicht and Burton portrayed salvation as a maturational process involving the two important aspects of cognition and a nurtured faith.¹ Research from the Barna Group indicates that the majority of people who accept salvation do so before the age of 13 (see Figure 1).

Barna has written that the “[p]rimary window of opportunity for effectively reaching people with the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection is during the pre-teen years. It is during those years that people develop their frames of reference for the remainder of their life—especially theologically and morally.”³ What a sobering and challenging thought for Christian educators!

Adventist teachers acknowledge that a 1st-grade student can experience an age-appropriate, conversion experience that is just as real and compelling as a pre-teen’s conversion experience. But, due to the chronological and maturational differences between the 1st grader and the pre-teen, each conversion experience will be different, idiosyncratic, and age-specific. Adventist teachers need to validate a 1st-grader’s spiritual encounters because these formative experiences can become the foundation that can reassure and give direction to a young student’s spiritual journey. Interestingly, some pre-teens comment that their spiritual maturity can be traced back to these very early faith-affirming experiences.

An altar call that is included as part of Week of Prayer meetings, or a similar school program, can act as a catalyst to: (a) prompt students to consider their response to God’s unfailing love; or (b) provide the opportunity for students to publicly announce that their life is now committed to God. Understandably, any group of students will respond to an altar call in a variety of ways and for a variety of personal reasons. Frequently, the student’s earlier life experiences with a significant Christian individual (e.g., parent, minister, teacher, friend, etc.), will either have enhanced or negatively influenced the student’s concept of the character of God and/or the significance of Christian salvation and the conversion experience.

The following four scenarios illustrate why some students decide to respond to a public altar call. They are:

1. Students who want to please an adult respond to an adult’s influence rather than to a godly conviction⁴;
2. Students who are captured and caught up in the mood of the event respond without having made a conscious decision to follow Christ⁵;
3. Students who are fearful and terrified of eternal spiritual consequences if they don’t respond to an altar call feel compelled and obligated to respond; and
4. Students who are under godly conviction genuinely desire and respond to an altar call to surrender their heart and life to Christ.

After an altar call program, it may be advisable for Adventist teachers to take time to discuss and address the meaning and implications of a personal conversion experience. Not every student in the class will have a Christian background, and this often emotionally driven experience may be uncharted territory for non-churched students. Therefore, teacher explanation, debriefing, and clarification may be necessary. It’s crucially important for students and teachers to recognize the difference between: (a) responding

Figure 1. Age at Which Individuals Chose to Become a Christian

43 percent accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior before reaching the age of 13;

13 percent between the ages of 18 to 21 years; and

23 percent made that commitment to Christ after their 21st birthday.²

to an altar call; and (b) responding to God’s love because of an altar call. Sometimes these two concepts can be confused in the emotion of the experience as demonstrated in the four scenarios above.

Another topic that needs attention in the Christian classroom involves an understanding of the conceptual differences between the terms *knowing God* and *knowing about God*. The term *knowing about God* (head knowledge) often indicates that a person has knowledge about God, the Bible, etc., but not a personal relationship with God. Whereas the term *knowing God* (heart knowledge) usually indicates that a person has a personal heart-relationship with God that extends far be-

yond a superficial knowledge. The latter term describes an active engagement, while the former involves passive knowledge.⁶ The teacher’s goal is for each of his or her students to personally experience God on a daily basis (heart knowledge) rather than just having a head knowledge about Him.

Factors That Influence a Student’s Readiness for Salvation

A child’s concept and understanding of salvation can be influenced, either positively or negatively, by the factors listed in Figure 2. Adventist teachers need an awareness of the impact that these factors can have on a child’s readiness for salvation.

Figure 2: Factors That Influence a Student’s Readiness for Salvation⁷

| | |
|--|--|
| Home influences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive parental modeling of a committed Christian life can demonstrate to a student the power of salvation. • Parental hypocrisy regarding the application of Christianity may impede a student’s understanding of salvation. • Different religious affiliations held by parents may result in a young person experiencing conflicting parental loyalties. |
| Cognitive maturity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mental maturity and chronological age may not always be synchronized. • Different levels of cognitive maturity influence a student’s ability to understand and experience salvation. • Some cognitively precocious students may understand the implications of salvation at a younger age than their peers. These students can be highly sensitive to hypocrisy and may be deeply conscious of their fallibility and sinfulness. |
| Emotional security | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If early in life, students have a stable home and see consistency in parental interactions, in most cases, this will help them develop a positive sense of trust and love. This type of home climate can also help them to love and trust Jesus. • Students from an insecure, dysfunctional, or deprived home may have difficulty developing an understanding of trust and love. |
| Biblical knowledge | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge about, a belief and confidence in, and a love of the Bible will assist students to comprehend and respond to salvation. |
| Personality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students appear to be religiously inclined and have a sensitive and emotional nature. • Some students who are deep thinkers may take time to process information before responding to it. • Some students may show no overt interest in Christianity unless a significant adult challenges them to think about developing a personal relationship with God. |
| Religious upbringing | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If the child’s religious background has been based on a solid biblical foundation, he or she will be ready at a younger age to accept Jesus.⁸ |
| Peer pressure | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may be swayed by the attitudes of their friends. • Students who are spirituality minded will often be attracted to friends with the same attitude. The reverse is also true. Like attracts like. |
| Early childhood contact with Christianity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive initial experiences with Christianity, especially in early childhood, may contribute to and influence the lifelong acceptance of salvation and a Christian lifestyle. |

Leading Students to Understand and Accept Salvation

Unlike any other faith and belief system, there are no steps that people can follow to make them acceptable to the God of Christianity. Christians believe “that God has already completed the steps and simply calls on us to receive Him in faith.”⁹ Salvation involves accepting what Jesus has already done for us.

Children develop an understanding of salvation based on the level of their cognitive development. To help students understand the abstract concept of salvation, the *Children’s Ministry Resource Bible* provides multiple, practical age-specific ideas such as the following:¹⁰

1. *The Wordless Book*, which uses colored paper to symbolize the story of salvation, presenting the Cosmic Conflict story in an abridged form.¹¹

2. *The Salvation Hand*. Each finger on the hand has a specific statement and Bible verse that describes the message of salvation.¹²

If a student asks, “How can I be saved?” Calkins suggests that teachers can use the following uncomplicated explanation:

1. Jesus loves us as we are. Nothing can make Him love us more or less than He does right now.

2. Wrongdoing is called sin, and everyone has sinned. Everyone needs Jesus because no one is good enough for heaven without His help.

3. Jesus is the sinless Son of God. He died for our sins. Believing in Him is the only way to heaven.

4. We pray and ask Jesus to forgive our sins, admitting we need His help. We cannot do it on our own. If we choose to accept Him into our lives, He can create in us new thoughts and actions.

5. If we accept Jesus into our lives, we will become His adopted child—a child of the King. We will now belong to His kingdom on earth and have a reserved place in His heavenly kingdom.¹³

Helping students to understand salvation, and then to witness their acknowledgement and acceptance of Jesus as their personal Savior, is a highlight of every Christian educator’s career.

Barriers to Experiencing God

Numerous media attractions and sociocultural issues continually bombard Christians young and old. The family unit is under attack, self-harm is on the rise, and substance abuse is in epidemic proportions. All these issues can become barriers to a child experiencing God on a personal level. Adventist educators, however, are in the unique position of being able to help students address these barriers if they themselves have personally experienced the grace and love of God. As teachers model what it means to be strongly committed to and involved with a Christian worldview and lifestyle, students in their care will witness and experience the meaning of strong Christian leadership.

There are significant barriers that thwart a student’s ability to experience a personal relationship with God, including the following:

1. **Hypocrisy of adults:** Young people can detect hypocrisy very quickly in adults. According to Habenicht and Burton, hypocrisy can inoculate students against Christianity.¹⁴

2. **Lack of love and trust in early childhood:** Dysfunctional families are incapable of giving children the love, care, nurture, and sense of security that everyone needs. In such families, children learn not to trust or love another person, and it becomes difficult for them to trust God.¹⁵

3. **Poor parenting:** Some parents are permissive and laid-back while others are controlling and severe. Children’s early concepts of God come from the way their parents interact with, and treat, them.

4. **Distorted images of God:** Children taught to believe that God always answers prayers sometimes develop distorted images of God when their prayers are not answered in the way they anticipated. Parents who portray God as being harsh, dictatorial, and a revengeful Being present a warped view of God to their children.¹⁶

5. **Family break-up:** When a child’s family is in crisis, he or she may not understand what is happening, and may become aggressive and/or withdrawn. Such children learn to turn off their emotions to protect their inner sensitivity in order to survive. Because developing a relationship with God often includes one’s emotions, young people who struggle with regulating their emotions or whose emotions are out of control due to life circumstances may have a difficult time dealing with their emotions.¹⁷

6. **People pressure:** Pressure from adults to become a Christian may result in children rejecting Christianity. Also, when a child’s parents each belong to a different faith, this can cause the child to feel torn between the two religions and pressured by a parent to accept or reject one or the other parent’s religion.¹⁸

7. **Lack of belonging:** Belonging resolves the sense of need and provides a sense of purpose. In many cases, students who build friendships with their Christian peers have a greater sense of belonging and higher self-worth. Students who lack Christian friends often leave their faith community because they do not feel they have anything in common with that community.¹⁹

8. **Media influence:** Media often make fun of Christians and Christianity, portraying Christians as people who are incompetent, boring, and inept. Young people will have to develop resiliency and knowledge to counter these stereotypes in order to live as Christians in the 21st century.

9. **Misunderstanding of the relationship between faith and reason:** Faith and reason are neither opposites nor mutually exclusive. History demonstrates that some of the world’s greatest discoveries were made by Christian scholars, e.g., Louis Pasteur, Galileo, and Isaac Newton. How sad that many people in modern society consider Christian faith, reason, and scholarship to be incompatible. “To believe in God is not to put the mind on hold—rather, it is mind and heart and sometimes also the body working together to make meaning in one’s life.”²⁰ This is because Christians recognize that their mind, heart, and body together play a significant role in their reasoning, cognition, and faith development.

10. **Abuse:** This is of growing concern worldwide. Unfortunately, it also happens in a Christian context, not just between adults and children, but often among peers as well. To abuse the trust of a child is to destroy that child's trust in God. God has no patience with people who harm a child. He says in Matthew 18:6: "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6, KJV). Christian teachers and schools have a responsibility to create safe spaces for children and young adults by establishing policies that prevent and address abuse.

Leading a student to understand and accept salvation is a responsibility and a privilege. It also requires teachers to be knowledgeable and sensitive about this delicate process. Adventist educators should provide as many opportunities as possible for students to experience God. Some students will eagerly accept any opportunity to experience and connect with God; some may choose to reject the provided opportunities; while others may need assistance to overcome

barriers obstructing their involvement in this experience.

Teachers need to know, understand, and experience salvation for themselves before they can authentically explain and demonstrate it to a student. It is the responsibility of Adventist educators to sow the seeds of God's love and grace. The Holy Spirit waters and nurtures their growth, and God ensures the harvest.

Experiencing God Through Music

Music has a vital role in reaching and touching the heart with spiritual truth. However, music may motivate for good or evil because it touches the emotions and can make a person more susceptible to suggestions that encourage or denigrate godly thoughts and intentions. Students need to be taught how to choose music that honors God and does not corrupt their head, heart, or hand. When life becomes difficult, and students are struggling to make sense of their world, memorized faith-based songs encourage, inspire, and positively motivate. Music can be a vehicle to connect or re-connect a person to God.



Experiencing God Through Answered Questions

As students mature and move from a concrete and literal cognitive understanding to a more abstract approach to thinking, some of them will question certain aspects of their faith. Unanswered prayer, the role of angels, and the challenges of negotiating difficult times are some of the most commonly raised issues. Students need to develop their faith and make it their own, and questioning is one way to facilitate this ownership. Teachers need to be sensitive and provide support for the students as they discover and develop, or reject, aspects of a personal faith.

An important aspect of a maturing faith for students is their realization of their role in the cosmic conflict. Everyone feels the consequences of the evil one as he creates as much havoc as he can, and then encourages people to think that God is the culprit. With reference to the devil, Habenicht and Burton pointed out that, "God's people are not immune from his strikes."²¹ However, when unfortunate things happen in life, students need to understand that God is not the problem; indeed, He can be the solution to the problem.²² If God stepped in every time something negative happened, then many people would follow God from the wrong motives. If students learn to trust God when things are tough, they will discover that He is trustworthy. Trusting God does not change the circumstances, but it will change the students' attitudes and the way they deal with the issues. When students are hurting, teachers may reassure them by saying: "Jesus is right beside you. He will carry you in his arms. He loves you and is crying too."²³

Closing Thoughts

Growing in Christ and experiencing God are enhanced through age-appropriate experiences. As students mature, they will question previously accepted beliefs as they take greater responsibility for their own faith, and this questioning should be welcomed as a learning opportunity. Experiencing God may be interrupted or delayed by barriers that children experience in their relationships with others. Christian teachers are privileged to have the opportunity to help remove these barriers in their classrooms, through modelling and living a Christian lifestyle. ✍

Part 2 of this article will appear in the April-June issue.

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