

BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE: HOLY LISTENING  
WITH PRAYER, SCRIPTURE, STORY, AND PEOPLE  
AS A FOUNDATION FOR CONFIRMATION

Barbara D. Abel Van Doren

B.M.Ed., Capital University, 1969  
M.A.R.E., United Theological Seminary, 1983

Mentors

Donald B. Rogers, Ph.D.  
Jacqueline Nowak, M.A.R.E., C.C.E., (P.C. USA)  
Leanne Ciampa Hadley, M.Div.

A FINAL PROJECT DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE DOCTORAL STUDIES COMMITTEE  
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

UNITED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
TROTWOOD, OHIO  
December, 2007

Copyright © 2007 Barbara D. Abel Van Doren  
All rights reserved.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

|   |    |
|---|----|
| ABSTRACT.....   | v  |
| INTRODUCTION.....   | 1  |
| CHAPTER   |    |
| 1. BACKGROUND OF THE ACT OF MINISTRY.....   | 7  |
| The Context   |    |
| 2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....   | 20 |
| Literature on Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture  |    |
| Exploring Contemplative Practices and Prayer  |    |
| Literature on Listening and Story   |    |
| Resources Used on United Methodism, Confirmation, and Baptism                         |    |
| Literature on Children, Youth, and Spirituality                                       |    |
| Literature on Spirituality in Youth Ministry  |    |
| 3. FOUNDATIONS AND THEORY OF BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL<br>NURTURE IN CONFIRMATION..... | 34 |
| Foundations of Baptism  |    |
| Foundations of Confirmation   |    |
| Confirmation in Methodist History   |    |
| Foundations of Holy Listening   |    |
| The Image of God  |    |
| Listening in Christian History  |    |
| Foundations of Story  |    |
| Postmodernism and the Theology of Story   |    |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| Story and Youth  |     |
| Biblical and Historical Foundations of Story           |     |
| Lectio Divina  |     |
| Story in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture              |     |
| Faith and Developmental Theories of Young Teens        |     |
| 4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY .....                          | 83  |
| 5. THE ACT OF MINISTRY: DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH ..... | 89  |
| 6. SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS.....           | 113 |
| Results of Research                                    |     |
| APPENDIX   |     |
| A. Permission Forms .....                              | 128 |
| B. Research – Sample Milestone Questions. ....         | 132 |
| C. Confirmation Liturgy .....                          | 134 |
| D. List of Dissertations .....                         | 137 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY .....                                     | 139 |
| Books  |     |
| Online Sources   |     |
| Video Sources  |     |

**ABSTRACT**

BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE: HOLY LISTENING  
WITH PRAYER, SCRIPTURE, STORY, AND PEOPLE  
AS A FOUNDATION FOR CONFIRMATION

by

Barbara D. Abel Van Doren

United Theological Seminary, 2007

Mentors

Donald B. Rogers, Ph.D.

Leanne Ciampa Hadley, M.Div.

Elder Jacqueline Nowak, M.A.R.E., C.C.E.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, including sacred space, Sabbath, hospitality, prayer manipulatives, accompaniment, blessing, holy listening, and story, was incorporated into two confirmation classes at Parkview United Methodist Church in Miamisburg, Ohio. Holy Listening, in verbal and contemplative prayer, scripture, faith stories, and personal interaction, was studied through qualitative data collected from the youth. Confirmation content (scriptural, historical, denominational and congregational) became Stories which were part of the teens' own spiritual journey and story as they confirmed their baptism. Foundational study of Holy Listening and Story supported the model, which helped connect the youth to God, the congregation and each other.

O come be blessed by God who loves you,  
By the One who knows your name.  
Remember that God made you for God's own.  
Be open to God's Blessing, receive the gentle touch.  
Come now to One who loves you very much.

Donald B. Rogers (to the tune of "*Spirit Song*")

## INTRODUCTION

Challenges to the leadership of Confirmation in contemporary mainline Protestant churches are many. Young teens in a confirmation setting may or may not have been actively nurtured in the Christian faith. It cannot be assumed that they have a basic understanding of the language of faith, of Christian vocabulary, of the most common stories of Scripture. It cannot be assumed that they have an active “God connection.” They may have grown up being nurtured through the church and through the family, or they may have recently been drawn into a particular congregation. They may come from a stable, close family with deep spiritual roots, or from a chaotic, dysfunctional family with no spiritual core. The youth involved in a particular class may be very diverse, reflecting these differences and others. How can a class be structured to potentially have meaning to each participant?

Another challenge to the nurture of young teens at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the navigation of many changes and challenges taking place in the mainline churches. Denominations and congregations are dealing with issues such as diversity, multiculturalism, global and community social conscience, homosexuality, media-driven culture, political challenges and the changing and varied perceptions of Christianity in the culture. Mainline churches are losing members, and the culture no longer reflects the values traditionally held by the Christian church in the United States. In the confirmation setting, a possibly “forced” opportunity of intense teaching and relationship within a finite time frame, how can the experience be approached in a way that not only covers the Scriptural and

denominational material, but also helps them connect to God in their hectic, bit-driven, fragmented, media-dominated lives?

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (hereafter known as BBSN) can provide an environment for young teens to experience their connection to God, and can provide a framework for their growing faith journey and their experience of connecting their faith with their daily lives. BBSN is built on the belief that children and youth possess an innate spirituality; they see God in the wonders of the world around them, and ministry with children and youth is the process of drawing that spirituality into their conscious understanding, of walking alongside them on their journey. The *Blessing Center Statement of Purpose* explains:

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN) is the process by which children and others are assisted in identifying, maintaining and deepening their prayer life. We believe in the Holiness of children. That is, that each person is born in the image of God. Children have a natural and instinctual spiritual connection to God, which can provide the basis for their growth in faith and life, in healing and in the ability to solve problems, and can be a means to maintain or heighten self esteem, without which we can not truly care for others. (Matthew 22:37–40)

BBSN begins with the belief that children are blessed with innate spiritual strength. When assisted in identifying, claiming and strengthening that spirit, they are able to maintain their connection with God throughout life. Children can discover, with God’s help and in relationship with caring adults who accompany them on their journey through life, how they can best thrive, cope and, when needed, heal. This becomes especially important in traumatic times and during crises, as they grow to become the children, teenagers, and adults God has called them to be.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> The Blessing Center, “What is Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture?” (The Blessing Center: 2007), <http://www.blessingcenter.org/about%20us.htm> (accessed June 2, 2006).

Youth twelve to sixteen years old still have that innate spiritual quality, but have also had many experiences and distractions through their home, school, and culture that challenge and often drown out their spiritual awareness. Therefore, the challenge of the confirmation process is not only to impart the basic knowledge of the Christian faith and the denominational church, but also to nurture their spiritual life, or a re-connection to their spirit and awareness of God.

It is the author's belief that the process of BBSN can provide a foundation for a confirmation experience that transcends the diversity of faith background brought to a class, nurturing the spiritual connection to God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. A healthy, potentially lifetime relationship with God can be grounded in Holy Listening to God through Scripture, prayer, Story and people.

Rev. Leanne Hadley, founder of First Steps in Colorado Springs and mentor of the BBSN cohort at United Theological Seminary, explains Holy Listening in a context of helping hurting children and teens:

The BBSN model of Holy Listening, Creating a Sacred Space, Prayer and Blessing provides a structure and safe space where children can explore their feelings and use their spiritual strength to cope and heal. Holy Listening is a process of affirming the innate spirituality of children while at the same time allowing them to honestly express their pain. Creating a Sacred Space helps a child create a space that allows them to be still, settle their soul, and begin to pray. Prayer is the communication between the child and God. During this time God's spirit of light and love can comfort, heal and surround the child.<sup>2</sup>

How might Holy Listening look in the setting of Confirmation?

---

<sup>2</sup> Leanne Hadley, First Steps Spirituality Center, 313 N. Tejon, #18, Colorado Springs, CO 80903, 719/520-9024, 1ststeps.net.

First, Holy Listening involves listening to the Holy: listening to God in prayer and listening to God through Scripture. This part of Holy Listening can be encouraged and nurtured in youth through Sacred Space, Sabbath time, Blessing and various forms of prayer and prayer tools, always keeping our purpose of God-connection as the focus. Mike Yaconelli reflects this focus in *Contemplative Youth Ministry*:

Contemplative youth ministry isn't just another ministry model; it's an opening of the heart, an attentiveness to God, a receptivity to the Holy Spirit, a growing relationship with Jesus and his way of compassion. Contemplative youth ministry isn't about becoming mystics or turning kids into cloistered monks and nuns; it's about helping kids become alive in Christ. It isn't about candles and labyrinths; it's about youth and adults becoming present and available to God's love.<sup>3</sup>

Second, Holy Listening involves believing that all people are made in the image of God. Thus, Holy Listening looks for the image of God in the other person in a listening relationship. The listener respects that image, treating the other person as a beloved child of God, even when the person is not reflecting that image. Holy Listening accepts that person without judgment or evaluation, but with the openness of the spirit of God's love, even when one would not ourselves feel love. Holy Listening implies expecting God to act in the listening. It is God's blessing in action.

Third, in this context, the author understands Holy Listening to involve listening and absorbing Story about the Holy. Story is a way of communicating biblical understanding and of teaching what has gone before. Story is a way of both coming to new understandings and moving outside ourselves. Young teens are often absorbed in themselves and their immediate

---

<sup>3</sup> Mark Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 25.

world. Story is a way of opening windows to a better understanding of other people, to a better understanding of the Biblical times, and therefore of Scripture itself. Jesus taught in parables, in Story; the faith has been passed down through generations through Story. When young people confirm their baptism and affirm their connection to the congregation, they are stepping into the Story of their congregation, of their denomination, of Christian history, of Jewish history, and of Scripture. When they hear the stories of the faith journeys of others, they witness vulnerability, tales of both tragedy and triumph, and also day to day normal life. Knowing stories of members of their own congregation can increase their collection of familiar faces, be a thread of connection to the others around them, and give them new comparisons for their own lives. To hear the stories of historic Christian figures, tales of faith from the near or distant past, and testimonies of contemporary people both local and well-known, can be a way of learning to respond to life through the eyes of their own faith, of understanding traditions and teachings of Christianity, and of bringing Scripture to life. As youth begin to understand that “everybody has a story,” they begin to develop the respect of the image of God in each person.

Fourth, Holy Listening can be reinforced through the use of symbols. Confirmation is Christian Education: education of information, education of an historic set of symbols and analogies, and education of means of faith. Effective education uses different doors to open to the same room: aural, visual, physical, and emotional, in addition to repetition. Using symbols to represent the spiritual concepts and experiences can enhance both the learning and the prayer experience, giving a tangible quality to the intangible. This study will

especially include symbols on the altar and as prayer manipulatives, items that are used in prayer as tangible connections to the intangible Holy God.

In Chapter One, the background is provided for the Act of Ministry (AOM), the action research that is the core of this paper. The joining of BBSN, the author's past experience with youth, and a two year absence of confirmation training in the local church provided the opportunity to research BBSN in that setting.

The Review of Literature, Chapter Two, outlines the literature explored for this study, and the state of the art of literature, especially in reference to contemplative practices with youth. The areas of study include: Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture; contemplative practices and prayer; resources used on United Methodism, confirmation and baptism; Holy Listening and Story; spirituality of children and youth; and spirituality in youth ministry.

Chapter Three discusses the biblical, historical, and theological foundations of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, baptism, confirmation, Holy Listening and Story and theories of faith development of young teens.

The methodology used in researching the AOM is explained in Chapter Four, as qualitative surveys and free writing were done by the youth during confirmation, with triangulation provided by Context Associates and parents.

Chapter Five covers the description, research, and the results of the research on this Act of Ministry. The summary, reflections and conclusions of the author are covered in Chapter Six.

## CHAPTER ONE

### BACKGROUND OF THE ACT OF MINISTRY

On January 1, 1948, a little girl came into the world. God said, “You have a mother and father who have suffered many losses, but they love you very much, and will take very good care of you. I will be with you.”

In 1952, God said to this little girl, “I am not giving you the gift of health in your childhood, and you will always be ‘different,’ but I am giving you the gift of a song in your heart, and the gift of music. The ‘different’ and the music are what will make you special, and will show you that I am with you.”

In 1956, God said, “I know you are lonely and wish you could go out and play with friends outside, but I have given you the gift of a good mind, and much time to spend with Me. You will grow closer to me through My Word, My stories, and the Sunday School teachers I have given you.”

In 1959, God said to this almost adolescent girl, “You have walked with Me for eleven years, and now it is time for you to allow Me to love other people through you. I will give you babies and children to care for, to love, and to tell My stories to. I will give you other youth with whom to grow in the knowledge of My Word and My journey.” And she sang God’s songs, taught God’s stories, and loved God’s children.

In 1960, God said to this teenager, “It is time for you to learn that the world is not necessarily a nice or safe place, nor does it always make sense. Keep on making music,

telling my stories, and walking with Me.” And she continued to sing the songs, tell the stories, and love the children.

In 1963, God said to this very sick girl, “You are struggling for oxygen and for life, and neither will come easily, but I have some jobs for you to do later on in life. Hang on to Me, and we will walk together.” And she clung, even when there was no consciousness.

In 1966 this girl, now a music education major in a Lutheran college, said to God, “Where are You in all these strange ideas I am hearing about You?” And God hugged her through a nun and a guitar.

In 1967, this girl cried to God and said, “Where are You, between Luther and the Catholics, between Existentialism and the Bible that I know?” And God sent her to the School for the Blind in Columbus to teach The Story to kindergarten children.

In 1969, this girl told God, “There are so many different ideas about You—all must be rationalization.” And God planted her smack in the middle of a still-EUB-in-spirit-Methodist-Church, and planted a protective hedge of prayer around her, even though she did not know it. And she played her music for God.

In 1972, this young music teacher left the space within the protective hedge, depressed and drawn into a different crowd. God told the Prayer Warrior of that church, “Keep praying for her, she is mine.” And that Prayer Warrior did.

In 1973, God said, “This is enough!” And through prevenient grace, God used bad weather at band camp, the witness of the changed life of another teacher, a fourth grade student, a church secretary, and a hospital trip to draw her back into sacred space along

with the Prayer Warrior who had continued to pray, with an Hawaiian scientist, with the Catholic wife of the associate pastor and another Prayer Warrior whose daughter would someday briefly be a doctor to her son. God used a radio station, books, a trip to Rome, and the book of Colossians to chip away at the wall of “protection” she had built, and confirmed the love of Jesus through a whiney, irritating little fourth grade girl. The young music teacher was on her knees, and back in the arms of the loving God.

In 1974, God said, “Welcome back, my child,” and for a respite, brought physical healing and rest, and an insatiable appetite for the Word. And soon God said, “It is the time for which I have been preparing you,” and she found herself leading a talented, on-fire-for-the-Lord group of teenagers with guitars, drums, tubas, and saxophones. And again God used her to tell God’s stories and share God’s love, as they grew together, cried together, learned together, and shared all those things with others as they sang to people throughout the state.

In 2005 she felt the tears inching down her cheek as she realized that:

- One of those teens was in Africa working with HIV patients in hospitals with a mission trip from her church.
- One of those teens went to Gulfport, Mississippi to help people deal with Hurricane Katrina.
- One of those teens gave up a job as computer programmer to be a Baptist music minister in Atlanta, Georgia.
- One of those teens had a ministry in California, and came all the way back to Ohio several years ago to a reunion of that group.

- One of those teens became a nurse at Children’s Hospital, and has four children who have gone to Christian schools.
- Many of those teens worked with the youth in their churches, from Dallas to Atlanta to West Carrollton to Beavercreek.
- One of those teens received an M.Div. degree and is pursuing a Master’s degree in Pastoral Counseling.
- One of those teens, in spite of having been sexually abused by a seminary student, became a social worker and counselor with youth and children.
- Several of those teens are working with children and music in the congregation of their youth.

And she is humbled that God saw fit to use her in the lives of these teens.

In 1978, God said to this music teacher, “You are listening and walking with Me. I have more challenges for you. Learn more about My ministry.” And she entered United Theological Seminary in the M.A.R.E. program.

In 1978, God also said to this growing disciple, “You are ready to grow through challenges. You have walked with Me, felt My presence, seen answers to many prayers, and ministered with My Spirit. Now it is time for you to climb more rocky hills and traverse deeper valleys.” And behold, there were more health problems, a career shift, and later the gift and challenge of a husband.

In 1983 and 1985, God gave this woman the ultimate gifts of love and humility—two babies. And God said, “You have been given precious gifts. Care for them and love them and nurture them and teach them of Me. Oh yes, and you will continue to gasp for

oxygen, not sleep through the night for three and a half years, battle depression and lose your earthly father. And I will walk with you, and you will know I am there, even though you cannot feel me. And I will use you to walk with those who are in more despair than you.”

And she loved and nurtured the children, nurtured their spirits, and used her gifts and training as God gave the health to do so. And lo, there arose another group of young people, and God said, “Teach them of Me, challenge them to grow not only in knowledge, but in Spirit.” And she did. And God also brought her adults to nurture. And she did. And there were friends and peers in her life with whom to share this journey.

In 1994, God said to this professional volunteer nurturer, “You are ready to begin the next challenges. You are ready to begin to understand the end of life, ready to begin to learn that the Church is not always My Kingdom, ready to learn to walk alone in the midst of community, ready to learn that parenting teenagers is different than leading a youth group.” And God pulled many planks from the flooring, and said, “Walk, and keep your eyes on Me.” And she did. And into her life came not only the challenges, but also wonderful Christian teachers for her children, who also held her elbow as she traversed the loose planks. God answered her prayers, bringing mentors of wisdom and faith into her sons’ lives as they faced their own challenges. And God also gave to the world better medicines for asthma, and lo, there was more oxygen.

In 2000, God said, “Goodbye, my child,” and sent her out into the desert to think, to ponder, to face loss and more clinical depression, to care for a dying parent and growing children, to search and find Him in new ways. In the desert, His face was

changing. In the desert, the battle against depression reared its huge head even more. In the desert there were many questions, and the answers became less and less definitive, yet more and more focused. The world became larger, less predictable, less controlled. And that eventually became “ok.” In the desert, God finally said, “You are now learning your next lessons; I will bring you to an oasis.” And God used a musician to give her God’s own creation. As she rested at the oasis, the Essential Oils brought healing both physically and emotionally. She began to look at the world on the far side of the desert, and wonder how God might use her now that her children were almost grown. And God took her by the hand and led her to audit a class in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture.

And God said to this healthier, more stable woman, “I am still with you. Walk with me.” And she applied for the D.Min. program and stepped out into the unknown.

### **The Context**

When the Act of Ministry (AOM) was begun in 2006, the author’s context was in the midst of several years of change, division, financial crisis and anticipating a change of pastor. Within a three year period, the ministry staff of three was filled by seven people. Within the previous four years the 150 year-old congregation had sold a downtown, ninety year-old, stone, Romanesque church and built a suburban, modern, multi-purpose building, introduced a contemporary rock service, rearranged Sunday morning schedules twice, abandoned many Christian Education components, both lost and gained many families, and witnessed the loss of hundreds of manufacturing jobs in the county.

The context for the AOM is Parkview United Methodist Church in Miamisburg, Ohio (a southern suburb of Dayton) with a membership of 316, about 240 of whom are active in some form. Total attendance for both services in 2005 averaged about 210 weekly. In 2003, upon entering the new building, the Sunday morning format changed from a small 8:30 service, a 9:15 Sunday School hour, and a 10:30 blended service to a 9:30 blended service, and an 11:00 contemporary service. The average total number of people involved in Sunday morning educational opportunities went from ninety-two in 2002, up to 104 and 107 in 2003 and 2004, and back down to ninety-five in 2005.

The congregation was primarily Caucasian, but did include several African-Americans and a woman from Nicaragua. Economically, there were probably a handful of families with a net worth of over a million dollars; many families were in service or working-class jobs, many were laid off work in recent years and been forced to develop new skills and many were retired on fixed incomes. Occasionally there would be a request for an emergency financial need that always received a good response. The average salary in the city is \$56,996.

The congregation celebrated its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary this summer, having been founded as a German-speaking United Brethren in Christ congregation in 1857 by John and Mary Kline. Many of the Kline's descendents remained active in the congregation until recent years, with only one family remaining. When the author came to the congregation in 1969, shortly after the merger of the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodists, Parkview was a very conservative church with biblical depth in its

members, many of whom were related to each other. During the following several years, United Theological Seminary students worked especially effectively with the youth.

In the early seventies, Lay Witness Mission weekends brought revival to the congregation, both adults and youth. Immediately following one of these weekends the author began working with the youth through vocal and instrumental music, beginning thirteen years of youth ministry. The “guitar and drum barrier” was broken in 1974, as the youth brought the sounds of the new contemporary music to Parkview, and family groups camped at outdoor music festivals. Later, Covenant groups prospered for a while and drama and clowns were well-received. The church has been an especially welcoming congregation over the years, taking new people under their wings, yet ironically maintaining an obvious difference between “old” and “new” people. The former pastor told the incoming pastor that Parkview was the “largest small church” he had ever seen.

The current facility is the fourth in the history of the congregation. In 2003 the congregation moved from a downtown location next to a library and three schools, which fed the church’s solid after-school program. Both the schools and the library also provided extra space for church programming when needed. Property was purchased on the edge of town for a very reasonable price, ground preparation was donated by the students of the Corps of Engineer as training, and many in the congregation were certain that the move was a work of God and the church growth focus would soon bear fruit. Parkview was now in a suburban location of fourteen acres next to several housing developments and across the street from a chemical processing plant which exploded during the sermon on the third Sunday at the new location. The city leased five acres and

built a small park on the property, with a playground and picnic shelter, a connection between the congregation and the neighborhood. Worship was held in a multi-purpose room with a stage on the long side of the basketball court.

Although Parkview was still within the city limits of Miamisburg, families also came from West Carrollton, Springboro, Centerville, Middletown, West Chester, Franklin, and Lebanon, up to a thirty mile commute. There were twenty-four ZIP codes represented among active members in addition to Miamisburg. Staff commuted from Kettering, Dayton, Farmersville, and Waynesville, twenty to thirty minutes away. A few families from the new neighborhood became a part of the congregation.

In the past fifteen years the congregation sponsored ninety-eight persons on the Emmaus and Chrysalis walks, including those now deceased (at least five). Of the ninety-three, fifty-eight remained active in the congregation. Sixty-nine persons participated in at least one Disciple Bible class, ten studied through IV, and many through II and III. Of the sixty-nine persons participating in Disciple Bible, fifty-one remained active in the church. There were no Disciple Bible classes after the move into the new building.

During the time of the AOM, there were three adult Sunday School classes. One, the Joy Class, met together since High School (now primarily in their sixties and beyond). This group has been the primary active leadership of the church for forty years, and also met as a social group once a month. Many of these members socialized outside of church. There was a class taught by the former pastor's wife, primarily of people who came to the church from another local United Methodist church during the move. A

fellowship group of young adults was attempted. During the winter of 2003–2004 the pastor initiated a rotation of classes that he and the associate taught, also considered membership classes. These were four to six week classes such as Purpose-Driven Life, Network (spiritual gifts), and Contagious Christian (evangelism). The traditional network of United Methodist committees were abandoned for the basic Administrative Board, Pastor Parish, Trustee, and Financial committees. Occasionally committees formed for a particular purpose and disbanded when that was accomplished. There were no committees that connected to education, age groups, missions or programs.

The Youth Director of three years was dismissed in the spring of 2005, and the youth group was led by volunteers. At the end of May of 2005 there were less than ten active youth, down from thirty-five the previous year. Junior High and High School boys' and girls' Bible studies combined into one Bible study, which became part of the author's puppet team practice. Youth Fellowship on Sunday nights happened once or twice a month. There were separate Sunday School classes for Junior and Senior High, with sixth graders in the Junior High class. At the beginning of this AOM, the average attendance at the Senior High class was two, maximum four. The Junior High was doing better, with eight to ten, and some brought friends frequently. The teachers for the Junior High rotated; until recently the teacher for the Senior High was the Youth Director over ten years ago, who had worked with the youth since two years after the author left the position, about twenty years ago. The youth group volunteers stepped into this position, and a new Christian Education director was hired for fifteen hours a week in the summer of 2007, after this AOM was completed.

From 1992 to 2000 Parkview had a staff person who is now a Diaconal Minister whose job, though it often changed names, emphasized children and families. During this time the church sponsored a solid after-school program which included many volunteers from the congregation. Children's sermons, children's church, and family activities were an integral part of the church life. Periodically the Youth Director was a part time paid position. Children have historically been important to this congregation. Until very recent years there were Children's Choirs, at one time including Cherub, early school age choir, late elementary choir, and youth choir. The tradition for many years was for all choirs to sing at Easter. Often, but not annually, there would be children's musicals at Christmas.

The worship schedule introduced with the move to the new building resulted in few children or youth attending either worship service. Both the youth and children's Sunday School was held during the 9:30 traditional/blended worship hour, with the assumption that the younger people would prefer the new contemporary service. This proved true of only a few families. Some families would send the children and youth to Sunday School while they attended the traditional/blended worship, then all would leave. After three and a half years of this situation and several years of controversy over worship times, the Sunday morning schedule changed in March of 2007 to 9:00 traditional/blended worship, 10:00 Christian Education time for all ages, and an 11:00 contemporary rock service. The attendance at the worship services immediately elevated by the twenty to thirty youth and children who had not attended worship for three and a half years, and a church wide Lenten Bible study created new adult classes. Both worship services then included a children's sermon and a children's worship time during the

sermon. This change occurred in the final month of this AOM, so is not reflected in this research.

When the move was made to the new building, any effort to incorporate the children in either worship service was abandoned. The new children's facilities were marvelous, decorated in a castle theme, with gray brick painted walls, and the children led by a very capable, overworked teacher and a few dedicated volunteers. The move into the new building included a change from the traditional age-divided Sunday School classes to the "center" model of Sunday School. Numbers initially shot up into the forties. After two years, they were down to fifteen to twenty attending Sunday School. With insufficient reliable volunteers to staff centers, Kindergarten through fifth grade met together, moving between areas for various activities. There were no other activities for children, and children were not intentionally included in the church community. Very few children or youth went to either worship service.

Vacation Bible School (VBS) also had to go to centers, as the new building did not have as many classrooms available as the old church. VBS attendance in 2005 was around eighty, 2007 VBS registered 102. Before the church move, VBS attendance was up to 200. Some of the children at VBS were grandchildren brought in from out of town for the week, some were from the community.

At the beginning of the AOM, the pastor of fifteen years was preparing to be transferred the following summer. In his first five years he brought the Emmaus Walk and the Disciple Bible classes, and the church blossomed. In 1994, he attended a Promise Keeper's Pastor's conference in Atlanta, and returned with new ideas, including the

possibility of building a new building instead of an addition to and remodeling the old. About the same time he became involved with the Beeson Institute for Church Growth. Much of the church's energy became focused on church growth, the new building, and the creation of a contemporary service. The move into the new building was met with dedication, enthusiasm, and excitement, but also drained financial and leadership resources.

In the midst of these changes, and partially because of all of these changes, the author began the D.Min. program in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN). With her background in youth ministry and confirmation experience, the pastor suggested the author consider confirmation as her project. About nine years earlier the confirmation training at Parkview United Methodist Church was assumed by the youth leadership rather than the pastoral staff, using the *Alpha* course as the curriculum. The previous confirmation class to the AOM was held two years earlier, and the youth who completed it were never confirmed. (These youth were included the final weeks of the researched confirmation classes, and were confirmed with the AOM class.) After examining the *Alpha* material, pondering Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, and prayer, a proposal of a BBSN confirmation class was presented to the pastor and youth team, and the author received their approval to proceed.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The inclusion of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN) in a United Methodist Confirmation Class involved research into a variety of areas. The first area of inquiry was to gain a more thorough understanding of BBSN and to become more familiar both historically and practically with contemplative practices and an introduction to the Christian mystics. Resources were then explored on United Methodism, confirmation and baptism. Research included children and youth: spirituality, ministry and developmental theories. Literature was also explored pertaining to the two specific chosen areas of focus in this Act of Ministry (AOM), Holy Listening and Story. During this study, several significant resources became available on contemplative youth ministry.

#### **Literature on Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture**

The three mentors of the BBSN D.Min. cohort group developed resource material for training. In the Dayton, Ohio area, certification training is offered, which includes many resources in a three-ring binder.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Rogers and Jacqueline Nowak included such

---

<sup>4</sup>Donald Rogers and Jacqueline Nowak, *The Blessing Center: Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Certification Course* (Dayton, OH, 2005).

topics as children's spirituality, BBSN models and various examples of practices. More information and examples from The Blessing Center can also be found on the internet.<sup>5</sup>

Rev. Leanne Hadley also developed materials for a training course in BBSN emphasizing Holy Listening.<sup>6</sup> This training manual reflected her work at First Steps Spirituality Center in Colorado Springs with hurting children and teens. More information on her work can also be found on the internet.<sup>7</sup> The BBSN cohort explored the practice with toddlers, preschool children, school-aged children, youth, adults in membership classes, and grieving adults. A list of these dissertations can be found in Appendix D.

Several aspect of BBSN: hospitality, Sabbath, and testimony (Story), were included in the practices described in *Practicing Our Faith*<sup>8</sup> by Dorothy C. Bass. Practices, according to Bass, are "shared activities that address fundamental human needs and that, woven together, form a way of life."<sup>9</sup> Bass and Richter also edited a version for teens, entitled *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*,<sup>10</sup> a visually engaging book by

---

<sup>5</sup> Blessingcenter.org.

<sup>6</sup> Leanne Ciampa Hadley, *The Holy Listening Method Training Course* (Colorado Springs, CO: 2002).

<sup>7</sup> First Steps Spirituality Center, (First Steps: Content Press, 2007), <http://www.1ststeps.net/> (accessed June 2, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Dorothy C. Bass, ed. *Practicing Our Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy C. Bass and Don C. Richter, eds. *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens* (Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2002).

eighteen adults who teamed with eighteen teens to discuss practicing Christianity as a way of life. Chapters on Story, Time, Welcome and Prayer connected BBSN principles to the life of the teenager, along with many other historic/contemporary practices. The chapter on prayer provided insights on expanding prayer forms for teens. The classic work on Sabbath, giving both biblical and historical depth to the Jewish observance was *The Sabbath*<sup>11</sup> by Abraham Heschel.

### **Exploring Contemplative Practices and Prayer**

In *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*<sup>12</sup> by Richard J. Foster, the Contemplative Tradition was included as one of seven “streams,” or expressions of faith, flowing from Christ as the source. Within each stream Foster shared at least three stories, historical, biblical, and contemporary, in addition to descriptions and comments. *The Way of the Mystics*<sup>13</sup> by John Michael Talbot, a Catholic recording artist, was a very readable introduction to thirteen classic Christian mystics and their writings. Henri Nouwen’s short book, *Encounters with Merton*,<sup>14</sup> introduced the author to Thomas Merton, laying a foundation for Merton’s *Contemplative Prayer*.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Sabbath* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951).

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998).

<sup>13</sup> John Michael Talbot and Steve Rabey, *The Way of the Mystics: Ancient Wisdom for Experiencing God Today* (Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections* (New York: Crossroad, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Doubleday, 1996).

Grounded in the scripture (Elijah) and historic Christianity, Ruth Barton's *Invitation to Solitude and Silence*<sup>16</sup> gave practical direction in moving into those spiritual practices in addition to sharing the story of her own experience. Tony Jones examined historical Christian practices such as Sacred Reading, the Jesus Prayer, Centering Prayer, Meditation, the Ignatian Examen, Icons, and the Daily Office in *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*.<sup>17</sup> He explored these theologically, practically, and through his own story.

*Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History, and Practice*<sup>18</sup> by Joseph Driskill was written for those who came from a mainline Protestant background with little or no background in spiritual practices or contemplative prayer. Historical connections were made between the early reformers and modern Protestantism with regard to spiritual practices, and also the ecumenical movement, Vatican II, and recent interfaith dialogue as they have impacted the mainline church. Driskill encouraged churches rooted in such Protestant pillars as social justice and critical thinking to add depth and balance through a renewal of spiritual practices.

<sup>16</sup> Ruth Barton, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

<sup>17</sup> Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>18</sup> Joseph D. Driskill, *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History and Practice* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999).

*Enjoy the Silence: A 30 Day Experiment in Listening to God*<sup>19</sup> introduced *lectio divina* specifically to youth and included thirty scripture readings with suggested meditations, an excellent resource for beginning sacred reading. A basic guide to *lectio divina* from the Catholic perspective was M. Basil Pennington's *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures*.<sup>20</sup> Written in a more contemporary style and from a Protestant viewpoint is *Divine Intervention*<sup>21</sup> by Tony Jones.

*A Praying Congregation* by Jane Vennard moved beyond the personal realm to the congregation, and prefaced the volume with a quote from Richard Rohr, "When the church is no longer teaching the people how to pray, we could almost say it will have lost its reason for existence."<sup>22</sup> The growing list of resources on spirituality in recent years has been overwhelming, but one could not conclude a list on this topic without including Richard Foster's classics, *Celebration of Discipline*<sup>23</sup> and *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*.<sup>24</sup> The author unknowingly prepared herself for BBSN by devouring and rereading *Celebration* several times during the previous decade

---

<sup>19</sup> Maggie Robbins and Duffy Robbins, *Enjoy the Silence: A 30 Day Experiment in Listening to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005).

<sup>20</sup> M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroads, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Tony Jones, *Divine Intervention: Encountering God through the Ancient Practice of Lectio Divina*. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> Jane E. Vennard, *A Praying Congregation* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: the Path to Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harper Collins: 1998).

<sup>24</sup> Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home* (New York: Harper Collins: 1992).

### Literature on Listening and Story

Holy Listening first came to the attention of the author through *The Gift to Listen, the Courage to Hear*<sup>25</sup> by Cari Jackson. Jackson brought the dimension of the sacred to bear on listening, including, but beyond, simply good listening skills. Robert Shippey, in *Listening in a Loud World*,<sup>26</sup> explored theological issues of Holy Listening, and used art throughout the book as means to listen at new levels. Listening within the context of spiritual direction was addressed in Margaret Guenther's *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*.<sup>27</sup>

The concept of Story as it is used in this AOM was reinforced and expanded through many resources, but the central book was the most delightful *The Rock that is Higher*.<sup>28</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, connoisseur of literature, master storyteller, and undercover theologian, led us to see Story as an affirmation of God's love, showing us truths of life and pointing us to Christ. Such books as *Story Journey*<sup>29</sup> by Thomas

---

<sup>25</sup> Cari Jackson, *The Gift to Listen, the Courage to Hear* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

<sup>26</sup> Robert C. Shippey Jr., *Listening in a Loud World: Toward a Theology of Meaning* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Guenther, *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction* (Cambridge, MA: Crowley, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *The Rock that is Higher: Story as Truth* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> Thomas E. Boomershine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988).

Boomershine, *Experiential Storytelling*<sup>30</sup> by Mark Miller, and *Digital Storytellers*<sup>31</sup> by Len Wilson and Jason Moore, presented a variety of ways of sharing Story to listeners, especially those of younger generations. The foundational theory and practice of *Godly Play*<sup>32</sup> became a quietly growing seed of influence through this study, bringing to light the importance of setting the stage for the Story, and allowing Story to become “owned” by the listener, with time to recreate, retell, ruminate and make connections to personal life.

### **Resources Used on United Methodism, Confirmation, and Baptism**

The primary resource for the history and current understanding of baptism in the United Methodist Church was *By Water and the Spirit: Making Connections for Identity and Ministry*<sup>33</sup> by Gail Carlton Felton. The very helpful book, *Claiming the Name: A Theological and Practical Overview of Confirmation*<sup>34</sup> by John R. Gooch provided historical, biblical, and theological foundational material about confirmation, as well as

---

<sup>30</sup> Mark Miller, *Experiential Storytelling: (Re)Discovering Narrative to Communicate God’s Message* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Len Wilson and Jason Moore, *Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002).

<sup>32</sup> Jerome Berryman, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (San Francisco CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

<sup>33</sup> Gayle Carlton Felton, *By Water and the Spirit: Making Connections for Identity and Ministry Study Guide and Text* (Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2002).

<sup>34</sup> John R. Gooch, *Claiming the Name: A Theological and Practical Overview of Confirmation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000).

very practical insights on children and youth, faith development, and leading confirmation. This also served as the author's introduction to the curriculum. The students in this Act of Ministry each had a copy of the *Claim the Name Student Book*,<sup>35</sup> a colorful workbook with fill in the blanks, puzzles, outlines, brief explanations, and lively illustrations. *Claim the Name Confirmation: 6-15 Teaching Plans*<sup>36</sup> was used as a resource, although it was not followed as the plans were indicated, due to the teaching style of the author. The plans were very flexible, and very compatible with BBSN, including a worship time and suggestions each week of ways to "Go Forth with a Blessing."

A resource that provided more historical depth was *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective*<sup>37</sup> by Richard Robert Osmer. This was also a rich resource on confirmation, youth, the theology of confirmation, and practical theology.

Several books were used for a better understanding of United Methodism, including Ted Campbell's *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*<sup>38</sup> and *Why I Am a United Methodist* by William H. Willimon.<sup>39</sup> *Being Methodist in the Bible Belt: A Theological*

---

<sup>35</sup> Crystal A. Zinkiewicz, ed., *Claim the Name Student Book* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> Crystal A. Zinkiewicz, ed., *Claim the Name: Confirmation Teaching Plans for 6-15 Weeks* (Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Richard Robert Osmer, *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996).

<sup>38</sup> Ted A. Campbell, *Methodist Doctrine: The Essential* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999).

<sup>39</sup> William H. Willimon, *Why I Am a United Methodist* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1990).

*Survival Guide for Youth, Parents, and Other Confused Methodists*<sup>40</sup> by F. Belton Joyner Jr. was written in a readable, light, humorous style, and compared United Methodism with evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Kenneth H. Carter, Jr. explored spiritual practices within United Methodism in *A Way of Life in the World*.<sup>41</sup> Two books were gleaned for United Methodist stories: *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*<sup>42</sup> by Richard P. Heitzenrater, and *The Life of John Wesley: a Brand from the Burning*<sup>43</sup> by Roy Hattersley. Video clips of John Wesley used in class were from *John Wesley*,<sup>44</sup> a classic 1954 production released on DVD in 2004.

### **Literature on Children, Youth, and Spirituality**

Because BBSN originated from ministry for young children and hurting teens, and because youth in confirmation are in transition from childhood to teenager to young adult, basic resources on children, faith and spirituality were studied. A foundational, well-rounded resource on nurturing the faith of children was Catherine Stonehouse's

---

<sup>40</sup> F. Belton Joyner, Jr., *Being United Methodist in the Bible Belt: A Theological Survival Guide for Youth, Parents, and Other Confused Methodists* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

<sup>41</sup> Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., *A Way of Life in the World: Spiritual Practices for United Methodists*. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> Richard P. Heitzenrater, *Wesley and the People Called Methodists* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

<sup>43</sup> Roy Hattersley, *The Life of John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning* (New York: Doubleday, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> *John Wesley: The Powerful Story of One of the Most Influential Ministers in All of Christian History*, directed by J. Arthur Rank, 73 min., Vision Video, 2004, digital video disc.

*Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*.<sup>45</sup> With depth and sensitivity, Stonehouse explored the foundations of the spiritual formation of children, built on developmental understandings such as Erikson and Fowler, offered a taste of Jerome Berryman's *Godly Play*, and connected the influence of the home with the church. *Postmodern Children's Ministry*<sup>46</sup> by Ivy Beckwith considered the child immersed in a transitioning culture, and the challenge that transition posed to the church and home in spiritual formation. David Hay and Rebecca Nye broke ground with their research in *The Spirit of the Child*<sup>47</sup> as they brought to light the richness of spiritual awareness in young children, and how it is often broken by the world as they grow, rather than nurtured. In *Will Our Children Have Faith*,<sup>48</sup> John Westerhoff approached the spiritual formation of children through the lens of liberation theology, and urged the teaching of knowledge be balanced with experiences in community, contemplation, and action.

Especially interesting as this AOM came to a close was *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation: Four Views*<sup>49</sup> edited by Michael Anthony. Presented as a

---

<sup>45</sup> Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Ivy Beckwith, *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

<sup>47</sup> David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Fount, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> John H. Westerhoff III, *Will Our Children Have Faith* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> Michael J. Anthony, ed., *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation: Four Views* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006).

discussion of four styles of evangelical children's ministry, the Contemplative-Reflective model was described by Scottie May, with responses by the contributors of the other models. Through the presentation of all four views and the rebuttals, strengths and weaknesses surfaced, and patterns of integration and balance emerged.

Reflecting years of experience in youth ministry and looking forward through emerging postmodern lens, *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry*<sup>50</sup> by Mike Yaconelli and *Postmodern Youth Ministry*<sup>51</sup> edited by Tony Jones both gave a state of the art snapshot of current views of youth ministry.

Two books provided valuable insight on contemporary teens and their faith: *Real Teens*<sup>52</sup> by George Barna and *Soul Searching*<sup>53</sup> by Christian Smith. Smith's book was the result of extensive sociological research on the religious lives of youth and their parents in the United States.

### **Literature on Spirituality in Youth Ministry**

The quest for literature on youth ministry beyond bowling and missions began with Kendra Creasy Dean and Ron Foster through *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul*

---

<sup>50</sup> Mike Yaconelli, *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry: Nine Biblical Principles that Mark Healthy Youth Ministries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>51</sup> Tony Jones, ed., *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Cultivating Authentic Community, and Creating Holistic Connections*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001).

<sup>52</sup> George Barna, *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001).

<sup>53</sup> Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford, 2005).

*Tending for Youth Ministry*.<sup>54</sup> Focused on people and relationships rather than programs, adults ministering with youth were called to be bearers of God, “through whom God may enter the world again and again.”<sup>55</sup> Growing through ministry, teaching, and doctoral work, six years later Dean wrote *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*,<sup>56</sup> connecting the passion of youth with the Passion of Christ.

*The Younger Evangelical*<sup>57</sup> by Robert Webber provided a scholarly look from a position of experience and wisdom at an emerging generation of leaders who saw their faith and church through new eyes. *Soul Shaper*<sup>58</sup> by Tony Jones was a youth version of *The Sacred Way*, with graphics and format more appealing to young people. Another voice which joined youth with contemplative practices is Mike King, author of *Presence Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation*.<sup>59</sup>

Youth today are looking for more than a place to go to hang out with friends, more than a program. They are looking for authenticity. This is a call for those who work with youth to examine themselves and their own spirit, their own motivations. In the past

---

<sup>54</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry* (Nashville TN: Upper Room Books, 1998).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Kenda Creasy Dean, *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans: 2004).

<sup>57</sup> Robert E. Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002).

<sup>58</sup> Tony Jones, *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Mike King, *Presence Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006).

three years, 2003–2006, several books were published by youth leaders who focused on authentically connecting youth to God by listening to the Holy. Dorothy Bass and Don C. Richter have included a variety of forms of prayer in their presentation of spiritual practices for teens, entitled *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*.<sup>60</sup> Integrity Music produced beautiful videos of contemporary Christian worship music, appropriate as a bridge to contemporary contemplative prayer.<sup>61</sup> The resources and guidance are available.

Contemplative prayer was a natural extension of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and Holy Listening, and another aspect of Holy Listening with young teens in confirmation. Kenda Creasy Dean spoke of experiences of youth with transcendence: “transcendent practices tend to leave deep and enduring impressions; while the shimmering vision of divine ecstasy may fade, a track has been laid that once led to a holy place, leaving open the possibility of our return.”<sup>62</sup>

In *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mike Yaconelli described Creative Prayer, Walking Prayer, the Awareness Examen, Silent Prayer, and Contemplative Prayer.<sup>63</sup> Tony Jones, in *Soul Shaper*, included chapters on Silence and Solitude, the Jesus Prayer, Centering Prayer, Icons, the Labyrinth, Sacred Reading, and other prayer practices. Mike King, in *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry*, included Imaginative Prayer, Respiratory

---

<sup>60</sup> Bass and Richter, *Way to Live*.

<sup>61</sup> Integrity Music, (Integrity Media: Visual Inventor, 2007), <http://www.integritymusic.com/music/music.php?target=nrp/iworship.html> (accessed September 2, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> Dean, *Practicing Passion*, 201.

<sup>63</sup> Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 87–93, 190–195.

Prayers, the Prayer Rope, and Prayer Postures.<sup>64</sup> These are all ancient practices, in forms that are appropriate for contemporary youth. Themes that ran throughout all these writings on youth ministry were the sense of the sacred, the respect for tradition and the practices of the early historic church as the youth looked for authentic, contemporary ways to live and express their faith.

The two books that resonated most deeply with the author and with the AOM were both by Mark Yaconelli, and were published in 2006 and 2007. *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*<sup>65</sup> chronicled Yaconelli's journey into contemplative practices, into contemplative youth ministry, and into a wider network of youth ministers and research. *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry*<sup>66</sup> described the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project from 1997 to 2004. Working with a diverse group of churches, the data that emerged proved to be a collection of experiences, stories and testimonies. Some of those stories were given voice in this volume, with a summary by the author. Though the Confirmation Class was a different format and setting, the author found many of her own learnings reflected in this study, bringing a hearty "Amen" to her spirit as the AOM drew to a close.

---

<sup>64</sup> King, *Presence-Centered*, 112–138.

<sup>65</sup> Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*.

<sup>66</sup> Mark Yaconelli, *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).

**CHAPTER THREE**  
**FOUNDATIONS AND THEORY OF**  
**BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE IN CONFIRMATION**

**Foundations of Baptism**

To examine the history of confirmation is to examine the history of baptism, beginning with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. As John traveled throughout the country around the Jordan River, he preached a “baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3).<sup>67</sup> John also preached the moral code of the Old Testament, the respect of each other as one would treat a child of God, made in the image of God. As John baptized with water, he guided their souls toward one who would come, “the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Luke 3:16).

Jesus came to John for the baptism of repentance, not because he needed to repent, but to identify with humanity, symbolic of the divine becoming human. Jesus’ baptism was also the confirmation of his divine identity and of his ministry, as a voice from heaven declared, “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” It was not clear exactly who at the scene actually heard the voice, but if it was heard by the

---

<sup>67</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture references are taken from the New International Version.

people gathered around John for baptism, the voice identified Jesus as God's son in the presence of community.

In the Great Commission at the end of the book of Matthew, Jesus himself instructed the eleven disciples to “. . . go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matt 28:18–19).

The book of Acts recorded the baptism of new believers as an announcement of their identity with the person and message of Jesus. Peter's message at Pentecost resulted in the baptism of “around three thousand” who accepted his message of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:41). Acts 16:33 recorded the baptism of the jailor and his family immediately after witnessing the earthquake, along with the words and deeds of Paul and Silas.

As the church grew, organized itself, and worked out the process of being The Church, baptism became a ritual that also included confirmation. The earliest known ritual for baptism was the Church Order of Hippolytus, which scholars believe originated circa A.D. 100. This rite is reflected in the United Methodist Services of the Baptismal Covenant. The baptized person can be anointed with oil and receive the laying on of hands as an act of confirming the baptism. In the early church the Eucharist was also a part of this ritual, and remains so among the Eastern Orthodox churches. Although most baptisms in the early church were adults, both Hippolytus and Tertullian, who wrote between A.D. 195 and about 225, referred to the baptism of infants and the unified practice of baptism/confirmation. The act was a sacrament as an act of God, and also an

announcement of the identity, not only in reference to God, but also to the people who called themselves Christians, the Church. A service of establishing boundaries, baptism/confirmation included the recipient into the life and fellowship of the community, and excluded evil and injustice from life and community.<sup>68</sup>

In the Western Church, the anointing and laying on of hands could only be performed by a Bishop. As the church grew, and the Bishop became more of an administrator rather than a senior pastor, he could not be present at all baptisms. By the Middle Ages, it was often years before a person had the opportunity of having their baptism confirmed by the anointing and laying on of hands of the Bishop, thus separating baptism and confirmation. In the understanding of the early church, the baptized person was marked through the laying on of hands (confirmation) by the Holy Spirit as God's own, and strengthened by the Holy Spirit for discipleship.<sup>69</sup>

In the fourth century, Augustine of Hippo moved his theology of baptism to meet his concept of original sin. His argument was that "humanity was a 'mass of damnation,' born in sin because of the lust of our parents."<sup>70</sup> This was in contrast to the Pelagians, who believed babies were born good, connected to God. (This innate connection of children to God is a core concept in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, especially as practiced at First Steps Spirituality Center by Rev. Leanne Hadley) Thus, to Augustine, babies had to be baptized as early as possible, as they would be condemned to hell if they

---

<sup>68</sup> Gooch, *Claiming*, 17–18.

<sup>69</sup> Felton, *By Water*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> Gooch, *Claiming*, 20.

died without being baptized, turning it into a magic formula. The author remembered, in her own childhood, the outcry and pain of the adults in her small village when a Catholic family lost a child before baptism. In her child heart, she could not understand why the adults were concerned about hell for the baby. She knew in her heart that God loved the baby, that the baby could not have committed damnable sins, and that he was in heaven with God. The influences of the author's child-God connection and John Wesley were already in place.

Beliefs about baptism after the Reformation varied. The Anabaptists rebaptized those who had been baptized as infants, because it had to be a "choice." Zwingli introduced the concept of infant "dedicatio," and the Puritans replaced the confirmation of baptism with a public profession of faith. Martin Luther decried the liturgy that had accumulated around confirmation over the centuries, and returned the sacramental focus to baptism. However, Luther did emphasize the catechetical instruction that had been so important in the early church, eventually developing instructional material which evolved into his *Small Catechism*, a standard in many churches over the centuries.<sup>71</sup> American Methodism insisted on infant baptism, often as a way to distinguish from the Baptists and Disciples of Christ, who baptized adults only.<sup>72</sup>

Baptism is a sacrament. A sacrament is an act in which God does something, more than a sign or symbol. To Martin Luther, baptism continued for a lifetime. That

---

<sup>71</sup> Osmer, *Confirmation*, 67–71.

<sup>72</sup> Gooch, *Claiming*, 21–24.

which baptism represented, the dying of the old self and rising to new life in Christ, continued in the Christian, as did the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the baptized person.<sup>73</sup> The United Methodist Baptismal Covenant I stated that through the sacrament of baptism, “We are initiated into Christ’s holy church. We are incorporated into God’s mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God’s gift, offered to us without price.”<sup>74</sup>

Baptism is also the initiation, the incorporation into the body of Christ, the church universal, the denomination, and the local congregation. The baptism is celebrated in the presence of the church, and addresses the congregation. In a series of promises within the liturgy of baptism, the community affirms its own faith and pledges to act as spiritual mentor and support for the one who is baptized. The congregation is also an integral part of the confirmation service, as they give thanks and welcome the confirmands, and renew their covenant to faithfully participate in the ministries of the church, by their prayers, presence, gifts, and service.<sup>75</sup>

Within the author’s own Wesleyan heritage, it is believed that a person becomes a member of the church through baptism. John Wesley believed baptism was “neither essential to nor sufficient for salvation.”<sup>76</sup> Wesley believed the baptized individual also was in need of justifying grace, repentance, and conversion later in life, part of “going on

---

<sup>73</sup> Osmer, *Confirmation*, 70–71.

<sup>74</sup> *United Methodist Hymnal*, (Nashville, TN, The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 33.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 35–38.

<sup>76</sup> Felton, *By Water*, 1.

to perfection.” There is no re-baptism in the Wesleyan heritage, but there are rituals for “remembering your baptism” when appropriate. Wesley did insist that Methodists be involved in a probationary period, becoming members of the society after this time of shared faith and accountability.

### **Foundations of Confirmation**

In the early church, confirmation was a sacrament, a rite through which God’s grace came to God’s people, a person’s response to God’s action.<sup>77</sup> This continues today in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. During the Reformation, Martin Bucer tied confirmation to a catechetical model. The confirmation service became more of an examination and a graduation service, rather than a sacrament. The Reformers also made confirmation required for the receiving of communion, which eliminated infant communion, and made a total break with the unified rite.

The Council of Trent in 1556, a council convened by the Roman Catholic Church in response to the Reformation, decided the appropriate age of children to receive confirmation was twelve. Seven was considered the “age of discretion” or the “age of accountability,” and the earliest age at which an act of confirming their baptism could occur. Protestant groups historically saw twelve, our contemporary Junior High, as the normal age for confirmation.

---

<sup>77</sup> Felton, *By Water*, 3.

## Confirmation in Methodist History

In 1864, the Methodist General Conference directed the pastor to organize classes of children ten years old or younger to teach them the meaning of baptism and “the truths of religion necessary to make them wise unto salvation.”<sup>78</sup> The 1892 *Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* included a six-month probationary period, with teaching on the doctrines and rules of the church. By the early twentieth century, membership classes were developing for children and youth. This progression implied the need to understand the Christian faith to join the church, a long journey from the original sacramental “laying on of hands” to confirm the baptism in the early church.

The 1964 *Book of Discipline* first used the word “confirmation,” and based the theology on a National Council of Churches document on baptism, *Baptism Confirmation . . . Implications for the Younger Generation*. The document listed three stages: We were baptized into Christ; we were confirmed in the church universal, we became members of the local church.<sup>79</sup>

In 1964, the Methodist Church also began to recover the sacramental nature of baptism. In *The Methodist Hymnal*, the new ritual of baptism was introduced: “In revising the Order for the Administration of Baptism, the Commission of Worship has endeavored to keep in mind that baptism is a sacrament, and to restore it to the

---

<sup>78</sup> Gayle Carlton Felton, *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America* (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1992), 105. (from the *Journal of the General Conference*, 1864; pages 202–203.)

<sup>79</sup> Gooch, *Claiming*, 24–25.

Evangelical-Methodist concept set forth in our Articles of Religion . . . . Due recognition was taken of the critical reexamination of the theology of the Sacrament of Baptism which is currently taking place in ecumenical circles, and of its theological content and implications.”<sup>80</sup> The commission pointed out that “. . . in a dedication we make a gift of a life to God for God to accept, while in a sacrament God offers the gift of God’s unfailing grace for us to accept.” The ritual of baptism was further revised in the 1989 *United Methodist Hymnal*, called the Services of the Baptismal Covenant, which continued the effort to reemphasize the historic significance of baptism. In acknowledging the reality of sin, of regeneration, the initiating of divine grace, and the necessity of repentance and faith, United Methodism moved closer to the roots of Wesley’s combination of sacramentalism and evangelicalism.<sup>81</sup>

In *By Water and the Spirit*, Felton stated that one of John Wesley’s most outstanding contributions to Christian theology was the way he blended and balanced the free gift of divine grace, available to all through various means, with the necessity of our human response of faith and holy living. Wesley insisted that baptism was no guarantee of salvation, but part of the lifelong process of God’s work in our lives. God’s grace came to us in baptism, and we responded through repentance and faith as we grew.<sup>82</sup> This was the baptism that the young teens claimed, independent of parents and other influential

---

<sup>80</sup> Felton, *By Water*, 5.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

adults. They “Claimed the Name” (from the title of the United Methodist Confirmation curriculum) of Christ, as Christians, affirmed the grace received in baptism, and chose to step into the local community of faith, into the 2000 year history of those who have called themselves “Christian.” The teens publicly affirmed their response of the faith of the denomination, and took ownership of their journey with Christ as they went “on to perfection.”

### **Foundations of Holy Listening**

If a person Googled the word “listening,” one would find the site for the International Listening Association . . . and a plethora of music sites competing for your money. A teacher in a college or high school class could lecture for hours . . . and find out when the tests are graded whether listening actually occurred. As this was written, the computer “whirred” on the lap and the furnace outside the window indicated the motor was functioning well. The television upstairs continued in its monotonous rhythm, and the clock on the wall told the hour by recreating a steam train whistle. Music and technology create a backdrop for our world that often “protects” us from facing the silence, ourselves, each other, and our God.

The Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary said to “hear” is to “listen with attention.” To “listen” goes a little farther: “to hear something with thoughtful attention: give consideration.”<sup>83</sup> The International Listening Association went much farther in their

---

<sup>83</sup> Merriam-Webster Online, “hear,” (Merriam Webster, Incorporated: 2007), <http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/hear> (accessed Oct 14, 2006).

definition: “the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.”<sup>84</sup> However, none of these approached the depth of listening as defined by Rev. Leanne Hadley in the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Certification Course: “*Holy Listening is when a person is fully present with another person: listening; not judging; not distracted; not analyzing; not diagnosing; and trusting that as they listen, God has joined them to offer wisdom, guidance and healing. As we enter into Holy Listening, God is present, and there is an air of holiness and sacredness.*”<sup>85</sup>

Also from the Blessing Center came the acknowledgement of the vertical and horizontal components of Holy Listening, “Hearing the other with one’s whole being, while knowing also the presence of God.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, Holy Listening not only involved superb listening skills, but added the vertical dimension of the presence of the Holy, a conversation of Three. Jesus said in Matthew 18:19–20, “Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Through the presence of fully listening, rather than offering advice, solutions, or

---

<sup>84</sup> International Listening Association, (International Listening Association: 2007) [http://www.listen.org/Templates/try\\_new.htm](http://www.listen.org/Templates/try_new.htm), (accessed Oct 14, 2006).

<sup>85</sup> Donald Rogers and Jacqueline Nowak, *The Blessing Center: Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Certification Course* (Dayton, OH, 2005), Holy Listening, 7.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 2A.

information, the listener allows the presence of God to provide the wisdom, guidance and healing.

Madeleine L'Engle said our deepest messages of love are often conveyed without words. She uses the word *kything*, which she found in an old Scottish dictionary of her grandfather's. To *kythe* is not to use speech or language, but to open yourself to someone.<sup>87</sup> *Kythe* was also defined as "to come into view; to appear,"<sup>88</sup> and also "to make known, to become known,"<sup>89</sup> and "to manifest; to show; to declare."<sup>90</sup> As the speaker "becomes known" to himself and to the listener, God also "becomes known." This could also be applied to our relationship to God in prayer, that as we listen to the Holy, as we open ourselves to God, He manifests Himself to us. *Kythe* also seemed to have a connection with healing, as indicated by several medical internet sites with *kythe* in their name. A student group in Manila used the word because "*kythe* is a Scottish word that means healing through simple sharing and togetherness."<sup>91</sup> This word broadened our understanding of Holy Listening.

---

<sup>87</sup> Madeleine L'Engle, *Glimpses of Grace* (San Francisco, CA, HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 307.

<sup>88</sup> The ARTFL Project, "*Kythe*," (The ARTFL Project: The University of Chicago, n.d.), <http://machaut.uchicago.edu/?action=search&word=Kythe&resource=Webster%27s&quicksearch=on>, accessed Oct 16, 2006.

<sup>89</sup> Merriam-Webster Online, "*kithe*," (Merriam-Webster: 2007), <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/kithe> (accessed Oct 16, 2006).

<sup>90</sup> Brainy Dictionary, "*kithe*," <http://www.brainydictionary.com/words/ki/kithe182587.html> (accessed Oct 16, 2006).

<sup>91</sup> Ateneo de Manila University, "*kythe*," (Ateneo de Manila University: 2006) <http://www.admu.edu.ph/index.php?p=185> (accessed Oct 16, 2006).

A very poignant example of Holy Listening was given in Mike Yaconelli's *Contemplative Youth Ministry* during a role-playing session about sharing one's faith. Daniel, the boy who was playing the person hostile to Christianity, became more and more intense with his part, until it became clear he was no longer playing the role, but crying out with his own questions and doubts. With the second "Christian" role playing person at the table, Daniel set aside any pretense at role-playing, and unloaded: "Listen, I was born in South Central—one of the roughest parts of Los Angeles. When I was four years old, my best friend and I were walking to the park when a gun fight broke out. We stood frozen—just watching these gang kids shooting at each other. My friend Benjamin got hit in the chest by a stray bullet. I sat there screaming and crying and watched him die. Now you tell me God is good and loving! What kind of God allows a four-year-old kid to die like that?"

In the starkly quiet room, the boy playing the Christian silently raised his hand, asking for another to take his place. After a silent pause, a boy named Jake responded. Mike Yaconelli said that he would have expected Jake to be the last one to respond. In recent months Jake was arrested for burglary, and attended an outdoor rehabilitation program which included a week alone in the wilderness. He attended church to get away from his parents, and showed little interest in the Christian faith. Jake moved the table, and turned the chair so he could face the boy, relaxed and patient, gazing into his eyes. In the awkward silence, unsure whether to interrupt, Yaconelli continued:

Finally, Daniel spoke up and began to accost Jake, "So what do you have to say? That my friend Benjamin went to a better place? That this was part of God's plan? That God makes us suffer so

we'll turn to him? How can you possibly believe all this crap about God being a God of love?"

Jake just sat there. I assumed he was planning a response, when gradually Daniel quieted, sat still, and returned Jake's gaze. And then something broke. Daniel's hard expression softened, his eyes searched Jake, and then I noticed what he was looking at. There were tears on Jake's face. Quietly, without looking away from Daniel, Jake let tears fall down his face. Daniel gazed at Jake in wonder for a moment, then his eyes swelled with tears, and he lowered his head. Slowly, Jake stood up, raised Daniel from his chair, and hugged him. After a few minutes they both stepped down and returned to the group. Jake never spoke a word.<sup>92</sup>

The group sat in stunned silence, then closed with a prayer and dismissed. Two weeks later, Daniel began going to church, not only youth activities, but to worship and Bible studies, and later served on the leadership team for the youth ministry. Yaconelli was convinced "that Jake was the presence of Christ that night to Daniel. His willingness to see, hear, and feel Daniel's pain was the good news that Daniel longed to encounter."<sup>93</sup>

Holy Listening is response to the speaker with "actions that flow from relationship, from attentiveness, from compassion, and from transparency to God's love."<sup>94</sup> The listener is open to both the spirit of God and the soul of the speaker, vulnerable to God's presence and action in the situation. Through the gift of love and openness, no strings attached, no control being exercised, the fully present listener allows God to move in the heart of the speaker.

A negative example of this interpretation of Holy Listening was found in the story of Job. As Job lost his family, his home, and his health, he cried out to God and to his

---

<sup>92</sup> Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 113–114.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

friends. Rather than listening to what Job was actually saying, the friends responded with their own theories in accusation. However, God listened, and listened, then responded in the whirlwind. Job intently listened to God, heard, was changed, and declared, “You said, ‘Listen and I will speak!’ I have some questions for you, and you must answer them. I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes. I take back everything I said, and I sit in dust and ashes to show my repentance” (Job 42:3–6, New Living Bible).

The selfless, intentional, fully present way of listening is a way to picture Jesus’ listening in the stories of the common people who encountered Him. Jesus listened so deeply that he heard thoughts without the expression of words. One of the passages that revealed Jesus listening to the image of God in the other is in the eighth chapter of John, when the woman caught in adultery was brought before him. As the men tried to trap Him into breaking the law, He listened, not only to the men, but also to the heart of the woman. With one statement from Jesus, the men began to drift away. Without lecturing, without judging, without punishing, the situation was diffused, and the men left in awareness of the state of their own souls. Without lecturing, without judging, without punishing, the woman’s heart was revealed to His listening, and in one statement she was forgiven and sent off with a fresh start.

When the woman poured expensive perfume from the alabaster jar, anointing the feet of Jesus, He listened to her tears and to her heart, and met her unspoken but deeply expressed need with the giving of forgiveness and peace (Luke 8:36–50). These women

experienced Jesus seeing the image of God in them. These women listened to the Holy in Jesus. These women experienced kything.

### The Image of God

Holy Listening rests on the doctrine of *imago Dei*, the image of God in humanity, a seminal concept in developing a theology of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture. *Imago Dei* is based on the passage in Genesis, which declares: “Then God said, ‘Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth’” (Gen 1:26–27 New Revised Standard [NRSV] ). This is rephrased several chapters later, after the Fall, and after the birth of Seth: “When God created humankind, he made them in the likeness of God” (Gen 5:1 NRSV). *Imago Dei* is also restated in God’s covenant after the flood with Noah: “Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person’s blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind” (Gen 9:6 NRSV). Although God is clearly the Creator, and humankind the Created, there is still some way in which God is reflected in a human being. New Testament references include 2 Corinthians 3:18, “And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit” (NRSV). In speaking of the tongue in James, we read, “With it we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse those who are made in the likeness of God” (James 3:10 NRSV).

Historically, there were several views put forth in interpreting these passages. One view saw the image of God as a functional view, that the position of dominion over life on earth reflected God's image through domination.<sup>95</sup> Many theologians would question whether power is the primary attribute of God, and the manner in which humans are most like God. A second view, that of neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth, was that the image of God is represented in the human couple together rather than individually, and saw the image of God in sociality and fellowship.<sup>96</sup> Barth saw the *imago Dei* as relational, as referring to the "God-given capacity of human beings in the cohumanity (as male and female) to be addressed by and to respond to God's word."<sup>97</sup>

The Reformers, and also Karl Barth, maintained that the divine image has been destroyed in humankind by sin, by the Fall, even to completely being obliterated. However, this contradicted the passage in Genesis 9, as well as later references and inferences in the New Testament, reducing human beings to the level of the creatures over which people were given dominion, which by implication did not share in the image of God.<sup>98</sup>

One view, held by most patristic, medieval, and modern interpreters, was called the substantialistic view. They understood the *imago Dei* to refer to particular qualities or

---

<sup>95</sup> Herbert Lockyer, ed., *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville, TN, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986), 502.

<sup>96</sup> William H. Gentz, ed., *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion* (Nashville, TN, Abingdon Press, 1986), 480.

<sup>97</sup> J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 22.

<sup>98</sup> Gentz, *Dictionary*, 480.

attributes of God reflected by human beings. Up to Aquinas, this was conceived especially to be the quality of reasoning, expanded later to include such ideas as conscience, spirituality, freedom, and personhood.<sup>99</sup>

Irenaeus distinguished between the *image* of God and the *likeness* of God, seeing the *image* as the potentiality in the human person for spiritual growth, and the *likeness* as the goal of the process. A person was not created fully spiritually mature, but only came to maturity through a “many-sided” process, including testing and suffering.<sup>100</sup> The Protestant Reformers denied this distinction between image and likeness, and believed that the Fall had effaced the image of God, yet held that a trace of that image yet remains in humanity. Luther indicated that the image of God could be restored through the Word and the Holy Spirit, sanctification, moving toward an eschatological view that the *imago Dei* would one day be restored to mankind in the new creation.<sup>101</sup>

In recent years Biblical scholars, in contrast to theologians, came to see the *imago Dei* through the lens of royalty. Kings in biblical times would erect statues in areas of their domain where they could not be present, an image to assert their rule. The image of God in humankind in this view was the bearer of the responsibility of representing God the king. This was not seen as exercising power and dominion, but rather ruling as God rules, with “securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of

---

<sup>99</sup> Middleton, *Liberating*, 19.

<sup>100</sup> Gentz, *Dictionary*, 481.

<sup>101</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 170–173.

each to full fruition.” The example of Jesus of Nazareth proclaimed that lordship meant servanthood.<sup>102</sup>

The New Testament included what might be called “image Christology,” describing the person of Christ as one in whom the *imago Dei* was fully manifested. Jesus was called the “likeness of God” in 2 Corinthians 4:4, and “the image of the invisible God” in Colossians 1:15. Hebrews 1:3 declared that Christ “reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of this nature.” The goal of the Christian life reflected in these passages is to be brought into this likeness, to mirror the divine nature on a finite level.<sup>103</sup>

Holy Listening in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture stands firmly on the concept of *imago Dei*, assuming the image of God in each other, assuming each person is beloved of God. This underlies the teachings of Jesus, of respect for all people, no matter how least, last, or lost. Holy Listening slows down to give attention to the image of God in the other, and the presence of the Holy Spirit in the moment.

This can be applied to the youth in confirmation in several ways, one of which is taking the time to truly listen to them, to look for and verbalize the holy in each other, modeling the experience of Holy Listening. Listening is a skill that is rarely taught or given focused attention. People often relate to labels and categories rather than the reality of the person with whom they are in conversation. While the other is talking, an individual is very often formulating their own response rather than focusing on the

---

<sup>102</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 32–33.

<sup>103</sup> Gentz, *Dictionary*, 481.

speaker.<sup>104</sup> This is especially true of young teens establishing their own identities, and without a variety of experiences that enable them to see situations from other points of view. How often are they encouraged to truly listen to others simply because the others are of value to God? Often they are told to listen by parents and teachers more as discipline and reprimand. Holy Listening opens them to relationship with both God and people.

### Listening in Christian History

Possibly the earliest listening in the church occurred in the first century, as Christians confessed their sins to one another and prayed for one another (James 5:16). Later the priesthood became the only persons to whom confessions were made. After some disastrous situations resulting from public confessions, it was determined to make confessions confidential between the penitent and the minister of absolution.<sup>105</sup> In the late eighth and early ninth century, the Irish monasteries, both on the islands and the continent, encouraged detailed examination of conscience. Penitents sought out a confessor or director of conscience. The soul friend, the *amnchara*, was an important person in the spiritual development of the one being directed.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup> Donald B. Rogers and Jacqueline J. Nowak, *In Praise of Learning* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1980; reprint, Dayton OH:United Theological Seminary, 2007), 33.

<sup>105</sup> Gentz, *Dictionary*, 215.

<sup>106</sup> Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* ( New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 191.

Another style of listening, prayer, and life also wove its way through the history of the Christian faith. The mystics emphasized immediate awareness of God. Mysticism was not intellectual speculation, a theological system, or a philosophy, but was often loosely applied to any personal religious experience, especially deep expressions of piety. Conversion or charismatic experiences were not properly categorized as mystical, nor were such phenomena as peak experiences or drug induced experiences. The lives of historical mystics were ordered around prayer, devotion, and centering on God. Sometimes expressed as “the interior life,” mystics withdrew from worldly pleasures and moved toward deeply listening to God, but would eventually express this listening in outward service to others. The third, fourteenth, and seventeenth centuries stood out as eras of increased mysticism.<sup>107</sup> Richard Rolle, a fourteenth century mystic, saw the soul centered in listening and speaking to God, not in activities, practices, or the possession of objects.<sup>108</sup>

Dominicans and Franciscans expressed their piety through love of neighbor as a way of loving God, and can be compared to Holy Listening focused on the speaker as a means of expression of faith. Dominicans balanced meditation and study. Thomas Aquinas’ systematic account of the Christian faith included both the integrity of the intellect and the validity of contemplative practices. Other mystics such as Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross followed the intellectual path.

---

<sup>107</sup> Gentz, *Dictionary*, 719.

<sup>108</sup> Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing 2005), 189.

In very recent years, many Protestants looked to the mystics and the early church for authentic ways of connecting to the Holy. Boundaries between Catholics and Protestants, between denominations, and between styles of devotional life were mixed and blended, especially as young people looked for Postmodern expressions of the orthodox Christian faith. These young people are currently moving from activity, the stark lines of Modernity, the commercialism, the bombardment of media, and looking toward some stability in their lives. Robert Webber stated that “younger evangelicals” realized that to affirm the Christian story, they must embrace the past. They “recognize that the future runs through the past.”<sup>109</sup> One college professor, Dale Dirksen, noticed that there was a noticeable trend among college-aged youth in the valuing of history, in the fascination with “old stuff,” possibly because they lived their life among “new stuff.”<sup>110</sup>

Along with the noise and the activities that are a staple of youth program activities, leaders would do well to also introduce them to the quiet places inside themselves, to listen to the others in their world, and especially to open themselves to intentional, focused listening to God. In *The Godbearing Life*, Kenda Creasy Dean spoke of the spiritual impact of retreat, of breaking the rhythm of the ordinary, and how that can significantly open the door for spiritual transformation.<sup>111</sup> In our loud, cluttered, hectic world, to make a place for solitude, for quiet, is to break into the rhythm of our life. If an introduction to the quiet wonder and awe of God has not been experienced by the youth

---

<sup>109</sup> Webber, *The Younger Evangelicals*, 49.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Dean, *Godbearing Life*, 191.

as children with such means as Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and Godly Play, then the time of confirmation can be an appropriate place to begin.

### **Foundations of Story**

Story, to many young teens today, comes in the form of a thirty or sixty minute episode of their favorite television series, a movie, or a series of movies. For a smaller percentage of teens, Story may be found through novels or magazines. Story comes as assignments in English class, often something to endure rather than enjoy, and something to be analyzed and dissected, rather than savored, digested, or in which to become immersed. Micro-stories fly past the senses in the form of individual songs, MTV videos, commercials, news stories. These stories often function as entertainment, as distraction or as blatant attempts to influence, especially in how persons might part with their money.

From preschool experiences on, today's youth are now introduced to stories from a variety of cultures, of countries, of religions, and of world views. Increasingly youth are exposed to a variety of stories and influences apart from family, as work, education, and individual activities and interests take precedence over family activities and traditions, and cross-generational communication diminishes. Even youth who have attended Sunday School and/or worship as they moved through childhood have not necessarily had the Christian stories and values reinforced at home, and rarely through the culture.

Technology, especially in the past decade, has exposed youth to people, cultures, and information on a daily and normal basis that was not available to their counterparts in earlier years. Their identities have often become more closely tied to the world of their

movies, TV series, and pop culture than the heritage of their families, religion, or nationalities that have identified people of the past. The economic situation of their families continues to have a major impact on their identities, experiences, and view of life as they see themselves in relation to the culture, and it also influences which part of the pop culture smorgasbord they turn to for entertainment and identity.

Many of the foundational concepts of Christianity assume basic knowledge of scriptural stories, especially those of the Gospels and of the Torah. Without the foundation of this scriptural Story, youth can hear the messages of salvation, of love, of moral integrity, of community, but the results may compare to the seeds sown on the path, on the rock, and in the midst of weeds. With no macro-narrative foundation, how is the story of “love” unique, how does it compare in their understanding to the flower-child “love” of the sixties, the concepts of “love” that parade through the media, the idealized “love” of the MP3 songs constantly playing in their ears? Without familiarity with the stories of the Christian faith, do the few seeds sown an hour on Sunday have a chance to take root in their lives, to grow to become a faith that not only steers their course, but can be a strong tree to cling to in the storms that they will inevitably face in life?

Granted, there are also youth who have heard the stories, but not absorbed the message. BBSN can offer them a fresh means of connection to their spirit, to the God of scripture, especially through the emphasis on Blessing and through Holy Listening.

Young teens’ exposure and experience of spirituality is often fragmented and diverse, having the effect of a patchwork quilt. Some of their parents or other significant people in their lives have had negative experiences of church, of Christianity, leaving

particular impressions, memories, and attitudes in their spiritual backpacks. With the focus of BBSN on the blessing of God's love, presence, and of creating sacred space, young teens have the possibility of finding a place of safety and acceptance, of a place to connect to God and hear His stories.

### Postmodernism and the Theology of Story

Perhaps the strongest influence on children and youth in the mainline church today, but the least visible or least addressed, is the position in which they are now perched in history. Much was written in recent years of the results of the Modern Era, of the Western world since the Enlightenment, and how we are now in the transition to the postmodern world. Modernism was driven by scientific investigation and reason. Modernism challenged Christianity by looking for scientific proof of recorded history, by seeing the challenges of life as things that could be resolved through science or reason, and by seeking to understand and control nature and people.

Postmodernism now includes the realization that science still has much to discover, and that the inventions that were expected to solve all our problems have also created new challenges, and have become abused as well as used. Postmodern people have become saturated with media "spin" and surrounded by commercials and advertisements developed through detailed studies of human reactions. People are bombarded with stories of political corruption and with stories of people in high positions abusing power, until the Postmodern person assumes that power and self motivate most actions (of other people). This assumption can play out in several ways within the church.

Some assume that the church and church history are also motivated by power and self, and reject all that the church offers. Others assume that the church is where motives are totally selfless, leading to unrealistic expectations of Christians.

Postmodern thinkers realize that things look different from different perspectives, and often take that to the extreme of denying that absolute truth can exist. These understandings, spread throughout our popular culture in recent years, deeply affect the youth who come through the doors of our churches, and have changed the soil in which they receive the seeds we are so eager to plant.

N.T. Wright identified three areas where Postmodernism created a mood of uncertainty, and affected the ways that the scriptures may be understood. First, Modernism attacked the overarching story of Christianity. Now even the big, older stories, the meta-narratives, have been attacked and deconstructed, including the stories of “progress” and “enlightenment.” “Like all meta-narratives, it (the Bible) tells a single overarching story which appears to be precisely the kind of thing people today have learned to resist. Like all meta-narratives, it is instantly suspected of being told in order to advance someone’s interest. It is, people suspect, some kind of a power-play.<sup>112</sup> Second, the concept of “truth” has been divided. Many people understand truth to be “what really happened,” yet we can look to the parables of Jesus to illuminate concepts of “truth.”

Modernity has tried to put:

---

<sup>112</sup> N. T. Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture* (New York: HarperCollins Press, 2005), 7.

. . . everything into the kind of box which can be weighed, measured and verified as though it were an equation in physics or mathematics. Now Postmodernity has pushed us the other direction: toward supposing that all “truth,” including the supposed “facts” of scientific experiment, can be reduced to power-claims. . . All statements about the way things are turn into variations on “the way I see them,” or even “the way it suits me to see them.”<sup>113</sup>

This was a cultural shift that now appears so obvious to many people that it has itself become an absolute. Third, Wright saw that we now face the problem of personal identity, the “Who am I?” question that is especially important to the adolescent. Growing understandings in psychology, science, the environment, the interconnectedness of life, the many voices crying for attention to their causes, and the deconstruction of history and story have both pulled foundations from what historically has given us identity, and made the complexity of “who am I” shifting and incomprehensible.

One of the battles waged in the church today is the question of which lens we use to view scripture. This is a question almost as old as the New Testament itself. The early church fathers, in responding to those attacking the unity of the Bible, had to develop scholarly, credible means to defend the *literal* authenticity of Scripture. They also borrowed from the Greek and Hebrew traditions in using the *allegorical* method, looking for deeper meanings hidden beneath the literal meaning of a passage. A third lens used historically to interpret scripture was the *moral* lens, attempting to find applications to

---

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 8.

life and community. The fourth mode of interpretation is the *devotional* lens, listening for God to personally speak through the scripture.<sup>114</sup>

This “Battle of the Lenses” continues in the twenty-first century, with many more postmodern choices. Do we see scripture as absolutely literal, dictated by God to the pens that wrote the scrolls? Do we see it through totally scientific lens, as an archaic document that has been superseded by evolution, astronomy, political theories, and modern knowledge? Do we tear scripture apart to determine what we “know” to be historical truth, such as the Jesus Seminar has done? Do we assume that those who wrote the Story were the ones who had the power to determine which story would be written? These ideas are no longer reserved for the intellectual in the research university, but are also popularized and brought into the American household through such cable offerings as the Discovery and History channels, not to mention movies such as *The Da Vinci Code*.

This environment surrounds the youth who enter a Confirmation Class. The leader and congregation need an approach to scripture that is coherent and can readily respond to the many ideas the youth may broach. A teacher will not have all the answers, yet must be open to listen and to explore the questions. The Holy Listening adult must be willing to respect their understanding, and help them connect it to Christian truth in the larger picture, the meta-narrative. Teens experience many adults, and sense the difference between those who care about them and their spirit, and those who are simply passing on traditions and answers that were taught in earlier generations. The BBSN mentor

---

<sup>114</sup> Jones, *Sacred Way*, 50–51.

accompanies them on their spiritual journey. For the author, this includes the journey being grounded in the full story of scripture, as foundational, as narrative and as devotional.

There is new room in our faith for experience, for mysticism, and for mystery. We can recover the story as the great conveyer of truth, and we can use it to great effect just as Jesus did. We can welcome people into a journey instead of getting them to assent to a (sic) oversimplified version of the gospel and recite a three-sentence prayer. In other words, we can recover some of our lost heritage. . . . We were sidetracked during the modern era, and Postmodernity may afford us the ability to recover some aspects of authentic Christianity.<sup>115</sup>

After wandering through various contemporary writers on scripture such as Walter Brueggemann, William Placher, Brian Blount, Brian McLaren and Marcus Borg, the author found a home in the writings of N. T. Wright, especially *The Last Word* and *What Saint Paul Really Said*. Wright faced the contemporary scene realistically, romped through the history of how scriptures have been used and abused, and landed with both feet firmly on the ground.

Regarding Story, Wright said: “We read scripture in order to be refreshed in our memory and understanding of the story within which we ourselves are actors, to be reminded where it has come from and where it is going to, and hence what our own part within it ought to be.”<sup>116</sup>

Story in our faith journey also includes church history, of which Wright states:

---

<sup>115</sup> Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 39.

<sup>116</sup> Wright, *Last Word*, 115.

Paying attention to tradition means listening carefully (humbly but not uncritically) to how the church has read and lived scripture in the past. We must be constantly aware of our responsibility in the communion of Saints, without giving our honored predecessors the final say or making them an “alternative source,” independent of scripture itself. . . . The study of church history is not, ultimately a different “subject” from the careful Christian reading of scripture.<sup>117</sup>

Reason, to Wright, included being attentive to lexical, contextual, and historical considerations. Reason prevents grand leaps of imagination, and includes the need to “make sense.” It also includes recognizing and acknowledging our own biases. Reason gives attention to and celebrates discoveries in the sciences, while understanding that science, by definition, studies the repeatable, whereas history, by definition studies the unrepeatable, and faith becomes the vehicle for “being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Heb 11:1). We do not need faith for scientific fact, as Madeleine L’Engle reminded us. But, in returning to the foundation of Story, Wright declared that, “. . . it is vital that we understand scripture, and our relation to it, in terms of some kind of overarching narrative which makes sense of the texts. We cannot reduce scripture to a set of ‘timeless truths’ on the one hand, or to mere fuel for devotion on the other, without being deeply disloyal, at a structural level, to scripture itself.”<sup>118</sup>

Fowler, in developing a basis for theology in the postmodern world, said professors Hauerwas, Stroup and others “emphasized the power of Christian faith as

---

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 122.

*narrative* for grounding the identity of the church and shaping it for discipleship.”<sup>119</sup>

Fowler also referred to Walter Bruggemann’s argument that the church must speak two languages: “. . . the language to be employed behind the city wall, based upon the stories and memories of Yahweh’s promises and faithfulness; and the language to be employed upon the wall, through which the witness, proposals and protests of a story-grounded people can address public life.”<sup>120</sup> We are a People of the Book, of the meta-narrative, of the Story.

### Story and Youth

In this cultural swirling, what can provide a vessel in which a young adolescent can navigate the call of his or her spirit? How can we avoid copying the culture, with sensory overload all around us? How can we walk alongside youth who have no spiritual foundation, and help them launch their vessel in healthy ways that can be used to carry and develop their faith, rather than constantly reinvent it?

The author understands Story as a launching vessel for these youth, a vessel in which they can collect individual Stories, pieces of truth, knowledge, and understanding of scripture as they are testing the beginning waters of their spiritual journey.

The book *Soul Searching* was the summary of an in-depth study of the religious attitudes and practices of American teenagers. One of the conclusions of the study was

---

<sup>119</sup> James W. Fowler, *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 188.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

that teenagers are “incredibly inarticulate” about their faith. The author, Christian Smith, suggested that there seemed to be much more unfocused, “invisible” religiosity than focused, “intentional” religiosity weaving through their lives, with little built-in content or connection to the realm of the spirit.<sup>121</sup> Story can be a means of developing ownership of the vocabulary, metaphors, and the linear narrative. As Story is told in different ways, as intentionality is addressed to Story, as time is spent “marinating,” youth have the opportunity to practice expressing their understanding of the faith, growing in their articulation of their beliefs and practices, and the place their faith holds in their lives.

In *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, Tony Jones offered “an incomplete list of postmodernism’s credos,” such as: “Objectivity is out, subjectivity is in,” “Question everything,” “There is no Truth with a capital ‘T,’” and “Never make lists” (chaos and inevitability are the rule). The one credo stated in the positive was:

Tell stories. Narrative is becoming the primary means of communicating beliefs. Since propositional logic has fallen on hard times, stories carry more weight in conveying truths. Author and pastor Brian McLaren calls this abductive reasoning. As opposed to deductive or inductive methods, when you tell a story, you abduct listeners from their known worlds into another world.<sup>122</sup>

Story can become a source of connection, a means to encourage young people to open the door of their attention, of their lives, of allowing God to work through the stories of people to enter their experience and their heart. God has wired us for story.

---

<sup>121</sup> Smith, *Soul Searching*, 131.

<sup>122</sup> Jones, *Postmodern Youth Ministry*, 27.

Who has not heard a child beg for a story at bedtime, during a storm, in a car? Ancient people created stories to explain (to them) mysterious phenomena. Epics were created to describe heroic character qualities. Stories of individual lives were written for posterity. From Rabbis to fables to modern picture books, movies and videos, stories were used to teach, to help us remember, to enhance understanding. Stories catch our attention. We look for connections to our experience, our lives, and our future. Stories create mental and visual “hooks” to connect, to remember, to apply.

The award-winning author, Madeleine L’Engle, devoted an entire book to “Story as Truth,” the subtitle to *The Rock that is Higher*. In what felt like a conversation in front of the fireplace with a wise grandmother, she connected her life events, her deep faith and understanding of scripture, the changes in society over her lifetime, years of devouring literature, and her perspective as an artist of storytelling and drama. She wove a view of Truth in Story that transcended the literal, scientific, and historical searches of our time and reminded us of the ways in which Story can give light on truths of the human condition, of understanding of ourselves, our world, and of each other.

One of the major discoveries of the post-Newtonian sciences is that objectivity is, in fact, impossible. To look at something is to change it and to be changed by it. Nevertheless there is still the common misconception, the illusion, that fact and truth are the same thing. No! We do not need faith for facts; we do need faith for truth. In his letter to Titus, Paul speaks of the mystery of faith, and in Hebrews 11:1 he writes, *Now faith is the substance of things hope for, the evidence of things not seen* (King James Version).<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>123</sup> L’Engle, *Rock*, 92.

## Biblical and Historical Foundations of Story

The story of scripture and the story of Christianity include both historical fact and truth in the sense in which L'Engle described. Scripture itself was compiled in a culture of oral storytelling. Some historical facts were known from other ancient sources, such as Josephus. Insight was gleaned about the history and culture of the Hebrew Scriptures from archaeology and from sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. Jesus did not reply to his accusers, "Let me explain." He said, "Remember," and told the story of David eating the consecrated bread (Matt 12:1–4).<sup>124</sup> To establish his credentials to the congregation at Galatia, Paul wrote Story, his journey with Christ (Gal 1:11–16). In Hebrews 11, the author reminded the reader of the stories of great faith from the Israelite history to encourage the patient endurance of the readers.

Biblical truth is opened through Story. When the expert in the law asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus replied, "A man was going down from Jerusalem . . ." (Luke 10:25–37). When a man tried to involve Jesus in the division of his inheritance, Jesus replied to the spirit of the situation with a story about a rich man building barns.

### **Lectio Divina**

---

<sup>124</sup> Yaconelli, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, 22.

*Lectio divina*, literally “sacred reading,” is historically a way of reading scripture that can make Story come alive to young people as it has to many over hundreds of years. An excellent introductory resource for using *lectio divina* with youth is *Enjoy the Silence: A 30 Day Experiment in Listening to God*<sup>125</sup> by Maggie and Duffy Robbins. In reading and re-reading a passage, in tuning in to particular words, in visualizing details such as sounds and odors, Story can permeate the soul of a young person. *Lectio divina* creates the space and time for quiet, for God to speak to us. It is also a process that can help connect the head and the heart, both the factual knowledge of story and an experience of the spirit.

Devotional reading of the Bible reaches back to the Israelites, especially in the reading of the Psalms, the song/prayer book of Judaism. The practice of *lectio divina* may date back almost eighteen centuries to Anthony of the Desert and the community that grew around listening to God. However, the strongest roots of *lectio divina* came from St. Benedict (ca.480–ca.550), who retreated to the village of Subaico in the Italian hills. His reputation spread, and as he gathered followers they were organized into monasteries of twelve brothers each. Around 529, many moved to a new monastery at Monte Cassino, where Benedict wrote *The Rules of St. Benedict* in which he outlines life in the monastery. Benedict’s bands of monks were in contrast to the earlier desert fathers and mothers who removed themselves from community, living in isolation. The Benedictine life revolved around prayer, work and *lectio divina*.

---

<sup>125</sup> Robbins and Robbins, *Enjoy the Silence*.

Literacy was not common, and books were scarce and expensive. Because of their dedication to Holy Reading, these monasteries preserved much of the great literature of the world. Benedictines also included other great texts of early Christianity in their *lectio divina*, and spent much of their day reading, both individually and communally, and also aloud at worship and meals.<sup>126</sup>

In the twelfth century, *lectio divina* was developed further by Guigo II, the ninth prior of the Grand Chartreuse, a Carthusian order in France. In his book *Scala Claustralium (The Ladder of Monastics)* Guigo wrote:

One day I was engaged in physical work with my hands and I began to think about the spiritual tasks we humans have. While I was thinking, four spiritual steps came to mind: reading (lectio), meditation (meditatio), prayer (oratio), and contemplation (contemplation). This is the ladder of monastics by which they are lifted up from the earth into heaven. There are only a few distinct steps, but the distance covered is beyond measure and belief since the lower part is fixed on the earth and its top passes through the clouds to lay bare the secrets of heaven.<sup>127</sup>

Holy Listening within BBSN includes listening to God whisper through the scripture, and the quiet reverence of Guido's four steps of *lectio divina* can connect BBSN with the Story, corporately or individually. Reading, slowly, repeatedly, and gently listening for God's word for the moment, was the first step of the ladder, and an active step. Action was followed by quiet, as the second step moved on to meditate, ruminate, and "chew on the cud." Quiet was followed by action again, as that which was

---

<sup>126</sup> Jones, *Sacred Way*, 49.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

“chewed” became offered up to God in prayer, whether in love, in query, or in anger. The fourth step, contemplation, to some of the mystics was an almost unattainable step on the ladder. However, it can also be a “Wordless, quiet rest in the presence of the One who loves us,”<sup>128</sup> created us, and blesses us.

Contemporary *lectio* can also include guided meditation and tangible symbols, helping the scripture to come to life. This form of Story comes with no agenda, no summary of morals learned, and no expected application. It simply connects the reader, the Story, and God to each other. Jerome Berryman captured this concept in his *Godly Play* stories for preschool children. The parables are presented, followed by quiet “wondering,” and the children are given the opportunity to use the story items themselves to reenact the story and to absorb the story through repetition and rumination.

### **Story in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture**

Story is a key vehicle for the launching of a Christian spiritual journey, and an appropriate framework for confirmation. BBSN affirms each youth’s own story of being in a position of being blessed by God, of being loved by God, of being important to God. The leader in a BBSN ministry accompanies the youth on their journey, affirming their blessing, their worth to God. It is not a system of rules, of “shoulds” and “should nots;” it is not an imparting of doctrines. Rather, as we walk with them, telling stories of Jesus, stories of Scripture, stories of people, and stories of history, they can be invited to

---

<sup>128</sup>Luke Dysinger, O.S.B. “*Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*,” (St. Andrews Abbey:2005) <http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html> (accessed August 2, 2006).

become part of the stories and to see their own story in light of the meta-narrative. Stories of baptism, stories of new birth, the story of their own infant baptism, or faith stories of their own family, provide stepping stones into their vessel. The stories of Holy Week, of celebration, communion, crucifixion, and resurrection, woven with stories of community, family traditions, and symbols all strengthen the structure of their spiritual vessel. The stories of Pentecost, the launching and organization of the faith of the disciples, apostles and the new church all can give wind to the sails in their own spiritual journey. Faith stories of those around them, people who support them, people who love them, let them know their vessel is not alone, that others have made this journey, and that each traveler is unique and valued by God.

The Biblical Story, the meta-narrative overarching the Scriptures, is foundational for a healthy, intelligent comprehension of Christianity. The story woven throughout scripture provides the framework for understanding and absorbing the message of Christ's teaching and life. Although a working knowledge of Hebrew scriptures, gospels, and letters is not a "requirement" for "being a Christian," it is important for growing in the Christian faith, for putting down spiritual roots, for building an understanding of God's actions in Christ, and how we live in response to that. Without a familiarity with the story of scripture, today's young teens are at the mercy of feelings, media, and the opinions of their friends and family. They are bombarded with a smorgasbord of spiritual ideas, yet often do not know the roots of the faith which they claim.

This Story began with Creation, with two points central to BBSN: God as Creator in Genesis 1, and humans beings made in the image of God. Genesis 1:26 declared,

“Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.” Psalm 139:13 said, “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Scriptures such as these reinforced the understanding of the individual teen’s value to God as they heard the beginning of the Blessing: “God created you.”

Within God’s blessing to Abraham, the youth heard “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; . . . all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2–3). They saw God’s faithfulness to his promise, and knew that they were a part of “all peoples” in this story. They heard the stories of God’s love for the oppressed in the book of Exodus, the story of the Passover that will later connect to Holy Week and the Lamb of God, the stories of love and deliverance. An understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures helped them understand that the Christian faith was rooted in Jewish history, and helped them better understand their Jewish friends and neighbors. Hebrew history helped them begin to understand the depth of history, tradition and emotion behind the contemporary conflicts in the Middle East that is a very real part of their lives, with family members serving in Iraq and elsewhere.

The stories of the Temple later connect to concepts of atonement. The stories of exile help youth understand that being chosen by God does not eliminate consequences of bad choices. The stories of return from exile demonstrate that God is a God of second chances, that no matter how badly we have messed up our lives, He is waiting for us to turn back to Him, and will greet us with open arms, as the loving father greeted the prodigal son. (Luke 15:11–24)

Of course the stories in the four gospels were the core for confirmation, as they explored the heart of Christianity: the life and teachings of Jesus. “Telling the story of Jesus as the climax of the story of Israel and the focal point of the story of the creator’s redemptive drama with his world is itself a major task” of our place in history.<sup>129</sup>

The book of Acts extended the Story into the Church: how did the church respond to the person and teachings of Christ? How did the Church grow from twelve disciples and a group of Galileans who listened to His teachings to be the major religion within 400 years? As we moved through church history, what mistakes were made, and how did we learn from those mistakes?

Wright sees part of the church’s calling to listen to the story of scripture as a primary way to grow in our love of God with our mind and our heart, finding fresh understanding, so each Christian steps into the Story “. . . equipped to take their own place in the ongoing story of God’s people as they engage in his mission to the world.”<sup>130</sup> This is day to day ordinary Christianity.

The emphases on Holy Listening, Story, and Blessing, especially in confirmation, were intended to surround the youth with the incredible love that God has for each of them, the understanding that this love is unfathomably rich in depth and history, and how the life of Christ and His death on the cross can impact their own lives. The faith stories they heard from members of the congregation invited them to explore their own faith and lives. The connections through prayer invited the meta-narrative to invade their own

---

<sup>129</sup> Wright, *Last Word*, 124.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

space, their own Story. Through the stories, Christ may have become a more significant part of their decisions, their choices of behavior and responses to their life situations.

In BBSN, the emphasis is not on “being saved,” but rather connecting to Christ. The emphasis is not on “being bad or being good,” but rather how we are blessed, and responding to that blessing. The BBSN nurturer in confirmation is not a counselor, giving answers to personal situations, but walks alongside them as listener, as one on the journey with them. As with any adult working with youth, one should be aware of the presence of serious problems, and guide them to appropriate people for help if needed.

BBSN in confirmation also brought their attention to their own faith story, remembering God moments, becoming aware of the presence of God on their life journey. The theme of Story brought keener understanding of how people’s stories intersect and become part of each other’s Story. Stories and traditions of the congregation and denomination were grafted into their own story as they were heard and experienced. Youth became more aware of Holy Listening, the idea that “everybody has a Story,” and that all are made in the image of God. Their world had the possibility of expansion, of seeing through new lens, of opening their hearts to the possibility of God acting in their lives and the lives of those around them.

### **Faith and Developmental Theories of Young Teens**

In dealing with a particular age group, such as in confirmation, understanding general characteristics of their stage of life can enhance teaching and listening skills.

There were a variety of perspectives from which to view twelve and thirteen year olds, such as intellectual, moral, cultural, and religious.

In *Big Differences: How to Deal with Youth of Various Ages*, Sharon Adair listed ten characteristics of junior high youth, grades six through eight:

- Physical: Their bodies and lives are changing rapidly.
- Sexuality: It is linked to their own body, and a curiosity of others.
- Parents: They are in the midst of a love/hate relationship, rebelling briefly but intensely.
- Faith: God is a distant figure, but important in their lives, connected to the church.
- Thinking: They are beginning to move from concrete to more abstract thinking.
- Self-oriented: They are focused on “Do you like me?”
- Verbal: While beginning to develop better ability to express themselves, they fear sounding “stupid.”
- Values and Decisions: They are primarily absorbing values of their parents, with a group mentality.
- Invincible: They believe that bad things happen only to others.<sup>131</sup>

Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist who developed the theory of cognitive development, placed the twelve to thirteen year old, or the age of puberty, as usually just beginning the fourth stage of formal operations. Moving beyond the *Concrete Operational* Stage Three, which can manipulate, categorize, predict, and use logic with concrete objects, the young person entering Stage Four can begin to think abstractly, to mentally deal with concepts that are not connected with concrete objects.<sup>132</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Sharon Adair, *Big Differences: How to Deal with Youth of Various Ages* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 32–34.

<sup>132</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 67–77.

Erik Erikson was a German developmental psychologist who studied the teachings of Freud, but moved on to believe the primary motivational force for human behavior was social interaction. Erikson viewed his stages, driven by social environment and biological maturation, as sets of “crises” that must be resolved. The resolution, or lack of resolution, of each stage was carried into the next, providing the foundation for that stage’s resolution. For Erikson, the twelve to thirteen year old was moving out of the fourth stage of Middle Childhood. The key words for this stage were *Accomplishment and Industry vs. Inferiority*. This stage focused on learning skills which resulted in a sense of accomplishment if successful, and a sense of inferiority if not. The young adolescent usually was moving into the *Identity vs. Role Confusion* Stage, beginning to develop a sense of self in relation to others and to one’s own thoughts about oneself. This stage of development was working on both a social identity and an individual identity. Young people at this stage were choosing groups while growing in their own abilities, goals, and possibilities. The sense of belonging at this age was very strong. The groups to which they turned provided mirrors to themselves, their perceived view of how others saw them.<sup>133</sup>

Lawrence Kohlberg was a brilliant psychologist who became fascinated with the studies of Piaget and began interviewing children and adolescents about moral issues. He developed a stage theory of moral thinking based on the reasoning behind moral decisions. Piaget saw moral judgment as a two stage system, as younger children based

---

<sup>133</sup>Richland College, Psychology 2301. Adapted from Woolfold & McCune-Nicolich, *Educational Psychology for Teachers, Second Ed.* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984).

their moral judgments on consequences while older children based their judgments on intentions. Kohlberg went well beyond Piaget, with ongoing studies bearing strong support for his theories. Stage One, *Heteronomous Morality*, assumed rules were to be unquestioningly obeyed, handed down by powerful authorities. Punishment and consequences were important. Most junior high students in confirmation were navigating Stages Two and Three. At Stage Two, *Instrumental Exchange*, they realized that authorities had different views, and individuals had different viewpoints. The individual, self-interest, and the risk of punishment were the strong influence. This was the stage of “I’ll scratch your back if you scratch mine.”

Stage Three, *Mutual Interpersonal Relations*, moved into what Kohlberg called “Conventional Morality,” which became more complex. People in this stage believed that people should live up to the expectations of the family and community and exhibit “good” behavior, which means having good motives and interpersonal feelings toward others. This stage was “Conventional” because the person believed that the attitude would be shared by the entire community. In Stage Four, *Social System and Conscience*, a person became more aware of and concerned with society as a whole as they looked beyond individuals. The emphasis was on obeying laws, respecting authority, and maintaining social order. In Stage Five, *Social Contract and Individual Rights*, persons viewed moral situations from the perspective of benefiting all persons.<sup>134</sup> Kohlberg saw his stages as results of individuals thinking about moral problems. The stages were not

---

<sup>134</sup> W. C. Crain, *Theories of Development* (Prentice-Hall), 118–136.

the products of society or maturation, but emerged from critical thinking, questioning, discussion, and challenges.

John Westerhoff suggested a model of four distinct styles of faith and used the analogy of a tree and its rings. His styles included *Experienced Faith*, *Affiliative Faith*, *Searching Faith*, and *Owned Faith*. Experienced Faith typically encompassed the preschool and early childhood years, and included their experiences with the people and world around them. In the stage of Affiliative Faith, a person sought to act within a community and be accepted by others, with a clear sense of identity and a place where one belonged. This included the affective, intuitive aspects of faith, the religion of the heart. Searching Faith was a faith of action, of doubt and critical judgment. It moved beyond the faith learned in earlier years as it added a growing importance of the intellect: religion of the head, questions, and studies. This person experimented and explored alternatives to earlier understandings and ways, and moved toward taking ownership of their own faith. Westerhoff saw the illumination of conversion as a possible movement from Searching Faith to Owned Faith. At this point often one desired to proclaim their faith, to witness, to put faith into personal and social action, and to stand up for what they believed.

In Westerhoff's analogy of these stages of faith to a tree, he saw a tree with one ring to be as complete a tree as a tree with four rings. Experienced Faith was seen as true faith, which never leaves us. A growing tree did not eliminate earlier rings, but added new rings to those already present. Persons in this analogy added styles rather than replacing one with another. A tree with three rings was not better than a tree with one

ring, but rather an expanded version of a tree. A tree grew slowly and gradually. A tree grew if the proper environment was present, and its growth was arrested when the environment was not present, but could resume growth in the presence of a nurturing environment.

Young teens experienced some type of faith, but often were not able to express it in words. For twelve and thirteen year olds, the sense of belonging, of being accepted by a group and of being a contributing part of community was very important. The affective part of faith, preceding the thinking part of faith, was intrinsic to the young teens, and was often expressed through the arts—music, drama, storytelling, painting and dance—before it was expressed in words and logic. Confirmation was a point in their lives that encouraged the meeting of the experienced faith, the affective faith with symbolic expression, and the logic and vocabulary of faith as the intellectual ring began to add itself to the tree of faith.<sup>135</sup>

James Fowler’s contribution to developmental studies was in the area of faith. Faith was defined as a verb, “an active mode of being and committing, a way of moving into and giving shape to our experiences of life.” Faith was always “relational; there was always another in faith, ‘I trust in and am loyal to. . . .’”<sup>136</sup>

Stage One was *Intuitive-Projective Faith*, with fluid thought patterns, images and fantasy, which were powerfully influenced by examples, moods, actions and stories of

---

<sup>135</sup> Westerhoff, *Will Our Children*, 87–96.

<sup>136</sup> Fowler, *Stages*, 16.

the visible faith of primary adults. Images, impressions and perceptions from this stage could be vivid and long-lasting, and were sorted out later when self-reflective valuing and thinking became stable. This stage, usually from about three to seven years of age, was vulnerable to the dangers of unrestrained images of terror, or the “unwitting exploitation of his or her imagination in the reinforcement of taboos and moral or doctrinal expectations.”<sup>137</sup> Some of these images would still be present in young teens, possibly becoming unpacked during confirmation discussions.

The second stage, *Mythic-Literal Faith*, reflected a more orderly, linear and dependable world, as the youth became capable of inductive and deductive reasoning. Faith became connected with narrative. Stories in this stage provided symbolic representations that shed light on themselves and their world. They began to tell stories to communicate and compare their experiences and meanings. However, the stories were told from within the story, and not yet stepping out of the story to reflect upon it. Images of God took on anthropomorphic qualities and reflected their experiences with family and authority. Reciprocity, such as “God will be good to me if I am good,” could be a part of this experience. Beliefs were appropriated with literal interpretations, along with moral rules and attitudes. Symbols were understood as one-dimensional and literal in meaning. If/when a clash or contradiction was realized in stories that define faith identity, and the person began to reflect, especially among authoritative stories, the Stage Two person then

---

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 134.

began the transition to Stage Three. “Previous literalism breaks down; new ‘cognitive conceit’ (Elkind) leads to disillusionment with previous teachers and teachings.”<sup>138</sup>

Some teens in confirmation retained Mythic-Literal Faith, some were in transition, and some were acquiring Stage Three faith, *Synthetic-Conventional Faith*. The fresh abilities to see the self as seen by others, and to understand that others see themselves through the eyes of others (including oneself), and the skill of projecting into the future became part of their growing faith structure. This was Westerhoff’s Affiliative Style: belonging to community, absorbing the values and symbols of community, and finding one’s place within that community. This was the confirmation task that included information on the history and beliefs of one’s denomination, congregation and Christianity, and connecting the teens to the community beyond the children and youth departments.

To Fowler, the understanding of God to a young teen coming into Stage Three “. . . must also be re-imaged as having inexhaustible depths and as being capable of knowing personally those mysterious depths of self and others we know that we ourselves will never know. . . . The adolescent’s religious hunger is for a God who knows, accepts and confirms the self deeply, and who serves as an infinite guarantor of the self with its forming myth of personal identity and faith.”<sup>139</sup> This was the core concept of this developmental stage that made Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture an

---

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 152.

appropriate and powerful foundation for confirmation. To be reminded through worship, ritual, attitudes and discussions that God created them, loves them, and blesses them has the potential for emotional memory that may last well beyond the stories of John Wesley and the doctrinal discussions.

Another important part of this stage was the locus of authority from without. Although they were making choices, their values and self-images were largely absorbed from others. Authority “resides in the interpersonally available ‘they’ or in the certified incumbents of leadership roles in institutions.”<sup>140</sup> For both adolescents and for adults who found equilibrium in Stage Three, the images and values to which they were committed were primarily a tacit system. “Tacit means unexamined; ‘my tacit knowing,’ as Michael Polanyi calls it, is that part of my knowing that plays a role in guiding and shaping my choices, but of which I can give no account.” Fowler used an analogy attributed to philosopher George Santayana: “We cannot know who first discovered water. But we can be sure that it was not the fish.”<sup>141</sup> A tacit system found the fish still in the water, unable to reflect on the water from a detached perspective. This person was aware of their values and normative images, could express them, defend them, and felt deep emotion for them, but typically would not reflected on the value system as a system.

Fowler’s next stage, *Individuative-Reflective Faith*, usually appeared when the person made a significant break with the community of Stage Three, and was exposed to

---

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 161.

wider cultural variations and life experiences. It would be extremely rare to encounter this stage in confirmation.

The value of being familiar with the various stages and categories described above in the leadership of confirmation was not analysis, labels or control of the class, but as tools available to better understand the individual youth and to be better equipped to walk with them as they explored their spirit and the historic Christian faith through the lens of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research project was to both meet a need within the context, and to research Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN). The author's background in youth ministry and the void of recent years in the area of confirmation at Parkview provided this opportunity. Therefore, the purpose of this phenomenological study was to discover the response of young teens to the use of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture in the confirmation setting.

The principles of BBSN were all included in the confirmation experience: Sabbath (times of quiet), hospitality (welcoming atmosphere, refreshments), sacred space (room set aside for prayer and quiet listening), prayer manipulatives, accompaniment (being with), blessing, Holy Listening, and Story. The two principles chosen to be emphasized and researched were Holy Listening and Story.

*Holy Listening* in this research included: intentional listening as being fully present, aware of God's presence in the moment; listening to others because all persons are made in the image of God, deserving our respect and attention because God loves and created them; listening to God through prayer, scripture, silence, story, circumstances, and nature.

*Story* in this setting included: stories of scripture; each teen's personal story, including their spiritual journey; personal stories of others, especially spiritual stories; stories of congregational, denominational, Christian, and biblical history

It is the author's hypothesis that the process of BBSN can provide a foundation for a confirmation experience that transcends the diversity of faith background brought to a class and nurtures the spiritual connection of the youth to God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. A healthy, potentially lifetime relationship with God can be grounded in Holy Listening to God through Scripture, prayer, Story and people.

In addition to the study of Bible, United Methodism, and the Christian heritage, time was allotted during each class session for quiet time in a sacred space with a candle, an altar with symbolic objects, prayer, and sharing. Although they were incorporated into the class discuss during the studies, Holy Listening and Story were described, discussed, and practiced especially in the sacred space. The teens were encouraged to practice Holy Listening during the week, such as with their families and friends. They were encouraged to be aware of God's presence in the situation and in the lives of the people to whom they listened. They were encouraged to listen to God through prayer and scripture. Story included each youth's own spiritual journey and life story. It included the stories told to the class by church members as they recalled the highlights of their own spiritual journeys. The stories of scripture and history that were studied were connected to the lives of the youth through historical threads, analogies, and contemporary applications. Holy Listening, Story, and the growing awareness of the presence of God became the threads that tied the lives of the youth to the Christian knowledge that initially had no

meaning to them. The threads gradually wove the information, the principles, then the applications into their daily lives, and laid the beginnings of a Christian foundation for some of the teens.

The appropriate vehicle for this study was the phenomenological approach to qualitative research, attempting to understand the essence of human experience concerning a particular phenomenon, in this case BBSN in confirmation. This involved studying a small number of participants over a period of time to develop patterns and relationships of meaning.<sup>142</sup>

The gathering of data from young teens is a challenge. Many twelve and thirteen year olds are gathering impressions and taking in information, but do not yet have the ability to express the abstract understandings that are beginning to develop. As the classes began, many of these teens possessed a limited Christian vocabulary. None of these youth knew the author before the classes except possibly by sight, so time was required to build trust.

Due to the impending change of pastors, the project was begun during Phase II of the D.Min. process, rather than the usual Phase IV, without time to fully explore the research process. Understanding of both BBSN and the research process came gradually alongside the confirmation experience. The incoming pastor graciously gave support for the author to lead confirmation the following year, opening the opportunity for more

---

<sup>142</sup> John W. Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2003), 15.

experience with BBSN in confirmation, and the opportunity to collect more data from the project.

At the initial meeting of both the 2006 and the 2007 class, the author explained to the youth and their parents that she would be collecting data for this project. Forms were signed by both the parents and youth giving permission for this data collection.

Recordings were initially made of the classes, but this did not prove to be a viable course of action, primarily because of the quality of the recordings. Although data needed to be collected during class time, the author had to be aware of the best use and distribution of time available. Thus, the author created Milestone Papers that were usually given to the youth at the beginning of the class, intended to reflect on what connections they had made with various aspects of the confirmation experience during the past week. This gave the author the opportunity to collect qualitative data as they transitioned into a time set aside to turn their minds and hearts toward God. The survey questions were open ended, designed to allow the youth to make their own connections of BBSN to their own lives. The questions varied slightly from one week to the next, keeping an element of unpredictability and encouraging a variety of connections. Some questions were designed to collect information for the author, and were not considered research for this study. The questions used for data collection on BBSN and Holy Listening were open ended variations of the following:<sup>143</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> See Appendix B.

- 1) Holy Listening during the past week:
- 2) The time this week that I felt closest to God was:
- 3) A time this week when I was aware of the image of God in another person or myself:
- 4) Did my availability to Jesus affect or change any of my behavior or attitudes in the past week?

In addition to the open-ended survey questions, the youth were asked in one class to write about their spiritual journeys, and were asked at the end to write about their confirmation experience.

Participant observation notes were taken by the author after each class. To provide triangulation, Context Associates participating in the classes also took notes and were asked to offer observations. Observations of body language, attitude, and student participation in the quiet room by both the author and the Context Associates were valuable. The Context Associates rotated being the Second Legal Adult, and were also asked to read and comment on the author's drafts of this document to provide member checking. Triangulation was expanded by some parents of the youth, both verbally and in writing.

The data collected from the youth was coded. Topics initially included Listening, Story, Spiritual Connections, Action, Image of God in Others, Image of God in Self, Worship Attendance, and Scripture Read. Prayer later separated out of Spiritual Experiences. Worship Attendance and Scripture Read were removed from BBSN data, and Spiritual Connections eventually absorbed the Image of God in Self and in Others as

well as Prayer. A chart was made with key words of the students' responses from their Milestone papers and their free writing. Patterns and percentages were gleaned from this chart. Individual responses from the qualitative data were also studied for insights on the response of the youth to BBSN.

After the data was collected and studied, the results were read and discussed by the Context Associates who had been the most involved in the classes, providing member checking for validation. The youth in confirmation, those of few words and those with more verbal expression, provided their responses to BBSN in confirmation. These responses are described and studied in the following chapters.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **ACT OF MINISTRY: DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH**

Due to an impending pastoral change, the research project was actually initiated during Phase II, with a Confirmation Class of eight teens. The following summer the incoming pastor also gave support and approval for the author to continue with the Confirmation Class the following year, giving her two groups to observe for research. There were significant differences between the two groups in age, background, and personality combinations, and a significant difference in the length of classes and the time span of the classes. The particular personalities and theological foci of the different senior pastors during each class also influenced the author and the youth as the classes unfolded. Both response and lack of response from the students were influential in developing the classes, as well as the author's growing understanding of BBSN and of confirmation as the research progressed.

The author's first challenge was to incorporate the focus of the cohort group, Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN), into the setting of confirmation. The model was pioneered by Rev. Leanne Hadley at First Steps with children and teens in pain and trauma, and by Jacqueline Nowak in Children's Chapel at Memorial Presbyterian Church with preschool children. Confirmation is a time for both strengthening the connection of the youth to God, and for learning information about the faith, the church, and scripture. What in BBSN could be included to help strengthen their relationship to God in an age

appropriate manner, and could be integrated with the learning part of the experience? The original BBSN focus was to be Holy Listening: listening to each other, to a variety of guests, to the Scriptures, to worship, to stories (both biographical and metaphorical), and to God through a variety of prayer experiences. The first class presented challenges that had not occurred in the author's earlier confirmation and teaching experiences.

Of the eight teens, none of whom knew the author previously except possibly by sight, two had grown up going to Sunday School at Parkview, one had grown up going to Worship at Parkview, but not Sunday School, and five had not regularly attended a church until coming to Parkview the previous two to three years. Four of the eight were at the time attending Sunday School on a somewhat regular basis. There were two sets of close friends and one pair of siblings; beyond those pairs, the youth did not know each other. The ages were spread between five seventh graders, a ninth grader and a tenth grader. They had little in common besides their parents attending Parkview and wanting their teens to be a part of confirmation.

The first class quickly revealed that there was little working knowledge of the Bible, even the common foundational stories, although those who had grown up in Sunday School would remember some names and stories when prodded by the Context Associate attending the class, who had been their Sunday School teacher. The author realized that her plans would need to be revised, and the youth realized they knew very little about the Bible. (One shy seventh grader found many excuses to be absent from future classes, eventually dropped the class, took a Beginning Bible class with adults, and returned to successfully be a part of the 2007 class.) One class out of eight was over, and

the challenge remained, not only to cover confirmation material and BBSN principles, but to reach the variety of ages and backgrounds, help the group become comfortable with each other and to help them develop a sense of belonging, which is so important to young teens.

As the author pondered the situation, she reviewed her current understanding of BBSN, of the experience of children initially brought into a church community between the ages of ten and twelve, and of past teaching experience. A thread was needed to connect the youth not only to God, but to each other and to the information to be covered in the class.

The concept of Story began to emerge, from the stories the hurting children and teens told Rev. Hadley at First Steps, the scripture read at the Memorial Preschool Chapel, and the stories the preschoolers told each other as they passed the lamb and shared their happy and sad moments. Story was embedded within BBSN, but had not been identified. It was a short leap to the title of Brian McLaren's book, *The Story We Find Ourselves In*. Each teen was in the center of his/her own Story, which included both the life story and the spiritual story. Identifying the personal spiritual journey was a normal part of a confirmation experience, and an "anchor" from which the individual youth could begin to see the "boat" of confirmation: the congregation, the denomination, the Christian heritage and scripture. Holy Listening, listening for God, can be practiced in stories; scripture is both a collection of stories and an overarching story, a meta-narrative. To affirm their baptism would be to choose to step into the story of God's love for us through Jesus Christ, and place them within the ongoing story of the 150 year old

Parkview congregation, of the United Methodist heritage, of the stories of Christian history—both triumphant and shameful, of the New Testament Gospels, early church history, and of the roots and heritage of the Old Testament Jewish heritage.

Bible stories are a normal part of Christian education, and when one is brought up on those stories, they become a natural, assumed connection to Jesus and to one's understanding of and relationship with God. When those stories are approached initially at the age of ten or twelve, as with some of the youth in this class, they may have as much connection to everyday life as a television show, or even less, with the impression of a story in a far away culture. To follow a biblical story with a discussion of its application may trigger a response similar to that of parental moralization. Study of BBSN had introduced the author to a better understanding of *Godly Play* and *lectio divina*; both quietly tell the story, let the listener enter the story, and let the listener pull out highlights and meanings that touch them at that particular moment of life.

This approach to the scriptural stories also “leveled the playing field” among the youth, as those who had little familiarity with the Bible did not feel inadequate or embarrassed, but equally related the passage to their own experience and understanding and were secure within the environment of Holy Listening. They grew in their experience of scripture, absorbed the language of the faith, related it to their life, and began to make stronger connections with God through the quiet and the prayer. This contemplative style of scriptural story did not replace instructional and interactive learning, but rather added another dimension, one to which some youth seemed to relate more, others less, than a more traditional classroom model.

Story now joined Holy Listening as the dual threads that tied together the youth, their relationship with God, their identity with the congregation, and the history, theology, and scripture to be covered in confirmation.

The 2006 class began in late February of 2006 and ended with the students being confirmed on Mother's Day, May 8, 2006. Mother's Day was considered to be significant, as in the future they could not only celebrate their mothers but also remember their baptism and confirmation. Classes were held on Sunday afternoons, from one to four-thirty. Due to schedule conflicts with the youth winter retreat, school spring break, vacations, and Easter Sunday, there were a total of eight weeks available for classes.

The three and a half hour classes were both a challenge and a blessing. The author attempted to impress on the teens that confirmation was an important step in their lives, an important part of their faith journey and there was much to cover in eight weeks. The author acknowledged with the students the challenge of the long classes, and discussed the fact that important things often require sacrifice. Several parents reported to the author that their teens would complain loudly before the class, reluctant to sacrifice their "free time" to the church. The parents followed that with the observation that the same students never complained *after* the class. That fact was taken as affirmation by both the parents and the researcher to indicate that the time had been a positive experience for the youth.

To keep the conversation focused and retain continuity of thought, there was no official break during the class time. Instead, there was planned movement between rooms, rotation among activities such as snacks, video clips, music (for memorizing the

books of the Bible and for worship), games for learning reinforcement, worship time, lecture, writing (Milestone papers, free writing, workbooks), and drawing. (Doodling was allowed. The author has since become aware of *Praying in Color* by Sybil MacBeth,<sup>144</sup> which has inspired various ways which the doodling could have been better incorporated into the confirmation and BBSN experience.) Snacks were concurrent with continued discussion or video and restroom breaks were on an as needed basis. Different areas of the church building were utilized in addition to the youth area. Much preparation on the part of the author was required for the long classes to retain the attention of the teens.

In contrast, the 2007 Confirmation Class of six teens began in October 2006 with two hour classes and continued through April 2007. This class consisted of three boys and three girls, four seventh graders and two eighth graders. Three of these youth grew up in this congregation, two regularly attended Sunday School, youth group and Worship, one had regularly attended Worship until the past few years. Three began coming to Parkview after the move to the new building in 2003. One of those had attended Sunday School regularly but not Worship, and two had attended Sunday School occasionally and Worship more often than Sunday School. One of those was the girl who had no previous church involvement until attending Parkview, dropped out of the 2006 Confirmation Class, took a beginning Bible class, then joined the 2007 class. Classes did not meet in December, and were not weekly. The meeting times adapted to various sports and

---

<sup>144</sup> Sybil MacBeth, *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007).

vacation schedules to accommodate the best attendance possible. Snacks were occasionally included, primarily as a gift from the author and the Context Associates attending the classes.<sup>145</sup> Activities rotated in a similar fashion to the 2006 class, obviously with less variety during each meeting.

Total class time was equivalent for the two groups. It is the author's observation that the longer classes may have been more effective over the course of the confirmation experience, with each student exploring their personal faith journey in a more compressed, intense manner, and the more effective retention of knowledge between classes allowing for the information building on itself rather than time spent reviewing during many classes. Also, with fewer classes, it may be that the teens and their families made a more concerted effort to attend all classes possible. The second group was faithful in communicating absences and reasons, but there were few classes with all six attending.

The most recent previous confirmation classes in this congregation had utilized the youth version of the *Alpha* course on basic Christianity. With no precedence and with time constraints, the author gradually discovered the *Claim the Name* United Methodist curriculum as the class unfolded. The author's previous teaching style over the years, both in public school music and in working with children and youth in the church, was to decide the goals of the learning, then to create curriculum from various resources. Content for this Confirmation Class was taken from the *Claim the Name* United Methodist curriculum, *By Water and the Spirit* by Gayle Felton, and various sources on

---

<sup>145</sup> Grace as a gift was one theme that ran throughout the confirmation classes, with small gifts used to reinforce the concept.

John Wesley, the United Methodist Church, church history, and Scripture as noted in Chapter 2. The author created games, handouts, and worksheets in addition to the *Claim the Name* workbook. The Leader's Guide to *Claim the Name* was also used as a resource. Video clips about John Wesley and from *Godspell*<sup>146</sup> were used to reinforce discussion.

Content of the classes included general familiarity with the Bible, memorizing the books of the Bible, and a variety of biblical stories and devotional scripture. The story of creation and the connection of the creation of humankind in the image of God were connected to Holy Listening. Abraham, God's covenant, and the scripture of Abraham being "blessed to be a blessing" complemented BBSN principles. Key stories were discussed and connected to the overarching meta-narrative at a development level appropriate to the teens. In the New Testament, emphasis was on gospel stories, with most students reading the book of Mark on their own. Many also read much of the book of Genesis.

To prepare the students for the confirmation of their baptism, the stories of Jesus' baptism and the baptism of the jailor's family in Acts were discussed. The significance of baptism wove throughout the course. The Story of Jesus from Holy Week through the Ascension was emphasized, with various passages of Jesus' teaching and stories included both in study material and devotionally. One class was spent on the Story of the history of the Christian church, one class was devoted to the Story of Methodism. Stories of John Wesley and images of Wesleyan teachings were also woven through the course. Each

---

<sup>146</sup> *Godspell*, Directed by David Greene, 103 min., Sony Pictures, 2000, digital video disc.

course included one class taught by the current senior pastor. During the 2007 course, the Apostle's Creed was threaded through the class, discussed, and memorization was encouraged.

Both courses included discussion and questions about denominations, Catholicism, other major religions, and school discussions and teachings of religions. Both groups attended Sabbath worship at a Reformed Synagogue. The 2007 group also attended a Greek Orthodox service. Both groups experienced a service project. The 2006 group assisted with an Easter egg hunt at Parkside, an inner city housing project. They joined the church puppet team with Easter songs and told the Easter Story to the children, hid eggs, made balloon sculptures, did face painting, helped serve the children lunch, and monitored outdoor games after the Hunt. This was the last activity of that particular United Methodist ministry, as the housing project would shortly be torn down. This was an eye-opening experience for most of the youth. The 2007 class helped with a Christmas dinner given by a large church in the county for those they identified as having need. The youth helped primarily with crafts. This was a worthwhile service experience, but not as intense as the housing project.

As the church building was usually not being used by other groups during class meeting times, the entire building was utilized when appropriate, both to keep the attention and interest of the students and to give them ownership and familiarity of *their* church of which they were or would be members. Some had not been in the adult wing or other rooms of the building. Similarly, the adults invited to share their personal faith stories and the Context Associates who participated in the classes were also intended to

add to the connections of the teens to the rest of the congregation, introducing them to people who did not necessarily work with the youth. These adults added to the youth's collection of familiar faces, of people they might run into at the grocery and connect with their church, of people who were "safe," of adults to whom they might possibly turn for support: their church family, their congregation, their family connected by their faith.

The youth area of the church included two rooms. The larger room contained two adjacent rectangular tables with chairs around the edges. This was usually used for study, lectures, discussion, writing, snacks, and videos. This room also had a small television mounted high in a corner, a bookcase of games, a folding ping pong table, a foosball table, and a small pool table. The presence of the games did not prove to be a distraction. The walls were white, with a bulletin board, an erasable white board, and various posters. A free-standing easel with a white pad of paper was used periodically for discussion. Adjoining this room was a smaller room with a blue patterned couch, several matching soft chairs, a coffee table, a boom box, and a bookcase. The walls were also white with a few posters. The same posters had adorned the walls of both rooms for three years. This smaller room was used during confirmation for BBSN: for worship, for personal sharing of stories, devotional reading of Scripture, and for prayer and blessing. The coffee table became the altar, and periodically symbolic objects would be added to the altar with an explanation of the symbolism and often an appropriate scripture. A liturgy based on these objects was used by the youth in the 2006 class on the Sunday they were confirmed.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>147</sup> See Appendix D.

Several Context Associates who rotated as the Legal Second Adult with the classes commented on the way the youth quieted down as they entered this smaller room.

When the youth were seated in the quiet room, the candle was lit to remind them of the presence of God, creating a sacred space. Here the youth opened their hearts with their requests for prayer, prayed for each other, and were given time to be quiet before God, usually with brief, simple direction. Various forms of prayer and prayer tools were introduced to the youth: breath prayers, prayer beads, prayer stones, prayer with pictures/icons, walking prayer, and very simple *lectio divina*. All the teens would participate in verbal prayers when simple directions were given, such as to pray for particular prayer requests, or prayers of gratitude, or the person on their right. When suggestions were not given, there was significantly less participation.

On two occasions each class was taken to the large worship area and asked to space themselves out to reflect and to write. The first time they were asked to write and draw their personal spiritual journey. One boy especially discovered during this time some things about himself and his faith that surprised him. The second time they were given a picture taken from the *Alpha* course of teens around a swimming pool. In the picture were youth swimming in the pool, ready to dive off the board, sitting on the edge with their feet in the water, standing on the side, standing at the door, playing along the side, and one wearing street clothes. The youth were asked, "If Jesus is the water, which person in the picture would best represent you, and why?" No music was played, and

they were not to speak to each other, but encouraged to sit in the quiet at the foot of the cross and reflect on their relationship to Christ. Some circled one picture and wrote one or two sentences. Others circled more than one person and provided reasons. A few filled the page, and one the back of the paper. They were not asked to share their answers, but they were asked how they felt about the experience both times. Some seemed to enjoy the opportunity for quiet, and one said it was “interesting, in a different sort of way.” A few of the more active youth were aching to get up and run. The author tried to balance these quiet activities with time for more movement during the same class.

Holy Listening was introduced in the prayer room during the first class. The author read a passage from *The Sacred Art of Listening*,<sup>148</sup> and gave the students a handout. Examples were offered and discussed of both good and poor listening, and how they felt when they were truly heard, or felt when they were not heard. The concept of the image of God was introduced, that every person was created by God, in the image of God. The students were encouraged to look at others as beloved creations of God, even those people they did not like. They were encouraged to try to begin to see others as God might see them, to intentionally be fully present in listening, to notice when others listened to them and how it felt. Realistically, this would initially be an intentional act, not expected to be done all the time. Later it was discussed how Holy Listening was a way they could make themselves available to God, to be used by God, to allow God to

---

<sup>148</sup> Kay Lindahl, *The Sacred Art of Listening: A Guide to Enrich Your Relationships and Kindle Your Spiritual Life* (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths, 2003), 11.

love others through their intentional listening. They could possibly sense God's love for the other person as they listened to them. This is something a Christian teen could do as a faith practice, a silent witness to their faith that could become more openly discussed as they became more comfortable with their faith and with others.

An important part of BBSN is the Blessing, as practiced in Children's Chapel and at First Steps Spirituality Center. For the preschool children, a scented, roll-on body glitter is applied to the back of the child's hand in the shape of a cross, while the leader looks the child in the eye, calls him by name, and reminds the child that "God created you, God loves you, and God blesses you" or other appropriate words. Unable to locate a similar product, the author created glittered blessing oil made from frankincense essential oil and glitter. The teens appreciated the significance of the frankincense, and several found the oil and the scent meaningful. However, it proved to be very messy, especially if passed around for the teens to bless each other. In the 2006 session, it also proved to be a fertile ground for giggles, which is not surprising at this age. The Blessing was only done twice during the 2006 session, once with the adults blessing the teens, and once with the teens blessing each other.

By the 2007 class, some wisdom was acquired, and when the Blessing was introduced, the teen being blessed wore the prayer shawl, and the other youth laid their hands on the one being blessed, closed their eyes and prayed. This was much more effective for a group this age. The second time the Blessing was used with the 2007 class, the author put a small metal cross in the hand of each teen while announcing God's Blessing, and a particular gift of God that was seen in each youth.

Story became more of a thread of process than a measurable pillar of research, an instructional approach, almost its own story line. It could not be measured by questions or actions, but the author believed it was reflected in the students' overall response to the class. Bible stories were approached during this confirmation class as pieces of their own story, their heritage, and their history.

When possible, connections were made to their world to tie the Bible to the life of the youth. The connections between Bible stories were emphasized to both enhance memory and to encourage the teens to become aware of the meta-narrative of God's interaction with humanity through time. For example, games included identifying the family connections in Genesis, and the basic timeline of biblical personalities such as Abraham, David, and Daniel. Index cards with the names of the books of the Bible were mixed and spread out on the table, and the students were timed as they put them in order as a group or in teams. Sometimes they would race as teams, sometimes they would compare their time to the previous week to see the progress they were making. When the final results were checked, key Bible people and events would be connected to the appropriate books for review. Through a memory song and the index cards, they not only did rote memorization, but also began to connect the pieces of biblical history to each other, and biblical history to Christian history, reformation history, Wesleyan history, and the story of their own life. Of course with limited time and little background, this was done at a very basic level.

Story was also introduced through inviting various members of the congregation to share a part of their own faith journey with the youth in confirmation. As various

spiritual journeys were shared, the youth became aware that each person had a faith journey, a life story, struggles, and triumphs. Members of the congregation became people who had made mistakes, walked away from God, had moments of intense spiritual connections, been forgiven, had prayers answered and not answered, had many or few years of intentional living with Christ in their lives. The youth learned that adults in the congregation were not always the perfect people they appeared to be on the outside. They learned that many adults in the congregation were not in the church because it was tradition, but because it held deep meaning for their lives. They learned that the choices a person makes as a young adult has consequences throughout life, and that God forgives and loves. They learned that most people are not perfect Christians throughout their lives. They learned of the difference made in a life when Christ is present. As they listened to others tell their spiritual journeys, they began to identify their own journey, their own Story. They learned to better see the image of God in others, to see beyond labels; this was reflected in some of their writing at the end of class. The author knew the concept of Story was becoming a part of the youth when, after watching a video clip of John Wesley being saved from the fire as a boy, one youth asked, “Is that John Wesley’s Story?”

### **Results of Research**

The principles of BBSN were all included in the confirmation experience: Sabbath (times of quiet), hospitality (welcoming atmosphere, refreshments), sacred space (room set aside for prayer and quiet listening), prayer manipulatives, accompaniment

(being with), Blessing, Holy Listening, and Story. The two BBSN principles that the author chose to emphasize with the youth and to describe for research were Holy Listening and Story, as defined in Chapter 4. The names of the youth have been changed to protect their privacy.

Qualitative data was gathered from the youth through Milestone papers they completed most weeks in class. The primary open-ended questions used for this research were variations of the following:

- 1) Holy Listening during the past week:
- 2) The time this week that I felt closest to God was:
- 3) A time this week when I was aware of the image of God in another person or myself:
- 4) Did my availability to Jesus affect or change any of my behavior or attitudes in the past week?

The author understood these were not questions to which young teens would typically respond easily. The author theorized that the repetition of the questions would encourage the practice of Holy Listening in their lives and also give the author insight into their integration of the BBSN concepts. The study and research of the BBSN cohort on the spirituality of young children and youth brought to light both examples and resources of spiritual awareness when it is encouraged, respected, and nurtured.<sup>149</sup> Because of this, the author expected the responses to become somewhat more detailed as

---

<sup>149</sup> See Appendix D, especially Nowak, Hadley, Teel, Koch, and Fogt.

the class progressed. This proved to be true more in the first class than the second. This is not familiar language to some youth in a conservative United Methodist/ United Brethren church, but it is theologically compatible, and opens a new door through which they may explore their faith, especially another door through which an unchurched teen can be invited into a faith journey within the church community. Teens were comfortable with these concepts whether they were new to a church community or had grown up in the church. They were comfortable with these activities with or without knowledge of the scriptures. Intelligence and background did not matter when they lit the candle and came into the presence of God together. Some teens were more receptive to the BBSN concepts than others, but it did not depend on age or church background.

The concept of Story was more elusive to measure, but insights did come to light through the writing of the teens. Matt described the influence of a biblical story in his life when he wrote, “When I was around 10 years old I heard a Bible story about a man that lost everything good in his life, but he never lost hope or faith in the Lord. So I decided, if this guy can do it I guess I could give it a try.” The youth began to refer to their own Story, to their Faith Journey as part of their vocabulary during class. In the final paper, Eric wrote that the class discussions had opened up a “much bigger picture than I knew before.”

The prompt of “Holy Listening during the past week...” brought only three responses of seven youth the first week, as was expected. After they realized this was something they were actually expected to do, there were few blanks the following weeks. The blanks were understood by the author to indicate they were relatively truthful rather

than filling in the blanks with fabricated answers. The responses were coded and categorized as friends, family, teachers, and church. Of the sixty-seven answers referring to Holy Listening from both classes, 13.4% were “No” or left blank; over half of those occurred the first week the Milestone papers were used. The youth listed teachers in 11.9% of the responses, friends in 26.9%, and family the most, at 29.8%. Some of the longer responses were “listening better to friends and parents point of view,” and “tried to think of people as a child of God.” Some teens described specific circumstances, which would follow through in many of their answers for a specific week. One student who had an especially poor report card connected this crisis in his life with his faith journey, choosing to listen to his mother within his understanding of Holy Listening and listening to God in prayer about his school situation. When asked what in the past six weeks had left the deepest impression on his faith journey, his answer was “having a not so good report card.” After four classes, Amanda and Kayla both wrote that they now “listened more to people when they talked.” Jacob wrote that he was “more polite and I don’t interrupt,” and at the final class that “Holy Listening is very important to me.” Chelsea wrote that she had “been trying really hard to listen to my friend’s and family’s points of view and their problems.” Eric wrote that he “had done it (Holy Listening), yet without thinking about it,” and another week wrote, “I didn’t try to judge people, I tried to think of them as a child of God.” In different weeks, Megan mentioned the guest speaker who came to Confirmation Class to share her faith story and listening to the rabbi at the synagogue during the class visit.

The prompts about being aware of the image of God in others received a wider variety of responses. Of a total of fifty-five responses to these questions, 12.7% mentioned teachers, 14.5% listed family, 14.5% named friends, and 29% were aware of the image of God during church, Sunday School, or Confirmation Class. One teen who helped regularly in the children's department of the church during Sunday School and sometimes Children's Church, mentioned several times a particular children's leader as a spiritual mentor, seeing in her the image of God. Matt wrote in his final paper, "I've been able to see the holiness in things. I feel like I can see God in people at times." The weighted responses in settings where God was being worshipped and was the topic of conversation is to be expected, but the number of responses of friends, family, and teachers on all the questions would indicate that the awareness of God in their everyday lives was very real.

There was no way to measure if this awareness was indeed increasing from the beginning of class, but the conversations of the youth during the time span of the class would indicate that was indeed the case. Their conversations indicated that at times they were viewing their friends, family, and teachers with fresh eyes, and that God was more frequently becoming a part of their interactions with others. Eric, grade seven, wrote in his final paper of the class, "I think before this class when I listened to people I didn't see them in the image of God. I merely judged them of what they looked like or maybe what clothes they wore, yet those things truly don't matter. And I think I see what is really important, and what won't live past today." The prompts about the awareness of the image of God in others also received other responses, such as times when they were

helping friends, helping at the confirmation service project with the Easter egg hunt, while listening, while reading scripture, BW3's restaurant, and bowling. (No more information is known on the last two!) Eric was impressed by a teacher who forgave the people who started a rumor about him. He said, "That was like something God would do."

The responses to the prompts asking the youth about the time in the past week when they had felt the closest to God were more personal and insightful. In the 2006 class, there were three blanks, including one "not sure." All three occurred during the first two weeks of Milestone papers. Answers became more specific as the weeks progressed and some gave multiple answers. Overall, over 53% of the answers had connections to church, worship, scripture, and confirmation. Of forty-seven total answers, four answers involved school, including two tests that must have triggered significant prayer. Four responses referred to home and family. Mentioned also were talking, cleaning the garage, playing with a friend, and working with younger children. Probably the deepest answer was one girl who said she felt closest to God that week when she broke up with a long-time boyfriend. Three of the teens mentioned cheering moves and dance, reminding the author of the transcendent experiences of her own in musical performances. Specifically, double back hand springs were mentioned, as a challenging move that had finally been conquered, with an implication of elation, gratefulness, and possibly a feeling of supernatural help.

As the youth reflected on their spiritual connection to God, some specific comments emerged regarding prayer. Of the seven youth in the 2006 class, three of them

wrote of their prayer experiences, two of these wrote about prayer several different weeks. Two of the 2006 group and one of the 2007 group wrote of specific prayers that had been answered, and how that had encouraged their faith and spiritual connection. Several of these had been prayers for friends or relatives for whom they were concerned and one was prayer for guidance. Times of closeness to God included prayer at bedtime for two youth.

Some of the Milestone questions changed for the 2007 class, giving them less opportunity to discuss prayer, but three of the six still wrote of prayer experience as the time that week when they felt closest to God. In November, this group was asked, “Has your prayer life changed since the beginning of Confirmation?” One was absent and two had minimal replies. Matt answered, “Yes, I know how to pray. And different forms of it.” Amanda wrote, “Sort of, more, longer prayers.” Jacob elaborated, writing, “I’ve been praying more and doing more holy listening.” One week the teens in this class were given polished gems stones, chosen by each youth from a gift box that represented “grace.” Suggestions were made of ways the stones could be used in prayer and to remind them of God’s presence, such as carrying the stone in their pocket or placing it in a prominent place. The stone could be used as a “trigger” for a particular prayer, praying each time they felt it in their pocket or saw it. Jacob used his prayer stone, saying he “held it and felt God’s presence.” A seventh grade girl used her prayer stone for comfort when she was worried about a test. Another girl connected the stone to thankfulness that she had a roof over her head and food on the table. This same girl also felt God’s presence when she was walking her dog through a cemetery.

One of the Milestone questions for the 2006 class was, “Did my availability to Jesus affect or change my behavior or attitudes in the past week?” The author searched through these and other writings for indications of faith influencing actions and of how the youth connected their faith with their daily life. 40% of these answers were blank; half of the 40% blank answers occurred in the first two weeks, the other half were spread over the following four weeks, again indicating increasing intentionality and awareness of the areas appearing on the Milestone papers. Responses included: “listened more,” “respected parents more,” “tried not to judge people,” and were “nicer.” One seventh grade girl said she thought about “What Would Jesus Do” in some situations that week. One week Megan read from the Bible to her younger cousin, and another week helped a cousin’s friend when she was sad. Kurt connected his faith with setting up tents at a scout campout. One boy lived out his faith by being “nice to the ‘smelly’ girl,” and another week by praying for a friend, who “got better.” Four mentioned the housing project where the Confirmation Class had helped with the Easter program, egg hunt and games. Megan expressed a better realization of the needs of the children in the project. The 2007 class mentioned times when they were helpful to people the past week. Courtney wrote that she sat with a girl at lunch because she was alone.

Although both classes were weighted with very good students at school, teachers and friends were more influential spiritually with the first Confirmation Class, and family with the second class. The first class included two cheerleaders, a dancer, a Boy Scout, and several in band. The second class members were all heavily into sports, with many active in multiple sport teams during a season. One in the second class was also a Boy

Scout, and several played band instruments. Outwardly, the first class seemed more receptive to the contemplative elements of BBSN, yet the final writings of the second class revealed that more BBSN elements may have been heard and absorbed more than the Milestones and the class conversation had indicated. These were active, competitive youth, not reflective writers, yet in their final papers they all expressed in some way that confirming their baptism was important to them, that they felt they had grown both in the understanding of their faith and in understanding Christianity, and that the BBSN altar, prayers and Story had been meaningful, especially in their prayer life.

Triangulation was provided by several Context Associates and parents. Several months after the 2006 class ended, a parent stopped the author to say that her seventh grade son was still wearing the cross necklace given to him as he was baptized and confirmed, that she was delighted that the confirmation time had been meaningful to him. Another parent wrote a letter of appreciation, as she was amazed that her son was so engaged in the discussion and the experience that he would discuss it with her at home. Her younger son became part of the second class. He did not experience the enthusiasm and interest of the older son. However, the younger boy missed many classes, and was a quieter person, self-described as being one who learns by watching from the side. His Milestone papers also showed quiet reflection and growth in spiritual awareness and prayer in a manner appropriate for his personality.

Some youth from each group expressed the opinion that the most important thing they took from the class was more confidence and initiative in talking about their faith at school and to their friends. There is no way of analyzing the underlying components, but

the author would like to think that the balance of knowledge, understanding and experience influenced their confidence.

The youth responded with final reflection papers and paragraphs, which included prompts about the BBSN aspects of the experience. Two of the final papers that were expressed well were from the two oldest youth of the 2006 class, in ninth and tenth grade.

The time I felt closest to God would be when I was younger. I'd go to Easter service every year with my grandpa and then we'd go Easter egg hunting afterwards. I'd attend church a lot and I always dressed up in fancy dresses. I also prayed every night before I went to bed ever since I could talk. As I grew older, however, I started to pray less and less until I got to a point where I just stopped. My grandpa had died that year and I just had nothing keeping me going to church.

The times I felt the most distant from God would be when I stopped praying. I was completely shut off from God for a period of four years and then my mom tried getting me back into church again. It was hard and overwhelming for me because I no longer had my grandpa sitting next to me nodding his head and replying, "Amen," after everything the preacher said. Church was never the same after that and I found it difficult to get back in the swing of things. As I grow closer to my age now, I'm starting to get closer to God.

In Confirmation class, the worship time and prayers have been meaningful in my relationship with God. During the worship, the smell of the candles calmed me and made me more open and comfortable. I really love the frankincense that you used for the blessing, despite the messiness of the glitter. The most meaningful thing was probably worship time when I heard people's faith journeys and stories because some of them were very interesting and I connected with them. I'm not sure how the stories could be useful for me praying to God, but I know that lighting the candle certainly helps set the mood for praying to God and it just calms me down and it effects me.

– Megan

This confirmation class has really influenced the way that I feel about God and the church. When I was younger, I went to church

reluctantly every Sunday, because then I didn't really know God. I went to some Sunday school classes and Vacation bible school, but I never really felt that close to God.

But this class has taught me a lot. I learned many things about the history and the Bible. I think it is easier to read once I understand some of those things. . . .

Another thing that I will always remember from this class is to not put God "on the back burner." I used to pray occasionally when I had a problem, but now I've been praying more, and I feel much closer with God. I've prayed about problems for myself and for others. And God has helped me with them, as well as the other people I pray for. But more importantly, I've been trying to keep God with me at all times. I sometimes pray at night just to tell Him that I want Him with me and in my life all the time. I've even been carrying that little cross I received in my pocket every day, just to remind me to keep God with me.

I am definitely glad that I had this experience. At first I was unhappy about the sitting in church for 3 ½ hours every Sunday. But as the weeks progressed, I got more and more into it, and found some things very interesting. I would really like to thank you for the time you spent with us, because this has certainly played a big part in my faith journey. I want to continue to stay with the church and keep God in my life always.

– Steve

## **CHAPTER SIX**

### **SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

This Act Of Ministry (AOM) evolved from the author's previous experience with youth, the two year void of confirmation training in the context church, and the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture D.Min. cohort at United Theological Seminary in Trotwood, Ohio. Confirmation became a place to fill a church need and to research Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN). Since the cohort group included those researching BBSN with toddlers, preschoolers, children and adults, the youth Confirmation Class also completed the age span covered by the group.

As the United Methodist Church has moved the sacrament of baptism closer to the sacramental meaning of the early Christians, it was appropriate to incorporate spiritual formation as part of the confirmation experience, along with doctrine and history. After decades of traditional confirmation addressing the intellect in the United Methodist and many mainline churches, the curriculum also now incorporated experience-based suggestions, such as various prayer styles and blessing. Research of the experiences of youth leaders in recent years revealed that the connections to God that develop through contemporary contemplative prayer, Holy Listening, and Story may indeed "lay down the tracks" of a journey in their life that they may continue to follow. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture in the context of confirmation could help provide a foundational framework for the postmodern youth to seek and experience God.

Two Confirmation classes were taught using BBSN in 2006 and 2007, the first meeting three and a half hours a week for eight weeks, the second meeting two hours a week for fourteen weeks, equivalent class time. The 2006 class included seven youth with five seventh graders, one ninth graders, one tenth grader. The 2007 class had four seventh graders and two eighth graders. There was a pastoral change between the two classes.

Each class meeting, with a few exceptions, included twenty to thirty minutes in a room set apart as sacred, quiet space, with an altar, a candle, and other symbols. The candle was lit to remind them of the presence of God, setting the time and space apart as a place to meet with God. Scripture was read, symbols were explained and reviewed, prayer requests were made, different forms of prayer were experienced, and God's Blessing was announced. Holy Listening was defined and incorporated as listening for God in prayer, scripture, and people. The concept of Story ran through the classes, both in the sacred space and in the discussion. The youth reflected on their own spiritual story and listened to the stories of journeys of others. This was in conjunction with the teachings and discussion of the materials of regular confirmation training.

Most weeks the youth completed brief Milestone surveys, with prompts about Holy Listening, looking for the image of God in prayer, scripture, and people, and times when they felt closest to God. Free writing added to this qualitative data, especially at the end of the course. Context Associates participated with the classes on a rotating basis.

One area of reflection at the end of this AOM was the developmental tasks of the early teen. To train young people with a "because I tell you so" or "because the Bible says so" would reinforce the unquestioned obedience of authority of Kohlberg's Stage

One. However, the discussion of Biblical stories and stories of Christian history encouraged examining life events from the viewpoint of another. One of the symbolic objects on the altar in the 2007 class was an antique blue glass lens from a lantern. This was introduced as a symbol of seeing their own lives through the lens of the teachings of Jesus and the Bible. It reinforced the Holy Listening concept of seeing the image of God in themselves and others, to see people as beloved of God. This approach in confirmation encouraged the young adolescents to move deeper into the faith community, to its history, habits, and rituals, toward the shared community of Kohlberg's Stage Three. Historic Christian teachings of respect for others and caring for those who cannot care for themselves helped draw the young people into more complex moral thinking. The discussions which pointed young teens toward compassion and action toward those who are marginalized, a strong theme of Jesus' teachings, may have planted seeds to Stage Five reasoning, which seeks to enhance the lives of all persons, not just the immediate community.

Young people are exposed to such diverse experiences such as the internet, non-fiction cable television, diversity of races and religions, contemporary media depicting both real and imaginary worlds and the interaction of cultures and species, and the multi-tasking and confusion of everyday life. These young people are being not only faced with, but bombarded with, moral examples and dilemmas at a dizzying pace. For many youth, immersion in this culture, especially if any attention is paid to the area of politics, must result in the critical thinking, questioning, discussion, and challenges that Kohlberg said are necessary to move to higher levels of moral thinking. It is the author's observation that for some youth, especially the many sociologists see as abandoned by

adult influence, the adult and global images become clutter and confusion, and actually deter them from growing into higher levels of faith and moral thinking. A healthy youth ministry can become a place to help these teens sort and unpack these influences, especially in settings of longer duration than a Confirmation Class.

The author believes that some of the postmodern youth of today (which is not necessarily all youth yet) are moving through the moral stages more quickly than youth of only a few years ago. Children in elementary school are being globally enculturated, from picture books of African fairy tales to the economic contributions of eastern Asia, to the oil and conflicts of the Middle East. One of the characteristics of this generation is altruism, the giving of themselves to issues outside themselves such as poverty, world hunger, and disease. This thrust into both personal and global dilemmas may be part of the energy behind some of the Emerging Church movement, found in many urban, educated communities today, which combine a willingness to dig into the hard, unanswerable questions and to become involved in face to face mission work. These cultural shifts and others are part of the world that the early teen inhabits, and our attitudes, vocabulary, and teaching must reflect our acknowledgment of their reality. BBSN is one way to help youth open their hearts to God in the midst of their reality, to move toward what Leanne Hadley calls “*spiritual integration*,” the ability to bring God into the midst of reality so one can live with a sense of hope and wholeness in the midst of the messiness of life.<sup>150</sup>

---

<sup>150</sup> Leanne Ciampa Hadley, “Spiritual Support: A Pastoral Care Model for Children and Teens in Trauma” (D.Min. diss., United Theological Seminary, 2007), 247.

Reflection on the spiritual growth and the influence of BBSN principles brought some generalizations, with the awareness that each youth brought his or her unique combination of spiritual history, family influence, personality types, and means of expression. Subjective observations of the teens' participation and writing seemed to sort them into three levels of response to the classes. Of the thirteen youth, five responded in a very positive way, with deeper reflection of themselves and their relationship with God, a growing understanding of scripture and of basic Christian concepts, teaching and tradition, and with evidence of applying their faith to their daily lives. Four responded with significant reflection and growth but less depth than the initial five. Four responded, but minimally, giving less evidence of understanding and of applying the core of Christian tradition and principles in their lives. Yet, these four also anticipated the day of Confirmation with excitement and relevance, saw themselves as being in relationship with Jesus, and felt they had grown as Christians. One of these was very open and willing, but less mature and easily distracted. One only visibly responded to fun, games and competition, yet she was also the bearer of many deep questions. She did not seem to respond as much spiritually as the others to the environment of the quiet room, the altar, and the various prayer styles and tools. It is not possible to determine the reasons of the lack of response, which could have been personality, learning style, situations in the home, or other unknown influences. In the quiet room she did visibly calm down and participated in the prayers and scripture.

It was observed that four of the five seventh grade girls were less attentive during discussions, doodled more, and seemed to absorb less than the boys and the older girls. It was also observed by the author and the Context Associates that when these girls were in

the prayer room, they were more focused and calmer than in the classroom and did participate in the various prayer forms. One of these girls, although appearing to be distracted easily in class, gave responses on the Milestone papers indicating that she was taking the discussion and prayers to heart, doing personal reflection, and applying her beliefs to her daily life. These observations all indicated that to those girls, the BBSN experience made more connection to their lives than the traditional material covered.

The gender breakdown of the response groups was interesting. In the group with the most visible response and written reflection, four were boys and one a girl. Of those in the next level of response, two were boys and two were girls. All four in the group with the least spiritual response to BBSN were girls. This loosely reflects the observations of Scottie May of a group of preschool children who weekly were given a choice between art materials, listening to praise music, a book corner, a curtained prayer corner, and a basket of materials for retelling the story. Boys were inevitably the first to choose the storytelling materials. Boys also selected the praise corner, and boys spent time in the prayer corner every week. May relates the story of a four and a half year old boy emerging from the prayer corner to say, "God touched me." May observed another boy beneath the curtain as he got down on his knees, put his face in his hands, and stayed for several minutes. No girl chose the prayer corner until the eighth week.<sup>151</sup> These observations of both the children and youth seemed to contradict common stereotypes.

Didactically, these Confirmation Classes proved to be a quite different experience than the many classes that the author taught ten to thirty years previously. The students

---

<sup>151</sup> Anthony, *Perspectives*, 76.

seemed to process information differently, and made fewer connections within the material. One parent, a teacher in a local public high school, theorized that the difference might reflect the changes in public education in recent years. During the discussions some students discovered they knew more about Buddha from school than they did about Jesus or Christianity from home and church. Of course there was a wide variety of family influence with regard to faith, from very minimal to parents who were youth and children's leaders.

The desire on the part of the author for the youth to have ownership of a more solid understanding of the Bible and their faith was influential in changing the 2007 class schedule from two and a half months to seven months. The retention of material and understanding did not seem to improve, and may have even been less. Again, the author speculated that the three and a half hour classes may have immersed the 2006 class in the material in a more compact manner, actually enhancing the retention. It would be an interesting study to follow through a year after the different classes ended to survey what had actually been retained.

When the time spent in a young person's Christian education is compared with the exposure of a daily class in school, it becomes less surprising that they know more about Buddha than Jesus. The typical Protestant Sunday School class of one to one and a half hours a week does not compare favorably with the religious education offered in many synagogues, mosques, and Catholic parishes. When combined with the changes in society toward the secular, the influences of the media, changes in education and the fragmentation and schedules of much of American family life, it becomes even less surprising that the level of Christian understanding has seemed to dropped so quickly.

The author initially thought this was true only in her own congregation, but connections with other Christian educators over the past year led her to understand that it is a common theme. This is a phenomenon that is not in the scope of this paper, but an important one for continued research.

This frustration with the contemporary differences in learning styles and retention of information also became a springboard in the personal growth of the author. Her teaching style of the past was primarily informational. She had relied on her music skills in leading youth in the affective/emotional aspects of faith. The BBSN concept of Story emerged from the challenge to connect youth to each other, to scripture and to God. The concept of Story as described in this paper was a universal and neutral territory, connecting with both groups of teens – those who were enculturated in a Christian church environment, and those who had only been involved in a church community for a few years or less. BBSN also leveled the differences between seventh graders and High School sophomores.

The author's music ability contributed to the experience of worship in the prayer room. The youth program had included singing only occasionally, primarily on some retreats, and a few youth had listened to Christian recorded music. As the youth grew into ownership of several songs, and the author began to also lead those songs with the wider youth group, the experience of singing became part of their worship.

The BBSN concept of Story as understood in this experience became the seed and motivation for the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the congregation in August of 2007. In studying the history of the congregation in Confirmation Class, the date was noticed and seeds began to be planted. The author then participated with a committee to

plan a weekend celebration, vespers and a worship service that celebrated the Story of the congregation, including horse drawn wagon rides, old-fashioned games, archival displays and an updated history of the congregation. The Story was also celebrated through liturgy, song, and included the German heritage. Former pastors, members who had moved from the area, family, friends and neighbors joined several hundred others in honoring, remembering and celebrating the stories of the congregation, denomination, and individuals who had faithfully and sacrificially followed Jesus Christ on their journey with the Parkview Family. As the Stories of the past were remembered, so also were the eyes of the congregation turned toward the future, and the new Stories to be written by God for and through the people of Parkview.

The most meaningful aspect of the Confirmation Class to many of the youth, especially in the 2006 class, became the time in the prayer room, as the author learned to lead the youth into the sacred space, to calm herself down, to allow God to be God, to be a more of a leader and less of a teacher. This moved the author out of her comfort zone, out of her leadership style. She was motivated not only by this AOM, but also by the research, then by the youth themselves as they began to find comfort in this place, to calm down, to share their prayer requests, to respond to God through the prayer tools, to share their experiences of Holy Listening, and to pursue their spiritual journeys. The author became a better listener in her own small group and a better listener at home. As she became more familiar with contemplative prayer, she became aware of attitudes and interactions that previously were ignored. As the teens looked for the image of God around them, the author grew in Holy Listening also, seeing the image of God in unexpected places, biting her tongue when it wanted to leap into the middle of a

conversation, hearing more layers underneath than words actually verbalized. Trained in the model of music teacher, under the leadership of orchestra directors, she became more open to losing control rather than gaining it, to be open to watching God work in different lives in a multitude of ways, and of giving up expectations of models of the past.

Questions that surfaced a few times among the Context Associates, and were pondered by the author, revolved around the understanding of salvation that was received by those in the Confirmation Classes. Were they truly confirming their baptism? Were they making their parents happy? Were they offered a plan of salvation? This was a context of a mainline church with an evangelical heritage and a large Emmaus community. The pastor during the first class used primarily language that would communicate the gospel to an unchurched audience. The pastor during the second class was firmly grounded in United Methodism. Discussions concerning salvation during the classes and devotional time included Wesley's house, with prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace described in terms that teens would understand. The stories of Holy Week, Ascension and Pentecost were studied and woven through the material. The youth reflected on their relationship and position with Jesus as they wrote about the swimming pool picture mentioned earlier.

BBSN is compatible with a wide spectrum of theology, but not with theology and attitudes of fear or judgment. BBSN is used at First Steps with hurting children and teens of all faiths and denominations. It is based on the understanding that we are created in the image of God, that children and youth are innately connected to God and have meaningful, valid spiritual experience, and that God loves and blesses them. BBSN does not deny that sin and evil exist, and that we all display attitudes and actions that are less

than high on the list of God's design for us. BBSN does affirm that God walks with us through both the good and bad, and gives strength to those who are victims in difficult situations.

Where and how can BBSN and contemplative prayer fit in a typical youth ministry? The full picture of youth ministry is not in the scope of this paper, but the author's key word for decades has been "balance"—balance between personal devotion, worship, service, fellowship, study and discussion. By necessity fund-raising was also included, which usually also qualified as fellowship. Some youth leaders, especially untrained volunteers, are less comfortable with the devotional element of youth ministry. The altar, candle, and introductory prayer forms as used in this AOM provided a frame for inviting God, for slowing down, for beginning to listen, for growing into non-threatening ways to pray. (The "what am I going to say when it is my turn" fear of many youth in a prayer circle has contributed to quite a few sweaty palms.) BBSN in this context would be a secure introduction to move a group into the use of contemplative prayer over a period of time if the leaders and youth were so inclined. The significance of a space of quiet and listening for young people has been discussed earlier in this paper.

The use of BBSN and contemplative prayer also provides the opportunity to reach youth who by nature have quieter personalities, who have deeper questions, who may have chaos at home or problems they need space to ponder. The lives of teens today are filled with activity, but often little time to quiet the spirit. Some of these come to a church looking for spiritual answers, for a place to be heard (adult Holy Listening). In these Confirmation Classes, few of the youth who responded to the quiet room were involved in the youth group beyond Sunday mornings, some because they were uncomfortable

with the larger group. Quiet, shy, often intelligent teens may fall through the cracks of a large active youth program. BBSN can help feed their souls.

BBSN in these Confirmation Classes was not only the candle and prayer around the altar, but developed into a frame of reference, a shared vocabulary. In an environment built on a sense of blessing and being loved by God, the youth identified times of being close to God, looked for the image of God in others, and also processed their own moral detoxification in their Milestones as they identified and reflected on parts of their own lives that both separated and brought them close to God. The emphases on grace, on Holy Listening, on all people being made in the image of God, gave opportunity to soften their treatment of each other, to grow into a safer, more secure group, to develop qualities of a more Christ-like nature. The concept of Story as it was woven throughout the personal, congregational, biblical, and historical material became a unifying thread within the group, also a vocabulary and foundation for learning and life experiences. These underlying principles and vocabularies could easily be carried into other youth experiences in a congregation to give continuity and integration of the spiritual journeys of both individuals and of groups.

What is the replicability of this model? This AOM was in a church that had minimal history of contemplative prayer. Spoken prayer was an important part of the children's ministry and of a few small groups. The previous prayer experience of the youth in Sunday School and the youth group was not known. The low ratio of youth attendance in the worship hour was previously discussed. The members of the classes were diverse in their past experience in church and Sunday School attendance, and in the role that faith had in their families. The model did not include previous experience with

BBSN by the youth or the Context Associates. The author was introduced to contemplative prayer through the BBSN cohort group, and was learning also.

Even with little background on the part of both the youth and the leader, the BBSN principles were a significant contribution to the overall confirmation experience. This context conveniently had two adjacent youth rooms, so one could be set aside for prayer and listening. For a context with only one room available, this could be achieved by removing all items except Bibles from the table, laying a tablecloth or small cloth in the center under the candle, and laying the altar items out. With the lighting of the candle and a calming attitude and verbal cues by the leader, the area could then become a holy space, a place to meet with God.

The Context Associates who rotated as participating adults in the classes agreed with the author that of all the various elements of the class, that the Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture was the part of the experience that probably left the most lasting impression on the youth. The prayer room, the Holy Listening, the concept of the image of God, and the altar seemed to connect them to God and to each other. The memorization of the books of the Bible, the improved familiarity with the Bible, and the familiarity with the Apostle's Creed strengthened the foundation of their faith. They will probably remember fragments of the discussions, some of which will be seeds for later germination. They have been exposed to more stories of the church and narratives of scripture.

The youth in this AOM were encouraged to intentionally listen to persons in their life, and to look for the image of God in unexpected places. They identified times when they experienced being deeply heard, and times when they spoke and no one listened.

They understood the power of Holy Listening, and began to use it as a Spiritual Practice. As they experienced Holy Listening through both being heard and intentional listening, they grew in their awareness of the feelings of others, in the quality of their relationships, in awareness of others in contrast to self. As they looked for the image of God in the people in their lives, looking at others as beloved children of God as they are themselves, they became more aware of the presence of God as they went through their daily routines. As a spiritual discipline or practice, it was a way for teens to put themselves in a place to meet God and to be used by God for others.

With greater understanding, they confidently confirmed their baptism. They understood this to be an important milestone on a lifelong journey, and now have more prayer tools with which to connect to God, more friends in their church community, and a glimpse of the historical and traditional roots on which their congregation rests. They know, not just intellectually, that God created them, God loves them, and God blesses them as they move on through their own Story with God.

**APPENDIX A**  
**PERMISSION FORMS**

Research Project Congregational Consent Form

\*\*\*\*\*

Title of Act of Ministry: BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE: HOLY LISTENING IN PRAYER, SCRIPTURE, STORY AND PEOPLE AS A FOUNDATION FOR CONFIRMATION

Researcher: Barbara D. Van Doren, M.A.R.E.  
Doctor of Minister candidate at United Theological Seminary Trotwood, OH

Site: Parkview United Methodist Church

Location (city and state): Miamisburg, Ohio

\*\*\*\*\*

The following information is provided to explain this research act of ministry. Please read this form carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have about this form, the research, or the information given. All questions will be answered.

Permission was granted for the spring class of 2006 by Rev. David Ziegel. Permission for the fall class of 2006-7 was granted by Rev. Brad Martin. Individual permission forms were signed by all youth and their parents before the classes began. You may request to read the rough draft of the dissertation before its final submission.

.....

INFORMATION ABOUT THE RESEARCH ACT OF MINISTRY

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is based on the belief that God has given children and teens an innate ability to know and love God. This is the quality that needs to be nurtured from birth onward by the faith community. Good spiritual formation during the earliest years of a child’s life is the basis for a positive spiritual journey as they mature. Members of our cohort group have done their research projects with infants (12 to 24 months), preschool, elementary aged children, youth, hurting children and teens, adult membership classes, and grief support. I have done Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture with teens in our confirmation classes. BBSN principles also include Sabbath, sacred space, various forms of contemplative prayer in addition to the more familiar verbal prayers, accompaniment – being with, hospitality, Holy Listening, Story, and Blessing: the understanding that everyone is created in the image of God by God, is loved by God, and blessed by God.

Included with the normal confirmation curriculum of Bible, denominational and Christian heritage, and especially understanding of baptism and the core of the Christian faith, the purpose of BBSN in confirmation was to encourage the confirmands in their own spiritual experiences as we made sacred space with a candle and altar, and intentionally listened to God in prayer, through Scripture, and to the image of God in the people we

encountered in daily life. Confirmands listened to the faith stories of individuals from the congregation as they moved through a milestone in their own faith journeys.

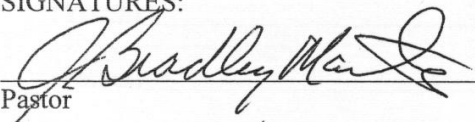
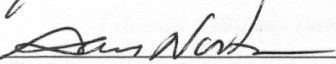
Short surveys, 'Milestone' papers, were completed each week by the confirmands, in addition to initial information, faith journey papers, and reflective papers at the end. Some of the classes were recorded. Several members of the congregation who are acting as Context Associates with me in this program participated in the classes, took notes, and made observations. This is the material that will be studied for the research Act of Ministry, the results to be included in the final dissertation.

The results of this research will add to the growing body of research and literature, not only on BBSN, but also on what is now being called Contemplative Youth Ministry, a congregational approach to introducing and nurturing youth in living the Christian life. Contemplative Youth Ministry, as studied and published by Mark Yaconelli and the Youth Ministry and Spirituality Project, is based on the same principles as Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture.

Anonymity will be maintained in the final document with the use of coded names in the final published dissertation. The church will be identified only if permission to do so is granted by the pastor and administrative board.

\*\*\*\*\*  
We have read this consent form, understand the procedures that have been used. With the understanding that individual participants were informed of and gave permission for this study, that the privacy of individual youth will be maintained and that the congregation may see the draft before publication, we consent to our congregation's participation in this research act of ministry.

SIGNATURES:

|   |         |
|---|---------|
|  | 6-10-07 |
| Pastor  | Date    |
|  | 6-10-07 |
| Chairperson, Administrative Council   | Date    |

To Confirmation Youth and Parents:

The leadership of this Confirmation Class is in partial fulfillment of my D.Min. degree work at United Theological Seminary. The focus of the degree is Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, with emphasis on children and youth. BBSN reminds us of our position of blessing from God, from birth, as His creation. This will be expressed in Confirmation through Sacred Space (an altar we will develop), Holy Listening, a variety of prayer experiences, and Story – when you affirm your baptism and join the church, you are a part of your own person faith story, the story of your congregation, denomination, Christian history, and Scripture. Part of my D.Min. dissertation will include descriptions, observations and what I learned about BBSN and youth from teaching Confirmation. For this purpose, and with your permission, I will keep copies of their handouts and responses during the year to collect information to study. Some of the classes may also be recorded for this purpose.

I would appreciate permission to collect this information, and to use some of your responses and comments in my D.Min. dissertation. Would you please fill out this form and return it to class on October 8<sup>th</sup>?

Sincerely,  
Barb Van Doren

*Yes, I give permission for my (youth's) responses to be collected.* \_\_\_\_\_

*Yes, I give permission for my (youth's) ideas and responses to be used in your D.Min. paper:*

Using my first name \_\_\_\_\_

Anonymously \_\_\_\_\_

Using pseudonym \_\_\_\_\_

Signed  
(Youth) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

(Parent) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

*No, I do not want my (youth's) responses to be collected.* \_\_\_\_\_

*No, I prefer my (youth's) ideas and responses not be used in your D.Min. paper* \_\_\_\_\_

Signed  
(Youth) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

(Parent) \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX B**  
**RESEARCH:**  
**SAMPLE OF MILESTONE QUESTIONS**

## SAMPLE MILESTONE QUESTIONS

Holy Listening during the past week . . .

The time this week that I felt closest to God was . . .

Someone to whom I really listened since the last class was...

I really noticed someone listening to me when...

I noticed listening NOT happening when...

Some times these two weeks when I spent time with God...

I felt God's presence most when...

This week I listened intentionally to...

A time when I was aware of the image of God in another person was...

A time when I was aware of the image of God in myself was...

A time when Jesus worked through me to help someone else was...

A time when Jesus worked through someone else to help me was...

A time in the past week I felt farthest from God was...

Did my availability to Jesus affect or change any of my behavior or attitudes in the past week?

**APPENDIX C**  
**CONFIRMATION LITURGY, 2006 CLASS**

## CONFIRMATION LITURGY

*(One person lights candles while another reads;  
readers place item on altar, then read.)*

1) The flame of the candle on the altar represents the presence of God in our midst. It sets aside a Sacred Space for the purpose of meeting with God. The flame reminds us of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, that God might be active in us and through us.

2) The Bible tied as a weight on a plumb line reminds us that Scripture is our source of guidance in building our life straight and strong. The Old Testament prophet Amos had a vision in which the Lord told him:

"Look, I am setting a plumb line among my people Israel."

For those of us who Claim the Name "Christian," the life and teachings of Jesus become the plumb line from which we learn and build our lives.

3) The Jewish prayer shawl on the altar reminds us of the heritage we have in the Old Testament. It reminds us that Jesus was a Jew. When we wear the prayer shawl to read scripture and pray, it wraps us up in Sacred Space, as God's arms wrap around us in love.

4) The bottle of glue reminds us that Jesus holds all things together. He is the glue that keeps life together when we feel like it is falling apart. Colossians 1 tells us:

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. . . .

<sup>17</sup> He is before all things, and *in him all things hold together*.

5) The puppy on our altar has big ears, to remind us that God calls us to Holy Listening – deep, intentional, God-channeled listening. Genesis 1 tells us that we are made in the image of God. Holy Listening is respecting and offering God's love to that image in other people. Holy Listening is open to hearing the story of others, to listening to God in prayer, and to hearing God speak through Scripture.

6) The gift box on the altar reminds us of the gift of God's grace, love and forgiveness, given through His son Jesus Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. The box is empty, reminding us that we can *do* nothing to earn this gift. Our part in God's story is to receive the gift, accept the gift, open the box and receive God's presence, love, and guidance into our lives, to make our story a part of God's story.

*(Reader places pair of shoes in front of the altar, then reads as the rest of the class place their shoes in front of altar and move to steps.)*

7) In front of the altar we each place a pair of our own shoes. We understand that to confirm our baptism is not only to believe, but to move on to “walk the talk,” to live our lives as best we can to reflect the teachings of Jesus and of Scripture; to be the hands, feet, voice, ears and heart of Jesus to the people around us.

*(Class lined across front on steps, in front of choir mics)*

- 1) Every one of us has a story, the story of our own journey.
- 2) As we confirm our baptismal vows, we enter more fully into the story of the congregation of Parkview United Methodist Church.
- 3) We enter into the story of the Evangelical United Brethren Church
- 4) We enter into the story of the United Methodist Church
- 5) We enter into the story of Protestantism.
- 6) We enter into the story of Christianity.
- 7) We enter into the story of Judaism.
- 8) We enter into the story of Scripture.
- 9) *Everyone* has a story.
- 8) Jesus could see the story inside each person.
- 7) Jesus loved each person within their own story.
- 1) God calls us to Holy Listening – to the heart of the stories.
- 6) God seeks to bring each person into the Story of God.
- 1) We are called to Holy Listening – to listen deeply to God through prayer and Scripture.
- 5) We are called to move our Story to become more and more *God’s* Story as we move through life.
- 4) God blesses *us* so that the joining of our Story and God’s Story can be a blessing to *others*, and become a part of their Story.

**APPENDIX D**

**LIST OF BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE DISSERTATIONS**

**LIST OF BLESSING BASED SPIRITUAL NURTURE DISSERTATIONS**

United Theological Seminary, Trotwood, Ohio

December 2007

Valerie Hobby Bell: "Membership Matters: Deepening the Experience With God and One Another Through New Member Classes."

Valerie Helen Berry Conzett: "Hope Cottage Companions: Small Group Support for Grieving Adults Based Upon the Practices of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and the Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church."

Arlys A. Mindt Fogt: "Worshiping with Children: The Body of Christ Living Our Theology."

Leanne Ciampa Hadley: "Spiritual Support: A Pastoral Care Model for Children and Teens in Trauma."

Cara E. Koch: "Fostering Spirituality in Three and Four Year Old Children in a Sunday School Classroom with a Team of Grandfathers using Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture."

Jacqueline J. Nowak: "Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Through a Children's Chapel Program."

Charlotte S. Teel: "Spirituality in the Church Nursery: Toddler, Family and Church Family."

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Books

- Adair, Sharon. *Big Differences: How to Deal with Youth of Various Ages*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Anthony, Michael J. *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation: Four Views*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2006.
- Barna, George. *Real Teens: A Contemporary Snapshot of Youth Culture*. Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2001.
- Barton, Ruth. *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God's Transforming Presence*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Bass, Dorothy C. ed. *Practicing Our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Bass, Dorothy C. and Don C. Richter, eds. *Way to Live: Christian Practices for Teens*. Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 2002.
- Beckwith, Ivy. *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004.
- Berryman, Jerome. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1995.
- Berryman, Jerome. *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991.
- Boomershine, Thomas E. *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis*. Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_, William C. Placher and Brian K. Blount. *Struggling with Scripture*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

- Campbell, Ted A. *Methodist Doctrine: The Essentials*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999.
- Carter, Kenneth H., Jr. *A Way of Life in the World: Spiritual Practices for United Methodists*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004.
- Crain, W. C. *Theories of Development*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 2004.
- Dean, Kenda Creasy and Ron Foster. *The Godbearing Life: The Art of Soul Tending for Youth Ministry*. Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Practicing Passion: Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004.
- Driskill, Joseph D. *Protestant Spiritual Exercises: Theology, History and Practice*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1999.
- Felton, Gayle Carlton. *By Water and the Spirit: Making Connections for Identity and Ministry Study Guide*. Nashville, TN: Discipleship Resources, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *This Gift of Water: The Practice and Theology of Baptism Among Methodists in America*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1992.
- Forest, Jim. *Praying with Icons*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.
- Foster, Richard J. *Celebration of Discipline: the Path to Spiritual Growth*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Streams of Living Water: Celebrating the Great Traditions of Christian Faith*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Fowler, James W. *Faithful Change: The Personal and Public Challenges of Postmodern Life*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995.
- Gentz, William H. ed. *The Dictionary of Bible and Religion*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986.
- Gooch, John O. *Claiming the Name: A Theological and Practical Overview of Confirmation*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2000.

- Grenz, Stanley J. *Theology for the Community of God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.
- Guenther, Margaret. *Holy Listening: The Art of Spiritual Direction*. Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1992.
- Hadley, Leanne Ciampa. *The Holy Listening Method Training Course*. Colorado Springs, CO: First Steps, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Spiritual Support: A Pastoral Care Model for Children and Teens in Trauma." D.Min. diss., United Theological Seminary, 2007.
- Hattersley, Roy. *The Life of John Wesley: A Brand from the Burning*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- Hay, David with Rebecca Nye. *The Spirit of the Child*. London: Fount, 1998.
- Heitzenrater, Richard P. *Wesley and the People Called Methodists*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1995.
- Heschel, Abraham Joshua. *The Sabbath*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1951.
- Jackson, Cari. *The Gift to Listen, The Courage to Hear*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2003.
- Jones, Tony. *Divine Intervention: Encountering God through the Ancient Practice of Lectio Divina*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2006.
- Jones, Tony. *Postmodern Youth Ministry: Exploring Cultural Shift, Cultivating Authentic Community, and Creating Holistic Connections*. Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Sacred Way: Spiritual Practices for Everyday Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Soul Shaper: Exploring Spirituality and Contemplative Practices in Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties, 2003.
- Joyner, F. Belton. *Being Methodist in the Bible Belt: A Theological Survival Guide For Youth, Parents, and Other Confused Methodists*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004.

- King, Mike. *Presence-Centered Youth Ministry: Guiding Students into Spiritual Formation*. Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- Lawrence, Brother. *Practicing the Presence of God with Spiritual Maxims*. Grand Rapids, MI: Spire Books, 1999.
- L'Engle, Madeleine with Carole F. Chase. *Glimpses of Grace*. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Rock That is Higher: Story as Truth*. Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 1993.
- Lindahl, Kay. *The Sacred Art of Listening: Forty Reflections for Cultivating a Spiritual Practice*. Woodstock, VT.: Skylight Paths, 2002.
- Lockyer, Herbert, ed. *Illustrated Dictionary of the Bible*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1986.
- MacBeth, Sybil. *Praying in Color: Drawing a New Path to God*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007.
- Merton, Thomas. *Contemplative Prayer*. New York: Doubleday, 1996.
- Middleton, J. Richard. *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1*. Grand Rapids MI: Brazos Press, 2005.
- Miles, Margaret R. *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Miller, Mark. *Experiential Storytelling: (Re)Discovering Narrative to Communicate God's Message*. Grand Rapids, MI: Emergent YS, 2003.
- Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Secular World*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Encounters with Merton: Spiritual Reflections*. New York: Crossroad, 2004.
- Osmer, Richard Robert. *Confirmation: Presbyterian Practices in Ecumenical Perspective*. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 1996.
- Pennington, M. Basil. *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures*. New York: Crossroads, 1998.

- Peterson, Eugene H. *Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006.
- Richland College, Psychology 2301. Adapted from Woolfolk & McCune-Nicolich. *Educational Psychology for Teachers*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1984.
- Robbins, Maggie and Duffy Robbins. *Enjoy the Silence: A 30 Day Experiment in Listening to God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Youth Specialties Products, 2005.
- Rogers, Donald and Jacqueline Nowak. *The Blessing Center: Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture Certification Course*. Dayton, OH, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In Praise of Learning*. Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 1980; reprint, Dayton, OH: United Theological Seminary, 2007.
- Shippey, Robert C. Jr. *Listening in a Loud World: Toward a Theology of Meaning*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005.
- Smith, Christian. *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.
- Stonehouse, Catherine. *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998.
- Talbot, John Michael and Steve Rabey. *The Way of the Mystics: Ancient Wisdom for Experiencing God Today*. Hoboken, NJ: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- United Methodist Hymnal*. Nashville, TN: United Methodist Publishing House, 1989.
- Vennard, Jane E. *A Praying Congregation*. Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2005.
- Wainwright, Geoffrey and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker. *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Webber, Robert E. *The Younger Evangelicals: Facing the Challenges of the New World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2002.
- Westerhoff, John H., III. *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Will Our Children Have Faith?* Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2000.

Willimon, William H. *Why I Am a United Methodist*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1990.

Wilson, Len and Jason Moore. *Digital Storytellers: The Art of Communicating the Gospel in Worship*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002.

Wright, N. T. *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture*. New York: HarperCollins Press, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. *What Saint Paul Really Said: Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder Of Christianity?* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997.

Yaconelli, Mark. *Contemplative Youth Ministry: Practicing the Presence of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Growing Souls: Experiments in Contemplative Youth Ministry*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007.

Yaconelli, Mike. *The Core Realities of Youth Ministry: Nine Biblical Principles that Mark Healthy Youth Ministries*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.

Yust, Karen Marie. *Real Kids, Real Faith: Practices for Nurturing Children's Spiritual Lives*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

Zinkiewicz, Crystal A., ed. *Claim the Name: Confirmation Teaching Plans for 6-15 Weeks*. Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. ed. *Claim the Name Student Book*. Nashville, TN: Cokesbury, 2005.

### Online Sources

The ARTFL Project, "kythe," The ARTFL Project: The University of Chicago, n.d. <http://machaut.uchicago.edu/?action=search&word=Kythe&resource=Webster%27s&quicksearch=on> (accessed Oct 16, 2006).

Ateneo de Manila University. "kythe." Ateneo University: 2006. <http://www.admu.edu.ph/index.php?p=185> (accessed Oct 16, 2006).

The Blessing Center. "What is Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture?" The Blessing Center: 2007. [http://www.blessingcenter.org/what\\_is\\_blessing\\_bsn.htm](http://www.blessingcenter.org/what_is_blessing_bsn.htm) (accessed June 2, 2006).