

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

General comments

Throughout the process of interviewing it was apparent that the respondents had often consciously contemplated the importance of their experiences. They had no difficulty reflecting on the influences of adults in the growth of their faith. Few of the questions and issues were new to them. This is not to say that they always had clear answers. Occasionally they appeared somewhat inconsistent in their thinking. There were issues on which they had not developed a well defined opinion and some experiences which they hadn't finished working through yet. Of those their sentiments were more a search for answers than the answers themselves.

Figure two illustrates the amount of times references were made to the various sources of influence. It gives an indication about the frequency at which sources and areas received attention. It is important to qualify that these numbers give no indication about the nature of the references. Positive and negative comments are tabulated together without distinction.

	Parents	Church leaders	Teachers	Others	Other influences	
Mind	16	54	7	4	9	90
Heart	28	36	13	20	20	117
Will	9	12	3	1	7	32
Whole person	25	19	9	5	3	61
	78	121	32	30	39	

figure 2

The respondents seemed to indicate that it was not exclusively the influence of

adults that lead them to make choices regarding their beliefs. They made some observations about influences that are not part of this study. It is worthwhile, however, to mention them here briefly to put the rest of there observations in proper context

A number of the respondents stated that they always had faith and that they never really doubted. Some expressed the belief that the development of a person's desire to join a youth group or church community cannot necessarily be traced to the influence of people but may be laid on their heart by God. They also listed peers and circumstances such as accidents as significant influences. One related the importance of a supernatural experience where anxious prayer during a drug high suddenly cleared his mind.

Support for the growth of faith seems to be strongly affected by the peers one keeps. A respondent reported that he, for a time, lost the faith and hung out with the wrong crowd. Over time he sought out the company of a Christian youth group in order to find peace for his heart. A number of respondents, mostly females, clarified the importance of good friends. They listed factors such as accountability, support, and helping each other understand things as matters of importance.

"She would be telling me what was going on in her life and I would just be encouraged and I would want that. And also my close friends, they have totally been an influence on my life where they would be encouraging me and keeping me accountable and just bring me to new levels, and just be there."

Belonging

The respondents indicated strongly and repeatedly that they needed to have a sense of belonging. They lamented situations that did not acknowledge them or made them feel that they only belonged to the youth group and that the adult church had nothing to offer them. They wanted to belong to the whole community. "I think one thing is just identifying yourself as a part of a congregation and seeing every Sunday just the

whole community together - just so many people together praising God, that helps a lot.” They enjoyed being involved in youth activities and wondered why they could not be involved in the general church activities.

Some respondents felt that it didn’t matter so much if they couldn’t understand all of the sermon content as long as they liked the pastor. “It is the people that make the whole difference, not necessarily the pastor preaching but his ability to relate to you.” They explained that they first needed to feel that they belonged to the community before they could start studying the doctrine and theology in greater detail. At a young age it was the relationships, not the teaching, that confirmed their place in that community.

Respondents with experiences in large congregations complained about the problem of estrangement. They hinted at parallels between an uncaring or unconfirming attitude of church people with an presumed uncaring or unconfirming attitude of the God of these church people. They expressed that, as children and young people, they desired the relationships with peers and adults in order to feel included and embraced. They described this as a condition for the development of a relationship with God.

Various respondents emphasized that a sense of belonging developed when young people were given certain responsibilities in the church activities. They explained that the sense of belonging was enhanced when they experienced caring and confirming friendships.

Mind, heart and will.

The respondents gave much thought to the significance of head knowledge, attitudes and emotions of the heart, and willed commitment. They did much comparing of those elements but hadn’t always figured out exactly what role the mind, the heart, and the will played in the development of their faith. They did express some strong

sentiments that can help us get some general understanding.

Intense emphasis on mind and academic knowledge in sermons had many respondents tune out. They explained that it developed an attitude in them that, since they couldn't understand it and adults could, it was intended for adults only. This reinforced the feeling that they didn't belong, that they didn't measure up for the important stuff. These respondents explain that, as kids they concluded there was no need to care about the stuff that adults considered important.

The respondents seemed to share a sentiment that too much one-sided emphasis on knowledge or on feelings prevented them from putting it all together. When knowledge, attitudes, emotions, and commitment came together they could suddenly see the integrity and wholeness of it all. Things clicked together, they made sense and just seemed right. It was then that the whole person was engaged and changed.

Some respondents who spent enjoyable years in children's groups complained that the transition to young groups and adult church was really hard. In their experience these groups were so different from each other that there was little connection. Children's group involvement did not require much commitment (will) and not a lot of knowledge. Youth and adult activities attempted much more to address the whole person but they often over-emphasized knowledge and commitment (mind) at the cost of attention to relationship building that acknowledges hopes and fears and insecurities (heart). This switch was a very difficult thing for them.

"It was hard for me to get into because you don't know anyone at first. A lot of kids feel like that, that they can't get in so they just don't bother going. I think that is something that I struggled with, not being able to get involved when I should have been."

A number of respondents reported that only during adolescents, when conscious decisions and commitments were made, did they begin to thirst for a depth of

knowledge. Up to that time their focus was more on relationships, emotions and attitudes. One respondent described a personal journey which, during childhood, focused on relationships with God and Christian friends but, during adolescence, switched to greater interest in knowledge and understanding.

A respondent who grew up within a contemporary non-traditional church culture explained that his feelings and attitudes were very well addressed while he was still a young child. When he became a young adolescent the community shifted to heavy knowledge expectations at cost of emphasis on matters of the heart.

A number of respondents from the more traditional church communities reported frustration and confusion over mixed messages adults were sending them at a time when the young people needed to decide on faith commitments. The young people's focus was on the state of their heart. It was a deep found heart commitment, a love and trust and confidence that motivated their desire to confess their faith publicly and seek confirmation as a committed member of the church community. Yet, they found that many of the adults around them seemed to worry more about their knowledge of the church doctrine and the state of their mind.

A few respondents related experiences during which their beliefs were tested in university settings where very opposing views were promoted. They described that, in a situation of serious opposition to their personally held beliefs it was first their feelings that were offended, regardless of whether the challenge could be met with satisfactory knowledge that could stand up against it. The heart seemed to speak before the mind. As committed believers they were willing to admit that there are certain things they could not fully understand with the head, yet they did accept them with the heart.

The respondents who had experienced academic challenges to their faiths reflected on the significance of knowledge and heart commitment. If the accuracy of certain

knowledge on which the belief was founded was challenged, the young person still held on to the belief if she has a context of heart commitment and modeling by people of integrity. If the belief rested on knowledge only, the faith could be greatly shaken or lost when it came under serious scrutiny. “I went to university armed but not prepared, if that makes any sense. I had been trained with Biblical knowledge but it hadn’t been put to the test.”

The respondents who had some experience with leadership expectations felt that receiving responsibilities required an integration of head knowledge, beliefs, opinions, emotions, and actions. Taking leadership responsibilities required and enhanced growth toward becoming a whole person. “It is one thing to know but it is another thing to know and apply it to your life and abide by it. As a Christian that is what you are supposed to be doing.”

Authentic People.

“A good example is more convincing than many sermons.”

All respondents indicated with great clarity that significant adults who had a lot of influence on their faith development were thought of as authentic people; their mind, heart and will were united and consistently integrated. These adults were seen as people of integrity because they presented their values in an internally consistent manner. Their beliefs appeared credible and valid because their whole lives, guided by those beliefs, had great validity. The children who observed this sensed the desirability of such a unity of thought and action. They identified with it and sought to emulate the example.

The respondents who grew up within a Christian home indicated that, as children, they accepted their parents’ beliefs and morals because those beliefs seemed to make

sense to them. The children observed the parents and saw a consistency and truthfulness about the way in which words and deeds matched. Having established this view at a young age they didn't further question it till their teen age years when they began to develop a sense of their own identity separate from that of their parents.

The respondents who contributed their conversion largely to the modeling of their parents listed such influences as consistent church attendance; modeling trust in God during times of conflicts such as financial troubles, work tensions and marital stress; love for God and for others; open communication about their beliefs; evident spirituality that is talked about and walked sincerely. These respondents explained that children and young adolescents watch their parents to assess the credibility of their parents' faith. They have a (subconscious) need to see confirmation that the talk holds together in the walk.

One respondent who's father had a very forming influence explained that the image that his father gave him of God made sense because the father himself appeared like a very credible person. Because father modeled fatherly caring and love so well a picture emerged of God as a very caring and loving Father. The respondent listed characteristics that he admired in his father. They included, love for wife and children, respect for other people, sound work ethic, prudent management of possessions, honesty, trustworthiness, a sincere relationship with God, and a willingness to help people in need. Another respondent listed similar characteristics in a parent, a church leader and a teacher who were the most formative people in his life.

Some reported that a lack of credibility and consistency in adults sometimes still had a positive effect. It served as a bad example which the child chose to reject. They already had a sense of direction regarding their faith which caused them to disassociate themselves from some adults which they found could not help them develop that faith.

“There was a lot of conflict going on in [my Christian] highschool... there was an awful lot of students against the teachers, you know, ... like some times you felt that a lot of the teachers were almost hypocritical in that they would say one thing and do another, you know what I mean. Or they would go back on their word and things like that, and that did not give a good example ... And, you know, I ended up disliking these people and not seeing them as a proper example just from the way that they treated myself and others that were close to me, so... say you saw those people sitting in church and you look at them and you think, ‘Well, I know how you act and you look like two people to me. You are sitting there and acting like the big Christian and yet I know how you act in your own life.’ It doesn't make me question my faith, no, it makes me question their faith.”

The respondents who talked about positive experiences with Christian teachers agreed that the influences of these adults were determined by their attitude of caring and confirmation. These teachers connected because they had the respect of the young person. It was a respect that was earned from treating the student with respect, honoring her for what she was and helping her along with her own needs. A respondent described one particular music teacher as ‘a whole Christian’ because his beliefs affected and directed all his daily actions and relationships. “He saw it as a chance to build people as people, not just as singers ... so I think his Christianity really came across in that way as sort of the holistic approach as opposed to the technical approach.”

Another respondent described a credible Christian teacher as a person who modeled his beliefs and was willing to go the extra mile to help the person, not just the student. He did not pick on people, he did not single anyone out but aimed to spare people personal embarrassment.

One respondent explained that, in spite of a rough time brought on by wrong decisions, he had a desire to hold on to the faith because of the time and care given by a youth leader and his wife. “I attribute part of my desire to stay with the faith to their time that they spent with me.”

The respondents generally agreed that conflicts in families, church and school are often obstacles to the growth of faith but that that depends on the manner in which these conflicts are handled. Some respondents were frustrated about church conflicts where people dealt with each other in manners inconsistent with their stated beliefs. The respondents who had experience with the conflicts of broken marriages agreed that parents' inability to live out of their beliefs caused great confusion. One child of divorced parents explained her struggle to develop a sound picture of God as a father by contrasting it to the weakness of her own father. Other respondents shared the experience where conflicts became positive times of learning and growth. An adult's willingness to stand corrected and admit error was seen as a sign of the authenticity of her faith. Parents, and other significant adults, who shared their own struggles and weaknesses were, reportedly, less likely considered to act hypocritically.

"I think a really important thing is that if they do falter or screw up or provide a bad example that they acknowledge that and explain to the child why that was a bad example and admit that it was a bad example. Don't try to cover it up or don't say, "You know I can say that swear word because I'm a parent", or "I do it this way but it doesn't mean you can do it this way." You know, just admit it. You know, ask the kid's forgiveness if you've hurt them."

Being Responsive

Various respondents suggested that they did not necessarily need a youth pastor or a pastor who is young but that they needed a pastor who was able to connect and relate. The young people themselves seemed to favour keeping a community together. They disliked segregation but they disliked being ignored even more.

"I think a pastor should be able to appeal to everybody, though I think that the whole message of the Bible is something that I think can apply to everybody. If there is a pastor up there preaching he should be able to apply it somehow and speak it to everybody, because there isn't just one certain generation there."

A number of the respondents from the traditional church communities felt that

traditional church services do not connect with young people. They indicated that they would have left their communities if it weren't for the contemporary services that were available in addition to the traditional ones. These respondents explained that a connection with children is only possible if language and instruments are used that are recognizable to the youth. "I don't know what the preacher thought when he was making these big speeches or anything, but if he thought he was making a big difference to our lives he was wrong." Other representatives for the traditional communities wouldn't be as out spoken but they also agreed that their church leaders can be much more inclusive and responsive.

The respondents seemed to share in a struggle with, what they perceive as, an undesirable separation of age groups. The respondents who grew up in church communities with contemporary worship services and much emphasis on youth groups and youth services felt estranged from the 'adult church'. They liked the approach by the youth pastors and group leaders but missed the connection with what the the community's adults did. Respondents who were from more traditional church communities lamented the lack of attention for youth because they found themselves continually in an 'adult church' that made no connection with the youth.

Methods of instruction.

All respondents expressed that the significant times of instruction were those when teaching and doctrine were made relevant for every day life. Many respondents agreed that successful leaders and pastors are those who have understood that what they teach has to be relevant. They have found ways of teaching doctrine etc. early and in a manner that makes it relevant, in order to prevent disconnection and boredom. Some contend that it may take some 'rote learning' and 'irrelevant teaching' to get to that

point. Others are very impatient with that and require the opposite approach; relevance first, and doctrinal instruction second.

Regarding instruction for children, most respondents seem to have favoured interactions that involved them actively and engaged them in discussions etc. as opposed to lectures on doctrine and theology. Those respondents who grew up within a faith community reported that effective instructors were those who frequently used narrations, anecdotes, craft activities, memorization games, having children make pictures that look for personal interpretations, use of pictures and other visual materials, and interactive teaching methods. The respondents considered these methods of instruction helpful for the development of their faith. Many indicated that the study methods they liked best were discussion groups, group projects, and writing.

“... He was teaching us again more applicable to your life, and also he just got a bit deeper into things - things that I hadn't learned before - so of course it was fascinating, right, and we did a lot of working in groups. We did group discussion and projects, and we had to write an essay - I remember that - the myths of Christianity, and we had to pick a myth and refute it which was great for us, I think, all of us because it really exercises your feeling of why we do things and what you could say to someone if they would be arguing, and that.”

Some of the respondents indicated that the traditions, rituals and routines of their community often seemed boring or meaningless but that they provided a sense of recognition, stability, and security that made it easier to feel belonging.

Summary

If a young child had the analytic ability she would likely describe the state of her faith in words such as these:

‘I accept that my parents’ view of the world is the correct view. I believe that their perception of reality corresponds with what reality really is, not because I can verify this, but because I trust my parents to be right about this. They are credible to me and

therefore I also believe their view of the world to be credible. I have received an inner confidence that this is so.'

The respondents indicated that, on the journey from early acceptance to a committed choice there are influences other than those of parents, church leaders, and teachers that impacted the development of their faith. Regarding the role of adults they reported that a number of things could either change or confirm their course. The sense of belonging and inclusiveness that a community gave them influences much of their emotional responses and attitudes. The matter of being engaged as a whole person, not just an cognitive, or an emotional being, was significant for them. Good relationships were mentioned repeatedly as one of the most pivotal factors. They explained the importance of authentic role models and a community that is responsive to them. They suggested methods of instruction and guidance that they experienced as particularly appropriate for children and youths.

These findings support what Fowler's said about faith development: "faith grows in the presence of relationships, language, ritual and symbol, in the context of community." He called faith a disposition because it deals with emotions and cognition. The concluding chapter will lay some insights from the literature besides the main findings of this research to formulate a description of the major influences associated with the development of a faith system in children.