CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Faith has been described as being sure of something that you hope for and being certain of things that you do not see. (Holy Bible, Hebrews 11:1) Fowler has called this a disposition because it deals with emotions and cognition. He observed that “faith grows in the presence of relationships, language, ritual and symbol, in the context of community.” The findings of the research bear this out. This concluding chapter looks at the main findings of the research to generalize some areas of adult influence on a child’s faith development. After considering the context of community it will focus on the relationships, communication, and experiences that nurture the developing dispositions.

Disposition

Faith nurture can be thought of as the careful tending to a growing tree. For healthy growth the tree needs a proper environment: light, air, food, space, etc. A poor environment arrests the growth of the tree. So it is with the nurturing of faith. Most of the authors and respondents mentioned in the previous chapters would express the belief that the moment of germination, the impulse to bring to life what formerly was not there, is a mystery outside of the control and influence of the significant adults. Nevertheless, once the seed has sprouted it needs nourishment and care. That is what the research question focused on. What is the supportive role of the gardener, how does she best water and feed and prune? The nurturing process works differently for every person. It works sometimes because of, and sometimes in spite of significant adults. There seems to be agreement that the nurturer needs to see the work as a holistic effort, one that does not separate the significance of mind, heart, and will (figure 9). Over-emphasis of either at cost of the other at inappropriate times does harm to the integrity of the message. Faith nurturing has to pay attention to all of the parts of the person’s being:

the feelings of the child toward his God; the child's personality; his knowledge and insight in matters of the faith; his potential and his abilities.

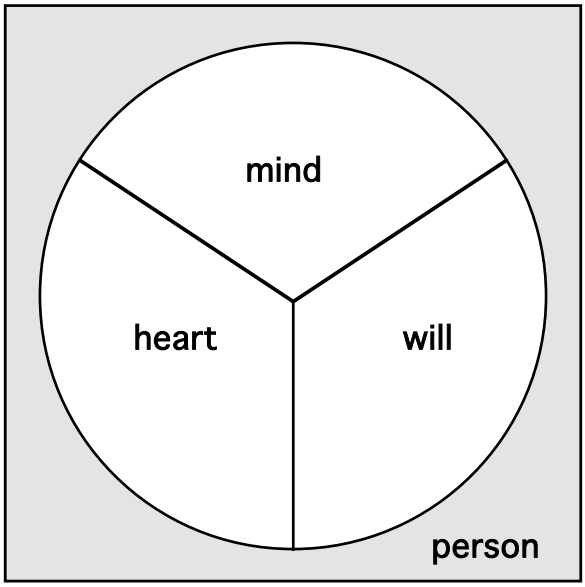

Figure 3

I believe that an important condition to finding the right balance is a responsive approach to the child. Awareness on the part of the adult of the manner in which faith generally develops needs to guide the choice of appropriate methods and nurturing styles. Fowler, Westerhoff and others indicate strongly that adults must pay close attention to what characterizes the child at each stage of his life. We have to realize, for example, that people often favour certain beliefs and views on emotional grounds before they begin to acquire the cognitive awareness that would either support of reject those beliefs. In the case of little children it is therefore very valid to focus on the emotional sense of belonging and enhance that with knowledge over the years.

Consistent over-emphasis on knowledge, especially at a young age, appears to be counter productive. Emphasis on matters of the mind beyond the capabilities of the hearers develops a sense of exclusion and confusion. Because it makes it hard for

children to put knowledge and feelings together in a wholesome manner it keeps from them the joyful discovery of the integrity of the faith experience. A responsive approach should acknowledge that the younger child needs to develop a sense of belonging based on affirming relationships and emotions. The emotional commitment must be developed as a foundation for the reasoned commitment that comes from knowledge. The young child requires knowledge to the extent that it will help to develop the emotional affiliation.

When the child is ready to comprehend doctrine at greater depth the connection with the heart should not be broken. The emotions continue to need engagement and involvement. Knowledge has emotional components without which it looses much of its meaning. Separation of knowledge and emotion readily results in a tendency toward legalism, eroding the significance of the knowledge that is acquired.

When a child or young adult begins to accept certain beliefs and values, his emotional and cognitive commitment should be equally strong. The child's conscious decision to hold onto the example modeled by the respected adult is initially based on emotional attachment. If it is not validated by cognitive instruction the commitment will flounder when the child reaches the stage of critical assessment. Tripp (1995) writes that a change of behaviour requires 'heart surgery' to change the motives that guide the behaviour.

Community

The community in which a child grows up is the only world it knows. It defines the child's identity and provides his security. Every aspect of his development is to be understood from its communal context. It is therefore important that the faith community indicates to the child that he is wanted and included. At a younger age a child will not consciously question his inclusion but during early adolescence the need to sense confirmation becomes very strong. An inclusive community will be sensitive to this by removing obstacles that would exclude the child and presenting challenges that will include him. The research respondents and the literature indicate strongly that exclusion is mostly felt in matters of custom, style, dress, music and church liturgy as well as in rules and customs that seem to devaluate the place of the child in the community. Inclusion is mainly experienced through confirming friendships and involvement in community activities.

Relationships within a community are so important to children because they function as the mirror that helps them see who they are. It is through the feedback of relationships that children develop their own identity. Relationships between young people and adults can strain when community rules and expectations are perceived to aim at control and confinement of children rather than at aiding their growth.

Good communication within a community is a means for developing unity of thought and action. An inclusive community is sensitive about the inevitable language gap between young and old. It understands the urgency for adults and children to communicate in the same language. Being media savvy and aware of the elements of youth culture and peer pressure is a communal effort. The use of narratives, metaphors and word pictures brings meaning and depth to communally held beliefs and values.

Shared, communal experiences shape the child's understanding of the world.

They are growth opportunities from which the children should not be excluded. Faith communities easily tend to focus on adult issues and activities that are most appropriately tended to by adults. Children who are routinely relegated to the the role of observers rather than participants easily become estranged from the community that raises them. When children feel ignored the community looses a powerful connection that could otherwise be harnessed for the nurture of faith. Stronks (1995) lists things such as service activities, involvement in regular home, school and church activities, and age appropriate instruction as matters that are a priority in an inclusive community.

Relationships

Relationships have emotional, cognitive and volitional components. The relationships with God, with others and with self all appear to have great significance in the development of a child's faith. Peterson (1994) argues that the most significant growing up a person does is growing up in God. All other growing up is in assistance to this. Biological, social, mental, emotional growth is all meant to be put in service to growing in God. The respondents' desire for a holistic approach to nurture seems to support that view.

Emotions

Just like love for a person is both an emotional, cognitive and volitional attachment and trust in a person, so a religious faith is a trust relationship. The emotional aspect comes out strongly in the child's longing to belong. Confirming relationships with significant adults reflect that message of being wanted and belonging. Modeling is one of the prime vehicles that relays that message. A father's modeling of fatherly caring and love creates a picture of God as a caring and loving Father. This relationship is an emotional confirmation that the cognitive view of God is correct.

A growing child is not able to consider his own identity separate from parents and significant adults in the community. During adolescence he needs to go through a change of relationships, a distancing of self from the significant adults in order to define himself as a independent person in his own right. Responsive adults need to understand the necessity of this relational change and the stress that it brings. It can cause strained relationships and tensions that frustrate and confuse all involved. The pressures of peers and popular culture to conform to the identity they present often add to the confusion. The quality of the new relationships depends a lot on the earnestness of the former ones.

Cognition

The respondents who described the academic challenges to their faith understood that there might be certain things they could not fully understand with the head, yet they would accept them with the heart. Children often make cognitive choices to accept certain adults' values if they have accepted those adult as credible, believable people. That positive relationship gives them the confidence to embrace a view that they may not yet fully understand.

The adult can not rely on the authority of her position alone to reach the heart and mind of the child. The child may cognitively accept that the adult is indeed due respect, but in the absence of real respect based on integrity and trust it will be hard to develop a relationship that can help the child to accept what the adult teaches.

A strained environment where relationships are strongly defined by rules, can benefit from a change to relationships that emphasize mutual accountability and respect. A school setting, for example, could decide to discard most of their subordinate rules and develop a code of ethics which describes modes of behaviours and related

principles for all who are involved in the school community. These principals would define the school community in terms of interactions between people, and establish procedures of mutual accountability and respect.

Commitment

Waterink (1980) contends that the real purpose of religious training is a life of service in every relationship. Consequently, religious training is not a separate section in the whole effort of education, but it is an integral part of the training in all educational subjects. Adults must model and teach a serving attitude if they want to develop commitment to a serving attitude in the children. It is in the actions that the beliefs come to maturity. An adult's commitment to such action tells the child that those beliefs and values are worthwhile and lasting, that they are desirable to have.

Children carefully assess how committed the adults in their lives are (Brink,1998). Children observe the adult's behaviour to see whether words and deeds match. They want to find out what really motivates her and who she is as a person. But they mostly consider her level of spirituality, her awareness that her life is part of a larger scheme of things.

Responsive relationships

An important condition to developing good relationships is a responsive approach to the child. This means that the adult responds appropriately to the child because she knows and understands what the child is like. Awareness on the part of the adult of the manner in which a child's faith generally grows needs to guide the development of the relationship and the choice of appropriate methods and nurturing styles. Fowler, Westerhoff and others indicate strongly that adults must pay close attention to what

characterizes the child at each stage of his life. We have to realize, for example, that people often favour certain beliefs and views on emotional grounds before they begin to acquire the cognitive awareness that would either support or reject those beliefs. In the case of little children it is therefore very valid to focus on the emotional sense of belonging and enhance that with knowledge over the years.

The early adolescents find themselves in an in-between-period. They do not seem to belong anywhere; they're no longer children but not yet adults either. They would be helped by a community that treats them neither as children nor as adults but as young adolescents who are allowed to be just that. Adults who understand what the young adolescents are like are better able to help them grow. The young people would be helped by reevaluation and clearer definition of their place and role, their responsibilities and expectations. Greater ownership can help them develop greater Christian commitment.

Further study of the stages of faith development and the appropriate consequences for faith nurture would be of great benefit to all involved.

Authentic adults

Blijdorp pointed out that faith nurturing emphasizes our limitations and dependence. The experience of faith, the walk with God in the family has to be credible and real, if the child is to adopt it as a his own faith. The convictions of faith also have to permeate everything the adults do, or it will be seen as something separate from real life. The faith of the important adults in the life of a child has to be obvious and joyful.

The adults in the lives of the young adolescents have to be authentic: they have to be real, personal, vulnerable, credible, and accessible. A young person will perceive the adult to be a real person if the adult is genuine and does not put up a false front.

The adult becomes more real if he is willing to share personal anecdotes that indicate the sincerity of what he teaches. Honesty and humility about one's own weaknesses and uncertainties gives a person greater credibility. The willingness to be vulnerable makes him more real. An adult who does not walk the talk is not believable and children will not easily buy into what that person teaches. Therefore the adult will also have to be accessible, willing to listen and learn and open to reevaluate positions. An adult who is not in touch with the world of the young person loses credibility because "he doesn't understand".

Authentic people are	
real,	they are genuine and do not put up a false front
personal,	they are willing to share personal anecdotes that indicate the sincerity of what they teach
vulnerable,	they are willing to be disarmed, they are honest and humble about their own weaknesses and uncertainties
credible,	an adult who does not walk the talk is not believable and children will not easily accept what the person teaches
accessible,	they are willing to listen and learn and are open to reevaluate positions

figure 4

Communication

People communicate their beliefs in verbal and non-verbal ways. Certain parts of the faith experience lend themselves better to verbalization and explanation than others. Faith is a way of construing that makes use of patterned knowledge, patterned valuing, and patterned construction of meaning (Fowler, 1986). Patterned knowledge, usually called a belief, is typically communicated verbally. Patterned valuing, which we sometimes call commitment or devotion, is often communicated non-verbally. Patterned construction of meaning is usually communicated in the form of an underlying narrative or story or by visual means. It brings together the knowledge and the devotion and

deepens the perception of reality. Adults of significance in the lives of growing children need to consider carefully how they communicate their beliefs and values in verbal and non-verbal ways.

Responsive communication

Communication that centres on the teaching and explaining of beliefs deals with patterned knowledge. At early stages this mostly involves verbally communicating beliefs about the people that are central to the faith. Patterned knowledge begins to play a bigger role at the searching faith stage (Westerhoff, 1979) during which an adolescent moves from an understanding of faith that belongs to the community to an understanding of faith that is his own. Respondents in this age group talked about the struggle to find the relevance of the faith teaching and experiences. Fowler (1986) calls it the individuative - reflective faith stage during which the young person begins to critically examine the previous stages' tacit system of beliefs, values, and commitments.

> "She takes distance from the community of shared values, beliefs and life patterns to the extent that it will allow her to claim a new authority over her own life. All creeds, symbols and stories from her religious tradition are subject to analysis in order to give her some control of their meaning for her personally."

Communication that centres on emotional attachment and devotion to matters of the faith deals with patterned valuing. To a considerable extent this involves non-verbally communicating feelings about people and beliefs. Much of this must happen through modeling by authentic adults. Devotion and commitment starts as simple trust and loyalty at the prelanguage stage. By age two it grows to include emotional and perceptual ordering of experiences during which the child looks at events from the perspectives of her own security. Later, a yearning for inclusion develops. She wants to learn the stories of the groups and communities to which she belongs to establish her identity.

Communication in the form of narratives or by visual means deals with patterned construction of meaning. This form of communication is important throughout all stages because the stories, metaphors and visuals are vehicles that easily connect cognition and emotion. The narratives help maintain the balance between knowledge and values that keeps the form of communication inclusive and accessible for people at all stages.

One example of this may be the significance of devotional times in a family setting. The respondents and the literature suggest that family devotional times are more likely to bring relevance to doctrines than formal instruction. Devotional materials usually contain a balance of readings, stories and activities that function as discussion starters for the family. If the materials are age appropriate they readily result in fruitful dialogues. In families that do not use that kind of booklets or only use adult materials such dialogue does not come natural or easy.

Methodology

The motive of faith nurture is not so much the acquisition of beliefs or values in themselves but a subsequent commitment to consistent behaviours and actions. To achieve that, in verbal and non-verbal communication, the connection between knowledge and emotions must be maintained. Faith nurture must consist of discourses that communicate beliefs together with metaphors and stories that present values and attitudes. Isolation of either does not enhance the perception of meaning and relevance.

Continuum of verbal discourse

If we consider teaching, in the limited sense of the transfer of ideas through verbal discourse only, then a number of conditions exist that can make that teaching particularly effective. Teaching that is most likely to reach the mind, the heart and the will of the child is audible, interesting, engaging, encouraging, enabling, and challenging. In general terms of methodology there seems to be some hierarchy to these conditions (Figure 5, Appendix 10).

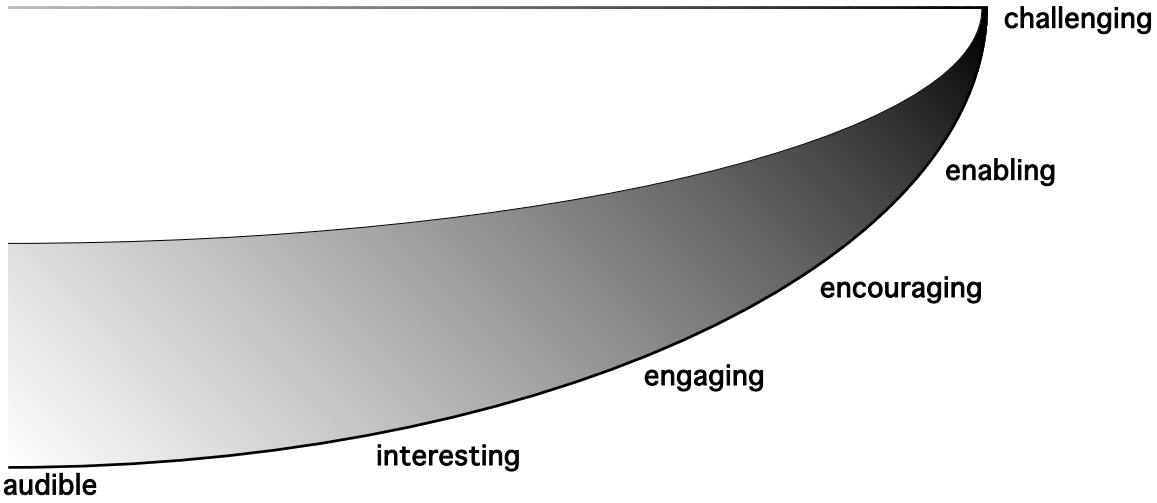

Figure 5

That this teaching needs to be audible is logical, but that in itself could be without effect. Hearing does not presuppose a connection between the ears and the mind or the heart. For that the teaching has to be interesting enough that it keeps the student from tuning out. Interesting teaching becomes engaging when it makes the student think. When the student's intellect is engaged she will be curious to find out what the teacher will say next and what he means. In this engagement there is a clear connection between ears and mind.

Encouraging teaching recognizes the place of emotions in learning, it aims to speak directly to them. When a teacher encourages the student through the content of

his teaching he involves the heart in the process of learning. He acknowledges that mind learning combined with heart learning has greater depth. This kind of encouragement should ideally show the way to action on the part of the student. The development of thinking and feeling motivates to student to change and grow. When the teacher encourages and shows a better way the teaching is enabling.

Challenging teaching addresses not only the mind and the heart but also the will. It causes the student to think, it encourages, enables and shows what she needs to do. It lays it in her path in such a way that she feels compelled to act upon it. Challenging teaching brings matters so close to the student that she cannot walk away from it without having her conscious accuse her.

Sermon

Hearing a sermon must be an experience, a meeting with God, not only cognitive instruction. The quality of the experience determines the attitude that is born from it. Faith does not consist merely of knowledge but it is a disposition expressed in a relationship with God. Preaching that is responsive to the individual characteristics of the hearers touches hearts and changes attitudes (Hoeksema, 1998). Responsive preaching instructs and teaches; this aspect speaks to the mind. It also forms, encourages, comforts and corrects; this aspect speaks to the heart. The hearer can begin to apply his knowledge and attitudes with his own will when both aspects have been well addressed. The ultimate purpose for a sermon is to appeal to the integrated, whole person, no longer to the aspects of mind, heart, will, separately. Such integration places the hearer before unavoidable choices.

Metaphors

Adults have great difficulty expressing their faith, hopes and doubts in ordinary communication, because common language is focused on matter which can be experienced and sensed, not on images and underlying meanings (Tromp, 1995). Religious topics seem to remove themselves from the every day language by virtue of their own abstract character. Basing a child's education on abstractions easily robs it of its meaning and relevance. Metaphors often bridge the abstraction and the value or attitude they want to teach.

The difficulty of speaking about God naturally in relation to the everyday reality is connected to the fact that we no longer known how metaphors are rooted in reality. This hinders children much more than adults. They must see that what is taught is alive and real or they will disregard it as meaningless. A metaphor has the power to break through the limitations of conventional communication. It takes a simple event or object and uses it to advance understanding of a deeper meaning which it symbolizes. Metaphors are able to express values in ways that abstract explanations never can. The metaphoric parables which Jesus told did much more than reveal plots, they taught lasting values and changed hearts. It is important that significant adults learn to use metaphoric language to reach the heart and minds of the children.

Narrations and stories

Stories are prime vehicles that unite knowledge and emotions to produce commitment. Especially during the synthetic - conventional faith stage (Fowler, 1986) children need stories of heroes who's examples compel them to emulation. Narrations often clarify concepts that would otherwise remain unclear. The story of mother Teresa teaches children to be compassionate and generous. Hearing it helps them to

understand what compassion really is because they, as it were, see it at work. Because stories make the connection between the mind and the heart they help us to understand what ideas mean at the human level. They associate the beliefs and humanness of their implications. Stories are, to a large extent, mental visualizations of abstractions.

Visuals

Visual aids such as props, pictures and dramatizations enhance cognitive ideas if they explain them metaphorically. Rembrandt's "Three Crosses"[1] , for example, does not merely relate a story but it interprets it both at a cognitive and an emotional level. Visualization, not carefully considered, can easily distract or confuse. It has to go beyond focus on appearances or plots to expression of meanings and attitudes that engage emotion and volition. Well conceived visualization is not entertainment or decoration but responsive communication.

Interactivity

Respondents and literature indicate that children do better in instructional settings that involve them actively and engage them in discussions, group projects, writing projects, etc. as opposed to lectures on doctrine and theology. Effective instructors frequently use narrations, anecdotes, craft activities, and memorization games. They ask children to make pictures that look for personal interpretations. They use pictures and other visual materials and employ interactive teaching methods.

Experiences

Emotions

Short (1968[2]) observed that much of the appeal of the early Christian church was

based on the experiences of the first Christians.

"The New Testament is an intensely personal document. It is not the effort of a group of men who are out to prove something to us by the force of their rational arguments. But it is the testimony, or testament, of a group of witnesses ... who are bent on simply reporting to us the experience of a love that overtook them and overwhelmed them, a peace that passed all their understanding, and a peace that they in turn would pass on to us."

To instruct children in the faith is a hard thing, maybe because it cannot really be done. Parents do not instruct their children to understand what love is, they exhibit it instead so that the child will experience it (aan het Rot,1995). A young child does not understand every explanation or action but it does understand whether it was meant for good and therefore is good. A separation between expressed faith and conduct places a large part of faith outside the reality of a child's experiences. At that time explanations of religious terms help nothing. She needs to be stimulated at her own level, with things she herself can experience.

Adults must carefully consider the manner in which they experience faith together with the children. At different stages of faith maturity daily problems and joys will be experienced in greatly varying ways. The areas where this certainly needs to be considered seriously are the traditions, rituals and routines of the communities. They are sometimes experienced differently by the youth and by adults, leading to alienation on the part of the youth and misunderstanding on the part of the adults. Church ceremonies such as communal prayers, study times, devotional singing and celebrations, baptisms, confirmations, shared Lord's supper meals, weddings, and funerals, all function to experience the faith together in community. Such rituals strengthen the faith if they are inclusive in nature, giving the child a clear understanding or his own place and role within its context. They tend to loose that ability if they are perceived as adult activities where children are mere by-standers. Family traditions

such as shared celebratory meals at special days, family devotional times, and parent-child getaways serve to unite family members around shared values. Even if they do not deal with faith nurture directly, they do have that effect indirectly .

Cognition

When the traditions, rituals and routines of the communities are experienced differently by the youth and by adults, the resulting alienation and misunderstanding may need to be examined in cognitive ways. Even if the child can not actively participate in some of the rituals, adult participants can share their own experiences much as they do with any other thing they have encountered by virtue of their longer life. They must make it clear that there are no intentional barriers based on a child's inferiority but only different experiences based on varying stages of faith development. The respondents appear to be in agreement with the argument of Moesker et al (1997) that churches must

> "either bring worship closer to the youth, or bring the youth closer to the worship. The same applies to doctrinal instruction. Either the instruction must be brought closer to the youth, or the youth must be drawn closer to the instruction."

Church leaders who face situations of estrangement must consider their effectiveness in reaching the children and young people. Not to do so would be consenting to a circumstance where the children are, in effect, taught to tune out and loose interest. Church councils and ministerial organizations can be good vehicles to help church leaders to become more responsive to the characteristics of their parishioners.

The experience of cognitive learning and growing together in a setting that acknowledges young people for what they are can be of lasting significance to them. Study groups, retreats, and summer camps are often credited with providing the

experiences that bring head knowledge and heart felt attitudes together to generate a holistic understanding and feeling about the faith. Especially for children who have reached the searching faith stage (Westerhoff, 1976) these experiences are extremely valuable.

Responsive experiences

They are strongly aware of the urgency of including children where ever possible for the sake of the child's growth.

The respondents' frustration with, what they perceive as, an undesirable separation of age groups confirms the need to keep adults and children together during worship services. While separate services for youth groups may seem the obvious consequence of a responsive approach it in fact 'merely postpones or increases the connection problem' (de Bruijne,1998). The real responsive approach is to make the church gathering a home for all the members of a community.

Realization that elementary school children typically appreciate rituals and participation in personal and specific prayers (Stronks et al,1993) guides the choice of activities for them. Children at the stages of experienced faith and affiliative faith (Westerhoff, 1976) typically need to be challenged to actions that demonstrate they are an important part of the church. This can be done through the development of meaningful personal relationships; involvement in service activities; responsive sermons that address the young people's level and needs; participation in prayer groups and study groups; regular, informal get-togethers with church leaders; etc. In church services young people can be involved in reading of the Bible; participation in dialogues and public prayers; taking collections; being ushers; handing out info by the doors; baby sitting; assistance with preparation of the liturgy and sermon; appropriate decoration of the building; etc. Having a place and purpose, distinct from that of the adults improves

their sense of belonging in the church community.

Liturgy

Parents and church leaders need to carefully consider how to confront the dislike of church music and the lack of enthusiasm for the traditional style of worship that is present among many children. Some communities have challenged the young people to get involved in the traditional liturgy and to, at the same, time help the community appreciate more contemporary kinds of religious music. A religious community must teach her youth what worship is and explain and model why it does what it does. That is important because it enhances the sense of rootedness that children need. This 'parenting in the pew' approach must contain the tangible acknowledgement that there are good ways, other than the traditional ones, to make music and sing. Much can be gained by involving the children in playing instruments in church. They can also participate in such things as singing rounds; singing descants; and responding to others with sung refrains. Special programs and gatherings for special occasions lend themselves particularly well to involvement by children in the liturgy.

Summary

The role of adults in the faith development of children can be thought of as the supportive role of a gardener who is carefully tending to a growing tree. The nurturing process of watering, feeding and pruning works differently for every person. It works sometimes because of, and sometimes in spite of significant adults. The nurturing adult needs to see the work as a holistic effort, one that does not separate the significance of mind, heart, and will. An important condition to finding the right balance is a responsive approach to the child. Awareness on the part of the adult of the manner in which faith generally develops needs to guide the choice of appropriate methods and nurturing styles.

An inclusive community removes obstacles that would exclude a child and presents challenges that will include him. Exclusion is mostly felt in matters of rituals and church liturgy as well as in rules and customs that seem to devaluate the place of the child in the community. Inclusion is mainly experienced through confirming friendships and involvement in community activities.

The relationships with God, with others and with self all appear to have great significance in the development of a child's faith. Confirming relationships with significant adults reflect the message of being wanted and belonging. They are emotional affirmation that the cognitive view of God is correct. An important condition to developing good relationships is a responsive approach to the child. Modeling by authentic adults is a prime vehicles to faith nurture. A strained environment where relationships are strongly defined by rules, can benefit from a change to relationships that emphasize mutual accountability and respect.

Faith is communicated verbally and non-verbally by means of patterned knowledge (beliefs), patterned valuing (devotion), and patterned construction of

meaning. The use of narratives or visual means connects the knowledge and the devotion and deepens the perception of reality. Faith nurture must consist of discourses that communicate beliefs together with metaphors and stories that present values and attitudes. Preaching that is responsive to the individual characteristics of the hearers touches hearts and changes attitudes. It provides an experience, a meeting with God. Family devotional times appear more likely to bring relevance to doctrines than formal instruction. Children generally learn best in interactive instructional settings.

A separation between expressed faith and conduct places a large part of faith outside the reality of a child's experiences. Adults and communities that seek to provide responsive experiences focus on whatever children can do, not so much on what the community needs them to do. They are strongly aware of the urgency of including children where ever possible for the sake of the child's growth. While separate services for youth groups may seem the obvious consequence of a responsive approach they, it in fact, can become another form of exclusion. The real responsive approach is to make the faith community (church) gathering a home for all the members of a community.

[1] Van Ryn, Rembrandt, De Drie Kruisen, Amsterdam, 1653.

[2] Short, Robert L. The Parables of Peanuts, Harper and Row, 1968.