PhD Research - Vivienne Mountain

Investigating the meaning and function of prayer for children in selected primary school in Melbourne Australia. (Australian Catholic University 2004) - this is a brief summary of the complete thesis

This research project grew from a variety of separate threads. As a Christian I have been engaged in the struggle, the occasional power and ongoing mystery of prayer. As a mother, it has been my experience that prayer is welcomed and recognised by children as real and important. Then in Teaching and Chaplaincy aspects of prayer and contemplation have been eagerly investigated by children from different faith traditions and indeed by those who declare their rejection of all faith traditions. Finally, through wider reading in the area of children’s spirituality and psychology the topic has become linked to the wellbeing of children in the face of our secular, consumer-driven society.

The research project aimed to reflect some of the multi-cultural, multi-faith culture of Australia. For this reason participants were selected from a variety of schools representing the secular, Jewish Orthodox, Muslim, Catholic and Christian philosophies. Ten students were selected randomly from year 5 from six different schools- two schools were considered secular- the Independent School (IS) and Government School (GS) and four faith based schools- Jewish School (JS), Muslim School (MS), Catholic School (CaS) and Christian School (CS).

In the literature, consideration was given to some of the complex understanding of prayer from the faith traditions. In Islam prayer is considered a “Foundation of religion” showing “submission” as central to the spirit of worship. In the Jewish tradition, prayer is “an expression of man’s constant awareness of the divine”, giving a sense of connection with the God of history and a continuation of the act of sacrifice. Many Christian writers identify prayer as concerned with the connection between humans and the God of grace identified as “Father” by Jesus. As well as

1 The full text is available on the ACU archives web site or published - V. Mountain, Research into Children’s Perception of Prayer (Saarsbrucken Germany: VDM, 2008).
2 Through MA study in Philosophy and Religion at Heythrop College (London University 1999) subjects such as Ethics and Psychology of religion stimulated further interest in investigating my experiences of children and prayer
6 Many authors could be suggested such as W. Brueggemann, Hopeful Imagination (Philadelphia PA: Fortress, 1986); R. Foster, Prayer- Finding the
the understanding of the theological importance of prayer many authors were cited to highlight some current thinking about the psychological reality and benefit of prayer for adults. For all religious traditions the act of prayer was regarded as an “effort to enhance life”. The complex notion of prayer was linked to the similarly complex concept of spirituality. Spirituality was considered as part of the inner psychic life, concerned with feelings, related to moral decision making and having a relationship with the transcendent “A desire for connectedness, which often expresses itself in an emotional relationship with an invisible sacred presence”. As well as being part of religion, spirituality has also been identified as before or beyond religious traditions, concerned with our sensed connection with the environment “We yearn to reclaim the deep, primal, sacred story of our evolving universe; of planet Earth . . . the diverse and magnificent array of life forms around us . . . (the) story of the evolution of spiritual consciousness within humanity itself; and finally to create a one-world family characterized by love, justice, peace and liberation”. From a large variety of definitions, “Relational consciousness” was chosen as a working definition for this research. Hay and Nye suggest this definition has four areas: relationship with the inner self, relationship with others, relationship with the environment and relationship with the Divine or Transcendent. This wide definition was used as a way to relate to both religious and non-religious participants.

Method

From the broader methodology of the human sciences tradition of qualitative analysis, the method of Grounded Theory was considered suitable to this study where new theory was being generated. The term “grounded” is used to describe the way in which the theory can be identified as based in or emerging out of the ground of empirical data. Grounded theory involves persistent and intentional effort on the part of the researcher through constant checking and immersion in the data. From this patient, sensitive and constant comparison, codes, diagrams and memos were generated that grow in complexity, density, clarity and accuracy, leading to a

8 David Wulff, Psychology of Religion Classic and Contemporary (USA: John Wiley, 1997). P 545
10 Dairmuid O’Murchu, Reclaiming Spirituality (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1997). P ix
point of “saturation” or certainty. The findings were expressed in major “Categories” with supporting “properties” for both the “meaning” and “function” of prayer. Additional findings related to how prayer was learned were also identified. Four different forms of rater-reliability checking were used to assist the analysis.

There were three methods of data collection. All interviews were video and audio recorded. The first activity was an illustration made by the participant of what it looks like when someone prays. From this, a semi-structured interview followed the interest of the participant, investigating ideas related to the drawing and extending into where prayer comes from and where it goes, how you can learn to pray and who prays in the world. The third area of data involved the participant in a school-like exercise of sentence completion. The sentence fragments were: Prayer is . . . People pray because . . . People don’t pray because . . . I would pray . . . I wouldn’t pray . . . I feel most prayerful when . . .

**Findings**

The common category identified in the data showed the meaning of prayer as:

**Communication with a good God**

The properties associated with this were:

- Understood through the faith tradition (God as holy, above, giver of life, judge, seen in Jesus)
- Understood through personal images of God (lover, healer, forgiver, guide, protector)
- Expressing social connection with the faith community
- Expressing personal feelings and hopes (praise, grief, need, guilt)

From this identification of the meaning of prayer all participants expressed the idea that prayer was valued – prayer was experienced as part of personal life – prayer was related to religion – prayer was associated with uncontrollable situations in life – for some prayer was limited to their experience within their faith community – prayer enabled the expression of strong feelings.

The common category of the function of prayer was:

**A personal way to perceive and respond to the experiences of life**

The properties associated with this were:

- Finding help through an individual connection with God (in challenging emotional states, giving hope of an afterlife, in personal identity formation)
- Finding social identity through communal ritual, activity and belief
- Finding help for others (family friends, social injustice and crisis)
- Expressing praise and thanksgiving
From this identification of the function of prayer all participants expressed that prayer as a way to help understand and respond to the experiences of life- God was seen as engaged in life- help was needed in coping with the difficult situations of life- some considered prayer as a way to personal identity through a faith tradition and some through idiosyncratic understanding- some saw prayer connected with the after life, many considered prayer as a way to help others and respond to world events such as disaster, poverty and war, many saw prayer as expressing praise and thankfulness.

**Recommendations**

As one third of the participants attended a secular school and did not express any connection with a faith tradition, it was expected that some would report that prayer belonged to others, or that prayer was now old-fashioned. However all participants said they had prayed, all said it was a helpful thing, all spoke quite freely about the topic of prayer almost all for a period greater than 30 minutes (one was only 20 minutes). This research has shown that prayer is part of the life of children and should be respected by adults who have a professional relationship with children.

**Recommendation of teachers of Religious Education**

That prayer should be practiced and taught- that prayer can be part of ritual and symbol- that prayer is a multi-faith activity- that pedagogy reflect an awareness of children’s spirituality- some consideration should be given to the view that spirituality is innate and some aspects of prayer can be considered to be a natural ability for the child.

**Recommendations for professional involved in occupations related to child welfare**

That prayer is recognised as a coping mechanism- that prayer be regarded as an activity with social and psychological importance for children.

**Recommendations for those involved in the development of children’s spirituality**

That a relationship with God be considered as part of children’s spirituality- that the religious community and communal prayer be recognised as part of children’s spirituality.

**Conclusion**

It is acknowledged that this research is limited by the geographic and cultural selection of participants. However, as a piece of new Australian research it shows that all 60 participants recognised that prayer showed a connection with the good God. Prayer was perceived to function as a way to cope with difficult experiences in life. Prayer was used by participants at important times in life and the words and thoughts of prayer helped to clarify and articulate deep feelings.

Prayer is:

“a special thing you can do . . .walking into heaven” (CaS boy 3),
“comes from the heart . . . you really want to get it through” (IS girl 1)

“I feel a bit better if I am sad (JS boy 5)

“Praising God . . . thanking God makes your life easier” (MS girl 4)

“Prayer is a good time to talk . . . and let all of the bad out of you to someone you can really trust” (CS boy 3)

“Most of the people who stop praying commit suicide . . .stop praying . . .give up all hope” (GS girl 5)

“People pray for religious reasons . . . it encourages them . . . puts up their confidence . . . they enjoy praying” (IS boy 3)

“It brings you closer to God . . . great feeling of contentment (MS boy 1)

References


