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## Generative spirituality and the parent-child relationship

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**GENERATIVE SPIRITUALITY  
AND THE PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIP**

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
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in

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by

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## ABSTRACT

This research study includes examining and exploring the processes underlying faith, parent, and child relationships. The project is based on the premises that parents and children mutually influence each other and that faith is important, beneficial, and facilitative, particularly in an increasingly individualistic society.

Qualitative methods were used to uncover a depth of information regarding the intersection of faith, parent, and child. Interview data were utilized from a purposive national sample of 30 highly religious families. Four major themes emerged from the analysis. These themes include *Concerns about Contemporary Culture*, *Commitment to Family Life*, *Close and Connected Family Relationships*, and *Children's Influences*.

Implications of this research study include informing professionals in the area of culturally competent practice and expanding theory regarding the nature of generative family relationships.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Researchers indicated that the parent-child relationship has significant influence on child developmental outcomes emotionally, psychologically, physically, academically, and spiritually (Baumrind, 1971; Karen, 1994; Luster & Okagaki, 2005). More recently, however, there has been increasing attention by researchers to the study of children's influence on parents (Demol & Buysee, 2008; Dillon, 2002; Kuczynski, 2003; Morrow, 2003; Palkovitz, Marks, Appleby, & Homes, 2003). Further, faith has been found to bi-directionally influence some parent-child relationships (Chaney, Marks, Sasser, & Hopkins, in press; Dollahite, Marks, & Goodman, 2004; Mahoney, Pargament, Murray-Swank, & Murray-Swank, 2003; Marks & Dollahite, 2007; Marks & Palkovitz, 2007; King, 2003; Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Wilcox, 2002). Therefore, an understanding of the processes underlying the connections between faith and the parent-child relationship is important. The links between parenting and faith become increasingly important during a time when the parent-child bond seems to be under siege by a growing number of cultural trends that appear to undermine human relationships (Doherty, 2001).

#### **Purpose of Study**

Family development research is concerned with generating greater knowledge to enhance and to promote optimal conditions within which family relationships may thrive and flourish. Family may, indeed, be the best opportunity to find meaningful potential in

a culture filled with existential angst because of the on-going opportunities to love and serve each member (Lantz, 1993). An overarching purpose of parenting is to connect with children in an emotional way so that they may reach their full potential as human beings (Brooks, 2008). Consistent with this purpose, Marks and Dollahite (2007) stated, “We need a clear vision of how to establish deep, generative, sacred relationships with our children and those of their generation” (p. 15). Through qualitative and descriptive methods, this project serves to highlight this vision by exploring the processes at work between faith, parent, and child.

Increasing our understanding of faith and families is crucial because understanding family development devoid of the spiritual dimension is incomplete (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Thus, family helpers who are not culturally competent with respect to religious and spiritual aspects of life that are important to many families are likely to be less effective (Marks, Dollahite, & Dew, 2009). Broadening our understanding of the frameworks in which humans derive meaning and motivation is preventative and facilitative. This understanding will guide psychologists, social workers, family life educators, and clergy in the development and implementation of culturally competent, comprehensive, appropriate, and context-sensitive services to families. Culturally competent and context-sensitive services involve understanding and respecting a wide range of influential factors including the influences of faith.

### **Research Question**

Consistent with the exploratory and discovery-oriented aims of qualitative research, my guiding question is: *What are the processes at work between faith, parent, and child?* Some relevant definitions follow.



## **Definitions of Concepts**

Generative Spirituality – focused and action-based commitment to the well-being of the next generation.

Shared Spiritual Paradigm (Spiritual Beliefs) – meanings and perceptions that guide behavior.

Shared Spiritual Practices (Religious Practices) – intentional rituals and traditions.

Shared Spiritual Community (Faith Community) – congregation of faith and care.

Bidirectionality – assumes parents and children continuously and mutually influence each other in an on-going transactional process.

Agency – a human's ability to provoke change within one's self.

Highly Religious – Clergy-rated most involved in the faith congregation.

Strong Marriage-- both spouses report feeling happy in their marriage and being married for at least 15 years.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

#### **Cultural Trends That Threaten the Bond between Parents and Children**

American society has become increasingly individualized and secular (Roehlkepatain, Benson, King, & Wagener, 2006). It is predicted that this trend will continue and that people will lose contact with the multigenerational communities that provide opportunities to both receive and to give meaningful social support (Dollahite et al., 2004).

Divorce continues to occur in about half of all American families (Amato, Booth, Johnson, & Rogers, 2007; McKenry & Price, 2005; Amato, 2000; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wallerstein, 2000). Children of divorce lack access to both parents simultaneously and, on average, spend less time with each parent. Oftentimes, it is the youngest of children who feel especially lonely and unprotected (Wallerstein, 2000). Non-resident fathers are at risk for deteriorating relationships with children as many of these fathers become partially or completely uninvolved after family dissolution (King, 2003; Popenoe, 1996). Compared to children from intact families, children of divorce often fail to report significant levels of emotional closeness to their fathers (Waite & Gallagher, 2000).

Whether the family is intact or separated, both parents are working longer hours leaving less time for the emotional work of family life (Hoschild, 1997; Levine, 2006). Children under age five, on average, spend 36 hours in daycare per week (Elkind, 2001). According to a poll commissioned for the 2000 White House Conference on Teenagers and contrary to popular belief, American teenagers want more time with their parents, not less (Levine, 2006).

Conspicuous consumption, defined as lavish spending for the sole purpose of displaying wealth (Mason, 1999), may also draw attention away from close connections between family members and the broader community. Excessive material pursuits demand a considerable amount of time and energy in the work place, may distract families from the pursuit of developing internal characteristics such as altruism, and may result in the outsourcing of many of the functions that families typically provide, such as child care and religious education (Dollahite, Marks, & Olson, 2002; Levine, 2006; Verma & Maria, 2006; Moore & Asay, 2008). Conspicuous consumption may lead to overly demanding pressures to achieve (academically and professionally) and to perfectionist behaviors that adversely affect “human,” and thus imperfect, relationships (Levine, 2006; Verma & Maria, 2006). The individualistic and competitive mindset of the American culture may be, in part, the impetus to “over-schedule” even the youngest of children (Levine, 2006; Elkind, 2001).

Across the socio-economic spectrum, families are struggling with circumstances that may erode or challenge the quality of connections with other people. According to a report by the U.S. Bureau of the Census presented in 2008, 13.2% of individuals and 19% of children live below the poverty line. Poverty is linked with less effective parenting, in

part, because parents tend to be more stressed and depressed and thus less positively involved (Brooks, 2008; Seccombe, 2000). However, it has been shown that affluence does little to buffer some of the risks that parents and children face in today's culture. Perhaps due to materialism and the pressure to achieve that families often experience in a hurried up world, even affluent children are at risk for tenuous parent-child connections (Levine, 2006).

The number and percentage of American teenagers who are depressed, anxious, violent, abusing substances, experiencing stress-related symptoms, and/or a spiritual related hunger is growing (Linder, 2004; Levine, 2006; Elkind, 2001). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 10% of American students attempt to take their own life each year (Levine, 2006).

### **The Importance of Faith**

Faith is an important and relevant force in American culture and it is an important aspect of American family life. Statistically, the vast majority of families in America report a belief in God or "spiritual reality," and nearly all families report a religious affiliation (90% and 95% respectively) (Marks, 2008). Most parents (90%) express at least an interest in pursuing religious education and faith formation for their children (Boyatzis, Dollahite, & Marks, 2006). A 2000 world view survey showed that 50% of young people age 18 to 24 report that God is very important in their life (Lippman & Keith, 2006) and 40% of teenagers pray (Roehlkepartain, King, Wagner, & Benson, 2006). About 50% of Americans reportedly attend religious services at least once per month (Dollahite et al., 2004).

The contextualizing statistics in the preceding paragraph are significant because religion and spirituality appear to be preventative or protective factors for many individuals and families (Dollahite et al., 2004). Spiritual awareness is linked with the ability to look beyond oneself and to care for others and for the environment (Hay & Nye, 2006). These qualities are two important underpinnings for better mental and social health (Levine, 2006). Spiritual living is associated with less material striving and continued opportunities to notice and actualize meaningful life potential (Hay & Nye, 2006; Lantz, 1993). Married couples who attend church together are at the lowest risk for divorce (Weaver, Samford, Morgan, Larson, Koenig, & Flannelly, 2002). Contrarily, some research suggests that faith may not always have a positive impact on some families as described below.

### **Potential Negative Influences of Faith on Family**

Potential negative influences of faith on family relationships may stem from the type of religion practiced, from the type of family structure involved, from rigid belief systems, and/or from compulsive faith practices. Additionally, some researchers suggest that divorced mothers may receive less social, instrumental, and emotional support from faith communities than widowed mothers. Also, religious single and cohabitating adolescent mothers tend to experience increased mental health issues (depression) when compared to religious married adolescent mothers (Garrison, Marks, Lawrence, & Braun, 2004). Research indicates that family relationships embedded in highly fundamental denominations, such as those that interpret the Bible literally, are correlated with higher levels of control, intolerance for ambiguity, defensiveness, prejudice, and a punishing parenting style (Strahan, 1996).

Arterburn and Felton (2001) discuss several dynamics underlying *toxic faith* (when faith becomes abusive). Families are at risk for poor relationship quality when the rules and rituals associated with religion become excessively rigid. Negative outcomes may stem from “religious addiction” which is characterized by a compulsive drive for religious perfectionism. Family relationships may also suffer when God is perceived as angry and vindictive or when the leadership of the faith community portrays God as punishing and people as undeserving. Arterburn and Felton further note, based on several case studies, that a shame-inducing religious approach may inflict pain rather than foster moral behavior. Additionally, interfaith marriage is significantly less stable than same-faith marriage (Curtis & Ellison, 2002; Lehrer & Chiswick, 1993). Two underlying mechanisms appear to be divisive: financial contributions and conflict regarding children’s upbringing (Marks et al., 2009).

The above studies link religion to negative outcomes for some families and suggest that faith does not always protect families but, on the contrary, may add additional stress, conflict, and dysfunction. Despite the potential for negative outcomes, it remains important to understand the processes underlying faith and family because the majority of studies focusing on faith and family relationships correlate religion to positive family outcomes. These outcomes include the ability to cope with stress, less depression, increased energy in marriage, and more effective as well as more responsible parenting (Dollahite et al., 2002; Koenig, McCulloch, & Larson, 2001). Religion and spirituality are more often linked with close and connected family relationships including parent-child relationships (Mahoney, Paragment, Tarakeschwar, & Swank, 2001).

### **Generative Spirituality and Erikson’s Theory of Adult Development**

When parents direct their attention and energy on the needs of children in a focused way, then parenting may be buffered from many of the cultural trends that may hinder close connections between adults and children (Boyatzis et al., 2006). The concept of generative spirituality is based on Erikson's theory of lifespan development (Dollahite, 2003). Erikson (1998) claimed that human development continues throughout life and that healthy and prosperous adult development involves and reflects the nurturing of the next generation. Thus, in some ways, parenting is as important to the parent as it is to the child (Brooks, 2008). Erikson proposed that after a couple establishes an adequate level of intimacy, the developmental task turns toward looking beyond themselves to the next generation. According to Erikson, middle-aged adults enter the stage of *generativity* versus *stagnation and self-absorption*. In this case, generativity refers to the raising of children and involves care, guidance, and protection. Adequate care, according to Erikson, often entails that a parent sacrifice some of their own desires for their child(ren). When the parent successfully manages the conflict of meeting children's needs while meeting their own needs (and sometimes despite their own needs), the ability to be *generative* (committed to children) emerges. When a parent fails to cope with this task and alternatively gives in to the temptation for self-indulgence, *stagnation* occurs. Erikson explains that a parent's inability to be generative may stem from the parent's own empty childhood or perhaps, to a culture that emphasizes independence over the care of others (Crain, 1992).

Given Erikson's theory of healthy adult development, generative spirituality may be defined as a sacred commitment to the needs of the next generation and connections with children that transcend or "go beyond" what is expected in the contemporary culture

(Dollahite, 2003). There are several premises for linking generativity with spirituality. Many components of caring for the next generation mirror the spiritual life, such as compassionate care and concern for the well-being of others (Snarey & Dollhite, 2001). In this way, generative spirituality involves a behavioral component. It is lived out in community. The generative spiritual life is *active* as well as contemplative (Yust, 2004). The search for meaning and purpose is practiced by treating others compassionately and fairly (Marks & Palkovitz, 2007). The bond between parents and children is grounded in something larger than the family and involves moral guidance and care that considers the “whole child” emotionally, behaviorally, physically, relationally, and ultimately, spiritually (Baumgartner & Buchanan, 2010).

Generative spirituality promotes strong relationships through responsible behavior that links the psychological (search for meaning) with the social (living in communion). In short, generative spirituality is a focused and action-based commitment to the well-being of the next generation.

### **Three Dimensions of Generative Spirituality**

Expanding on the above, generative spirituality involves three dimensions according to Boyatzis et al. (2006). The first dimension has been termed *shared spiritual paradigm*. Shared spiritual paradigm involves the meanings, perceptions, and beliefs that serve as the underpinnings of behavior. It is the basis for how life is lived out in the present and how decisions are made. These spiritual beliefs often compel one to sanctify their role as a parent (i.e., to view a child as a gift from God and/or to view parenthood as a spiritual calling) (Mahoney et al., 2003).



The second dimension of generative spirituality is *shared spiritual practices* which involve meaningful and intentional rituals and traditions (Marks, 2004). These rituals may include attending worship services, praying, celebrating holidays, or even engaging in a nurturing bedtime routine with children.

The third dimension of generative spirituality is *shared spiritual community* or congregation of faith and care. The parent and child are not isolated. Their relationship is embedded in a larger, intergenerational, Godly community where opportunities for support and serving are abundant (Boyatzis et al., 2006).

### **Faith and the Parent-Child Relationship**

**Marriage.** Gottman (1999) claimed that the best gift a parent can give to a child is a stable and happy marriage. His research suggests that babies of unhappy couples may show a lower capacity for joy as well as less ability to concentrate and to self-comfort (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). Several studies suggest that shared faith in marriage correlates with higher levels of marital satisfaction as well as increased marital stability, strength, and harmony (Boyatzis et al., 2006; Mahoney et al., 2001; Marks, 2005). The divorce rate of couples who regularly attend church together is 44%. The divorce rate of non-attending couples is 60% (Snarey & Dollahite, 2001). Research in the area of faith and marriage suggests that faith not only advances a pro-marriage paradigm in families but that several mechanisms are at play including family ritual, support of a congregation, and responsible paternal involvement (Boyatzis et al., 2006; Dollahite et al., 2002; King, 2003; Wilcox, 2002). Further, qualitative research has uncovered additional processes that include the sanctification of marriage, resolving conflict through prayer, serving others, and prioritizing faith over secular interests (Marks, 2008).

**Determinants of Parental Competence.** Turning to the area of skillful parenting, Belsky, Robins, and Gamble (1984), in their writing on the determinants of parental competencies, discuss important conceptual elements for successful parenting. The authors present a three-dimensional model of patience, endurance, and commitment. Perhaps patient parenting can be equated with what Baumrind (1971) called authoritative parenting; a style of parenting characterized by parental warmth, sensitivity, and firm but fair limits. Several links exist between faith and parental warmth, parent-child closeness, egalitarian parenting and positivity (Boyatzis et al., 2006; Chaney et al., in press; Dollahite et al., 2004; King, 2003; Lippman, Michelsen, & Roehlkepartain, 2004; Mahoney, et al., 2001; Pearce & Axinn, 1998; Wilcox, 2002).

Specifically, Pearce and Axinn (1998) hypothesized that mothers who place a high value on religion will have more positive relationships with their children. Using a representative sample drawn from the Intergenerational Panel Study of Mothers and Children (IPSMC), this quantitative study revealed that the more religion is perceived as a part of the mother's identity, the more that both mother *and* child see their relationship as having higher quality. King (2003) considered the relationship between religion and fathers' relationships with their children through a series of bivariate and multivariate regression models. Her sample of over 800 fathers was drawn from the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS). The findings of King's study suggest that for both married and divorced fathers, religious involvement is linked to increased paternal involvement and higher relationship quality. Additionally, Marks and Palkovitz (2007) discuss findings in their qualitative research that indicate that faith motivates some fathers to practice increased patience with their children.

Faith has occasionally been associated with authoritarian parenting, which is characterized as a style of relating that is highly demanding and unresponsive (Dollahite et al., 2004; Lippman et al., 2004)—a style that is associated with children who have a higher tendency toward weak moral development (Hoffman & Saltzstein, 1967). Most extant studies indicate that religious parents tend to be authoritative (high warmth/high discipline) in their parenting style (Marks, 2005).

**Patience.** Belsky (1984) argued that the primary factors influencing positive parenting behavior stems from a parent's ability to act patiently, a tendency that is correlated with psychological resources, self-awareness, and mental health. A parent's mental health directly impacts their ability to de-center from their own needs and preoccupations, to empathically relate to others, to see another's differing point of view (Ginott, 2003), to live mindfully in the present moment in order to better choose reactions, to engage in parenting as a journey of discovery, and to live a joyful life (slowing down and sharing in wonder) (Kabat-Zinn & Kabat-Zinn, 1997; Siegel & Hartzell, 2003). Faith is linked to several mental health outcomes such as a greater sense of happiness, greater self-esteem, and lower rates of depression (Garrison et al., 2004; Marks, 2005). According to Koenig, et al. (2001), faith is linked to greater hope and purpose and lower rates of suicide, anxiety, substance abuse, and crime. Religious practices such as prayer may help individuals to reduce stress, to feel calm, as well as to avoid negative coping patterns such as drug and alcohol use (Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Marks, 2008).

Further, evidence supports links between social support and the mental health of parents (Belsky, 1984; Cochran & Walker, 2005). Faith community provides social

support to parents in ways that may go above and beyond other groups of support. Faith communities encourage their members to be involved in ways that may promote a significant sense of belonging (Marks, 2005). Faith communities provide opportunities to make deep and profound contributions to others (Chaney et al., in press), contributions which may be fundamental components of a healthy self-concept (Crain, 1992; Maslow, 1970). Parents may receive the support of their faith community as “God working through the love of people” which creates a qualitatively different experience when compared to support stemming from secular arenas (Kraus, Ellison, & Wulff, 1998). Chaney et al. (in press) found that for many parents, the faith community can feel like extended family. This perception is relevant due to the transient nature of today’s society where many parents live great distances from their family of origin. It is also relevant for families who are in need of positive role models that their own biological families or broken communities are unable to provide (Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Stonehouse, 1998).

In addition, faith communities provide direct and indirect resources for parent training such as support groups, role-modeling, and counseling, buttressed by themes of tolerance, patience, and unconditional love (Chaney et al., in press; Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Dollahite et al., 2002; Pearce & Axinn, 1998). Parents may also be encouraged to apply the principles of patience, stillness, forgiveness, and unconditional love to themselves as they reflect on regrets, learn from mistakes, and work through problems (Marks & Palkovitz, 2007). In these ways, faith communities may nourish parents so that parents may better nourish their children.

**Endurance.** Endurance, as described by Belsky et al. (1984), is a parent’s ability to physically “keep up” with the requirements of raising children and to muster the

energy to “keep up” with children themselves. Because parenting, in part, is a physical pursuit, parent’s physical and mental health issues are critically important. Faith influences health in various ways. Faith community attendance (more than once per week) is linked to longer life; 7.6 years for the general American population and 13.7 years longer for African Americans, when compared to those who never attend (Hummer, Rogers, Nam, & Ellison, 1999). Specifically, faith involvement correlates with lower cancer rates and pro-health behaviors such as the avoidance of toxic substances such as alcohol and other drugs—particularly among faiths who proscribe the use of alcohol and drugs (Koenig et al., 2001).

**Commitment.** Perhaps commitment (the pledge to parent) is the key to directing a parent’s empathy, patience, and energies to the task of parenting (Belsky et al., 1984). In a recent qualitative study on how faith influences parenting, Chaney et al. (in press), found that parents of faith in the African American community view their relationship with their children as “sacred responsibility” or “gifts from God.” These spiritual beliefs about the nature of adult-child relationships often lead parents to spend increased time with children, to desire to do the best job possible, and to seek “high ground” when challenges arise. Marks and Dollahite (2007) found a similar theme in their study of fathers of faith. The authors wrote:

If a father believes God has called fathers to teach, bless, protect, and provide for the child God has placed in his care, then fathering becomes a sacred service for God, not just a socially proscribed role (p. 3).

Mahoney et al. (2003) describe “sanctification” as the belief that relationships within families hold a spiritual status and that they are connected to God. When parents see the

birth of a child as blessing their marriage or parenting as an opportunity to deepen their knowledge of God and God's attributes, then family life may lead to increased joy and purpose as well as increased personal spiritual growth. Further, Mahoney et al. (2003) report findings suggesting that mothers who perceive their relationships as spiritually significant exhibit increased warmth and less verbal aggression with their young preschool children. It seems that family members put more energy and effort toward safeguarding relationships that are viewed as "trusts" from God.

Additionally, and in general, faith calls parents to put family first (Dollahite et al., 2004). Some argue that it is religion, more than any other institution outside of marriage that expects fathers to be responsible and accountable to their children (Horn, 2001). Religious practices such as prayer may facilitate parent's willingness to reflect on their relationship with their children and to make improvements (Dollahite et al., 2002), as well as to facilitate family cohesion (Taylor & Chatters, 2005).

It has been documented that family rituals correlate with family commitment (Chaney et al., in press; Doherty, 2001). According to Doherty (2001), rituals are activities and events that are coordinated, repeated, and meaningful. They provide predictability, time together, family identity, family stability, and a way to live out family values (Chatters & Taylor, 2005; Doherty, 2001; Wilcox, 2002). Rituals may be protective (Fiese, Hooker, Kotary, & Shwagler, 1993) and restore structure for families which is relevant in a culture that is often chaotic, fast-paced and indifferent to the sacred (Marks & Palkovitz, 2007). Eisenberg, Olson, & Neumark-Sztainer (2004) found that families who share dinner together five or more times per week have children who are less likely to be depressed and abuse toxic substances. These children also do better in

school when compared to children in families that share dinner two or fewer times per week.

Utilizing the above model concerning the determinants of parental competence as a backdrop, it is suggested that faith may have a positive and supportive relationship with parent-child relationships through a myriad of pathways. However, parent-to-child influence covers only a segment of the family developmental process. Thus, child-to-parent influences in parent-child relationships are addressed next.

### **Children's Influences in Parent-Child Relationships**

Parental competencies typically reflect the dynamics of parent-to-child influence. However, the current generation of family research considers both parent-to-child influences AND child-to-parent influences. Most studies in previous generations focused only on the unidirectional influence of parent to child because it is rooted in philosophies such as that of Locke who asserted that children are born as “blank slates.” Parents do indeed influence children and traditional socialization models remain highly significant (Baumrind, 1971; Brooks, 2008; Luster & Okagaki, 2005). However, models of bidirectional influence add support and validity to theories suggesting that children enter this world with natural abilities and tendencies that facilitate their own developmental processes (Brooks, 2008; Dillon, 2002; Luster & Ogakagi, 2005). These naturalistic theories stem from those as far back as Rousseau who countered Locke by suggesting that children are not blank slates but instead, possess internal qualities that unfold naturally as the child grows (Brooks, 2008; Dillon, 2002). Kuczynski (2003) similarly argues that children live in the world via their own experiences and perspectives. Challenging traditional socialization models, children's reports and accounts of their own

experiences and world views provide family development literature with a new vision of how the processes in family development can be conceptualized and understood (Morrow, 2003). This research is salient because it considers evidence suggesting that children's cooperation stems more from the positive and mutually created qualities of the parent-child relationship and less on direct parent to child influence such as specific "disciplinary techniques" or parents' greater strength and authority (Kuczynski, 2003). This dynamic of child-to-parent influence can be further explained by the terms bidirectionality and agency.

**Bidirectionality.** Demol and Buyssee (2008) wrote:

Bidirectionality goes beyond the two main unidirectional effects and assumes that parents and children continuously and mutually influence each other in an ongoing transactional process. In this mutual influence process, parents and children are partners in the development of one another and the relationship (p. 360).

Kuczynski (2003) discusses several models of bidirectionality. Children and parents may influence each other through transactional causality, circular causality, goodness-of-fit, or systemic causality. Transactional causality involves viewing the parent-child relationship through the lens of ongoing changes as parents and children interact over time. In other words, parents and children change and therefore, their influential patterns change. Circular causality brings to light cycles and patterns of interaction. For example, a parent who spans an angry child may evoke more anger in the child. The angrier the child, the more the parent spans, and so on. Goodness-of-fit may be defined as how well a child's temperament is supported by the environment in



which they live or how well the child's temperament "fits" with the parent's temperament. Systematic causality broadens the window by bringing into account that the child is embedded in many layers of influence: nuclear family, extended family, community, and broader culture. We turn now to the concept of agency.

**Agency.** Children may influence parents behaviorally or cognitively through the use of agency – a human's ability to provoke individual-level change (Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003; Demol & Buyssee, 2008; Kuczynski, 2003). Agency may involve the child's self-initiated and intentional actions (self-assertion, negotiation), autonomy (personal control and competencies), and construction (ability to create meaning from experience) (Kuczynski, 2003).

Agency stems from the view of the child as a complete and whole person in the relationship and it is enhanced by close and connected relationships. It may be that when parents are highly invested in listening to children and taking into consideration their thoughts and feelings, agency is magnified (Demol & Buyssee, 2008). In other words, children's agency is rooted in an engaged, warm, and responsive style of parenting (Demol & Buyssee, 2008; Palkovitz et al., 2003), and is thus a fundamental component of such a relationship. If bidirectionality is the vehicle that alters relationships, then agency is the fuel (Cummings & Schermerhorn, 2003). The closer the relationship, the higher octane the fuel. An important note is that children's agency must not be equated in any sense to the notions of responsibility or parents moral obligations to children. For example, a strong-willed and difficult child may provoke more frustration and anger in a parent than would an easy-going child. Although the child's influence is recognized, the

parent remains responsible to understand the child, their own anger, and appropriate discipline methods (Kuczynski, 2003).

### **Studies Focusing on the Role of Children in Adult Development**

Parents follow a slightly different developmental path than non-parents, according to Palkovitz and colleagues (2003). Parenting, especially for committed parents, may be an ongoing learning opportunity that propels development in profound ways. Numerous studies highlight the relationships between parenting and adult development in the areas of cognitive and emotional development, social skills, personality functioning, responsibility, generativity, philosophy of life and values, as well as health habits (Palkovitz, 1996).

Cowan and Cowan's (2000) landmark ten-year, longitudinal study on the transition to parenthood sheds light on the intense changes that occur for new parents in terms of their sense of self, their relationships as partners, as well as with their family of origin and with the broader community. The *Becoming a Family Project* utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods to yield the following insights into this early period of family life. First, parents changed individually. They began to ask questions about purpose and meaning. Some parents attended to previously unresolved issues. On a related note, Ellison (2005) studied the impact of children's influence on mother's brain functioning and found, when compared to non-mothers, mothers showed marked improvement in the areas of perception, resiliency, efficiency, motivation, and social skills. Second, Cowan and Cowan discovered that most couples experience a profound shift in the division of labor and a decline in marital intimacy. Third, balancing work and family along with making decisions about childcare was central to the couples in the

*Becoming a Family Project*. Finally, many of the couples were challenged by the task of learning to accept the strengths and weaknesses of their own parents. In other words, couples reflected upon their own upbringing, evaluated the job their parents did, and made decisions about whether to model or re-work their childhood experiences.

Dillon (2002) similarly found that children affect parents in virtually every developmental sphere; emotionally, politically, cognitively, and spiritually. Dillon categorized four themes of child effects which he labeled: (a) informational influence, (b) catalysts for integration, (c) cognitive flexibility, and (d) inspirational influence. Twenty six percent of adults in Dillon's study reported being influenced by information presented by children such as recycling or changing bad habits (eating better and exercising). A larger portion (34%) reported that children became catalysts for integration. These adults found that children awakened conflicts and repressed memories from the past, thus creating opportunities to resolve previously disowned childhood experiences. For these adults, the child acted as a "trigger" which the adult, then, utilized for further growth, unity, and wholeness in adult life. A larger percentage of the participants (47%) reported feeling smarter and more creative as a result of relationships with children. Finally, 29% of the adults in the study reported that children had an inspirational influence. These adults were able to see the world anew through the eyes of a child and reported feeling energized by a child's sense of wonder and mystery. Dillon summarized:

Parents and teachers report that children wrestle with life's mysteries, stand awestruck before the most mundane of spectacles, and hunger for meaning and value by which to live their life. When adults interact with children, the familiar

categories and concepts adults use to organize the world can be challenged and even cracked open by the child (p. 272).

### **Children's Influence on Adult Faith Development**

There may be numerous mechanisms by which children lead parents to further adult faith development. Children may ask questions or bring up concerns regarding matters of faith or they may simply influence religious participation by asking to attend a faith community worship service (Boyatzis et al., 2006). Research indicates that many adults increase their participation in a faith community after becoming parents (Pearce & Axinn, 1998) and that adults are influenced by children in matters of faith, particularly in families with high levels of authoritative parenting (Pinquart & Silbereisen, 2004). Relationships with children and exposure to their questions may encourage adult spiritual reflection and contemplation (Palkovitz, 2002). In her book, *Becoming a Mindful Parent*, Sara Naphthali (2008) writes:

Parenting teaches us all of those spiritual truths that we resist with all our being, but finally cannot avoid – that life can never be perfect, that nothing lasts, that the only time is now... (pp. xi).

In this and many other ways, parenting may become merged with matters of faith and one's relationship with God (Palkovitz, 2002). In addition, as parents teach their children about faith, children's own spiritual capacities may be heightened and thus reflected back to the parent in an ongoing feedback loop (Mahoney et al., 2003).

Research by Marks and Dollahite (2007) and Marks and Palkovitz (2007) highlight many themes that reflect how relationships with children or becoming parents may influence adults' spiritual beliefs. In these studies, parents reported feeling inspired

by the miracle of birth. Many also reported feeling profound gratitude and a sense of connection to something greater than themselves. They also discussed a new sense of humility as children often directly and indirectly highlighted adult shortcomings. A parent's willingness to make changes, to admit mistakes, and to be flexible may be seen as spiritual opportunities that were made possible by a child simply expressing his or her feelings and concerns. Often, parents shared that children may teach adults more than adults teach them, if adults are willing to listen and to see how children themselves see God and experience matters of spirituality (Marks & Palkovitz, 2007).

Research by Palkovitz (2002) on involved fathering revealed the following themes: (a) Some fathers experienced no change in their religious beliefs or behaviors after becoming fathers because religion had either always been a priority, or religion remained negatively perceived, however, (b) a little over one half of the fathers in Palkovitz's study *did* experience change in their religious beliefs and behaviors. Specifically, they experienced an increase in commitment to faith (seeking a faith community or returning to a faith community) which included participation in religious education for youth.

One potent motivation for change, reported by some fathers, included wanting to be a role model and teacher to their children concerning matters of faith. This occurrence is consistent with statistical information presented earlier regarding parenting and religious education (90% of parents want some type of religious training for their children). Palkovitz (2002) also found that the change in level of faith commitment exhibited by fathers (increased time spent in religious activities) was not sudden and intense but that it typically occurred slowly over time.

## **Children's Spirituality**

Parents are responsible for their children and have much to offer children in the way of love, nurturing, discipline, and protection. However, many believe that children (if an adult is perceptive) have much to offer parents as well. Particularly in the arena of spirituality, the child can serve as spiritual teacher, guide, and/or inspiration (Miller & Kelley, 2006, Hay & Nye, 2006; Dillon, 2000, 2002).

One inherent problem with the study of childhood spirituality is the absence of consensus in the field about the definition of "spirituality." It may involve seeking the sacred, or possessing qualities such as mystery, awe, generosity, and gratitude. Some define it as similar to the pursuit of meaning and connection – the self embedded in something greater (Roehlkepartain et al., 2006). Yust, Johnson, Sasso, and Roehlkepartain, 2006 (p. 8) offer the following definition:

Spirituality is the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual participates in the sacred – something greater than the self. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility. It is experienced, formed, shaped, and expressed through a wide range of religious narratives, beliefs, and practices and is shaped by many influences in family, community, society, culture, and nature.

Lippman, et al. (2004) define spirituality as the construct that reflects the dimensions of meaning, connection, purpose, and transcendence. Underpinnings include awe, wonder, love, compassion, wisdom, and asking the "big" questions of life (Hart, 2006; Hart, 2004). Other assumptions of spirituality are as follows: 1) it must be actively nurtured under certain conditions to be fully actualized. 2) It is embedded in relationships or a

community of faith. 3) It is expressed in ethical and moral behavior toward others (Hay et al., 2006; Yust et al., 2006).

**Children's Spiritual Capacities.** Hay and Nye (2006) used a three theme categorization of spiritual sensitivity to conceptualize the core of children's spiritual experience. They present spiritual sensitivity as awareness (living in the now and being attuned to nature), mystery (wonder, awe, and imagination), and value (meaning and ultimate goodness). They then used these categories to qualitatively define the "core" of children's spirituality. They found that children, regardless of religion and faith, had experiences of what the researchers termed "relational consciousness". The themes included child-God (child's relationship with God), child-people (child in fellowship), child-world (child's relationship with nature), and child-self (child's existential issues and ponderings).

Hay and Nye (2006) claimed that spirituality may be most prominent in childhood and base their proposition on the theory of Alister Hardy. A British biologist, Alister Hardy theorized that religious and spiritual experience has evolved through natural selection because it has survival value and the various religions that exist throughout the world are expressions of a common spiritual theme. The assumption that spirituality is intrinsic is not only based on the fact that religion and spirituality have been found throughout history and throughout the world, but also on a growing body of research which points to potential biological and physiological underpinnings (Hart, 2006; Hay & Nye, 2006; Roehlkepartain et al., 2006; Scarlette, 2006). Research is drawing more serious attention to a site in the brain which is hypothesized to stimulate spiritual experiences (Hay et al., 2006). A recent study of meditating individuals highlights

considerable change in the brain when the participants entered a meditative state (Hay & Nye, 2006). Along the same lines, Hart (2006) wrote:

There is a growing body of evidence that children have spiritual capacities and experiences – moments, both little and large, that shape their lives in enduring ways. These varied experiences reveal a rich and significant spiritual life that has gone largely unrecognized in the annals of child development and yet may provide one of the most fundamental sources of human motivation. The evidence of these experiences/innate capacities challenges conventional views of childhood spiritual life... (p. 163).

Along these lines, children sometimes have a special spot in nature that propels moments of contemplation and connection that is often unattainable in a hurried up and modern world. Eighty percent of the young adults in a study conducted by Hart (2006) reported that they had experiences of awe inspired by the world around them in childhood. Twelve percent reported having this type of spiritual experience prior to age six. (Hart, 2006). Additionally, children are concerned with existential knowing (Hart, 2006; Louv, 2006). A participant in Hart's study offered the following:

I couldn't get my teachers to take my questions and ideas seriously. I thought this was what school was going to be about. There was such a big deal about going off to first grade, but I kept waiting for us to talk about life – you know why we're all here? What's this world about? The nature of the universe. Things like that. When I'd ask or say my ideas just to sort of get things going, there would be dead silence, and the teacher would move on to spelling or something. I thought, 'OK, I guess we're getting to the basic stuff this year, and then we'll get into the good



stuff in second grade, I can wait that long if I have to.’ Well second grade came and went and it wasn’t any better – maybe worse – since we didn’t even get to play as much. By fourth grade, I remember thinking, ‘I must be an alien. These people don’t understand. I’m not a social zero; I have friends. But no one, especially not the teachers, are talking about this.’ School seems not to be very interested in my questions or any questions really; it is all about the answers.

We’re really only supposed to give them the right answer. (p. 169).

This excerpt demonstrates the notion that children experience the limits of existential knowing and being. Existential limits include experiences of death, sense of aloneness despite intimacy and community, need for purpose in life and an awareness of free will, and responsibility. Berryman (2002), in his work with dying children at Texas Medical Center, observed how children soothed one another and their parents as they approached the end of their own lives. Berryman posited that it is not the awareness and surrender to these limits that is harmful to human development. Rather, it is resistance and denial that creates angst and suffering (Berryman, 2002; Frankl, 1984; Lantz, 1993).

In his work with elementary school children, Coles (1990) witnessed what he called “deafening silence” in the classroom as he read essays from children addressing the following questions; “Who are you?”, “What about you matters most?”, and “What makes you the person you are?” The first time Coles presented these questions to a group of working-class, fifth-grade students, he was unsure whether or not they would understand the assignment. He said, after a few moments of thought, most students were in full action; writing, coloring, and painting. The children were not perplexed; they were enthusiastic. Coles, in essence, gave the children an existential voice. He gave

them an opportunity to listen to each other, to teach each other, and to really learn about each other.

**Why The Spiritual Child Movement Is a New Phenomena.** The following sections describe the way both developmentalists and theologians have thought about children throughout recent history. Developmentalists tended to see children's spiritually as a progression, whereas theologians have been somewhat ambivalent.

**Developmentalists.** Much of the research on children's religious and spiritual experience followed the theory of Piaget (Dillon, 2000; Hay & Nye, 2006; Linder, 2004). Piaget's theory of cognitive development focuses on how children think about the world through a series of predictable stages (Brooks, 2008; Crain, 1992). In following this theory, children were not seen as having the capacity to understand matters of faith until reaching higher levels of cognitive functioning usually in adolescence (Dillon, 2000; Ratcliff & Nye, 2006). As a result, religious education for children typically involved methods focusing on a fundamental level where the "basics" could be taught, usually in entertaining ways (Westerhoff, 1976; Yust et al., 2006). Dillon (2000) calls this approach *hierarchal tendencies* or a *replacement view of development* where growth occurs in a unidirectional path toward an end goal.

Fowler used a stage model for his theory of faith development (Fowler, 1981). He was, however, able to move the field forward by broadening ideas about the time frame in which children begin to discover meanings, which he claims occurs in young childhood (Linder, 2004). Then, several small studies of children's spiritual experiences began to emerge (Farmer, 1992; Hollander, 1980; Robinson, 1983) which challenged the cognitive views of children's spirituality (Linder, 2004). These studies reflected faith in

multisensory terms (physically through the senses, emotionally through feelings, socially through family and history, and cognitively through curiosity) not just as a higher level intellectual capability. In this way, faith began to be viewed as available to the young as well as to the mature (Yust, 2004).

In 1990, Coles presented the first large-scale study of children's spiritual experiences, entitled *The Spiritual Life of Children*. The study served as a pivotal point in the field and drew attention to the notion of spirituality as a universal human attribute through his demonstration of children's deep and profound capacity for awareness in theological and spiritual matters (Hay & Nye, 2006; Linder, 2004; Ratcliff & Nye, 2006). As mentioned earlier, Coles (1990) worked with children in the area of spiritual matters. Through numerous discussions and children's writing and artwork, he found that children are quite capable of feeling lonely and of philosophical reflection. He found that for highly religious children, it was difficult to separate their spiritual and psychological development. This was the case for Connie, for example, who chastised Coles' psychoanalytical approach when she asked him, "Why won't you talk to *me* [my religious self] and not just about my problems?" Subsequently, in 1996, the first journal on children's spirituality was published and in the year 2000, scholars, educators, and clergy attended their first international conference (Ratcliff & Nye, 2006).

**Theologians.** Turning to religious perspectives on children, Bunge (2001, 2006) writes that in Christianity, children have been seen with ambivalence and she details six paradoxical views of children throughout recent history: 1.) *Children are gifts and sources of joy*. This view supports the notion of the child as God's blessing and challenges "children as property". 2.) *Children as sinful*. Stemming from the writings of

Calvin, children are seen as being born in a state of sin. 3.) *Children as requiring instruction and guidance*. This view emphasizes adult responsibility to nurture the child's faith. 4.) *Children as made in the image of God*. In this way, children are to be respected, protected, and are able to receive God's grace. 5.) *Neighbors in need*. This view involves taking care of sick, poor, abused, or abandoned children. 6.) *Children as spiritual teachers and models of faith*. This final view highlights the importance of paying attention to children's questions and experiences and understanding more about the role that children play in the development of faith in adulthood. Bunge argues that when we hold these views together, we see the needs of children as whole. What has been most neglected is how children can teach, inspire and thus, influence adults. Within this purview, what is even more neglected is how children's spiritual capacities transpire within a family context (Ratcliff & Nye, 2006).

### **The Spiritual Child Movement and Influence on Adult Faith Development**

What we are beginning to see is that children have a spiritual life. They have the ability to recognize existential realities, possess innocent wisdom, are capable of moments of compassion, and often live their life through the lens of wonder and curiosity (Berryman, 2009; Hart, 2006). The spiritual child movement stemming from children's experiences, feelings and biology, and supported through the environment (Scarlette, 2006) has many implications for mature, adult faith development. Parents may reprioritize what is important or notice new meaning in life (Dillon, 2000). Children's presence and capacities may help adults heal negative or toxic religious experiences or to recognize their own forgotten or repressed capacities for curiosity, for being present, and fully alive (Dillon, 2000; Hart, 2006).

## **Conclusion**

Generative spirituality provides a framework for understanding how faith can be preventative or protective for the parent-child relationship and how faith and parenting may follow along similar and overlapping paths (Dollahite, 2003). Although faith may involve risk factors for some parent-child relationships, many studies have been presented to support the positive links between faith and parenting. The concepts of bidirectionally and agency in the literature on parent-child relationships coupled with recent thoughts concerning the nature of children's spiritual and religious experience provide the basis for inquiry into the processes at work between faith, parent, and child.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The goal of this research seeks to expand current understanding concerning the connection between faith and the parent-child relationship. This goal involves exploring bidirectional influences and contexts (faith, the parent-child relationship and the potential merging path of the two). A qualitative approach was utilized. Qualitative research is appropriate and well suited to situations where theory is in need of revision, when new domains are yet to be explored (Kuczynski & Daly, 2003), or when the goal of research is to uncover processes and mechanisms between relationships (Marks, 2004; Palkovitz et al., 2003). The latter two situations specifically apply here.

Many theories in the field of parent-child relationships are based on dated clinical observations (Kuczynski & Daly, 2003) or unidirectional influences (Kuczynski, 2003). Much of the research on faith and family is based on single measures such as church attendance or religious affiliation (Chatters & Taylor, 2005), whereas little attention has

been paid to the contexts of spirituality (Ratcliff & Nye, 2006), or the role of children in the faith development of adults (Bunge, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, the following definition applies: “Qualitative methods attempt to study the lived experiences of parents and children in their relationships and the meanings they construct of those experiences from their own perspectives” (Kuczynski & Daly, 2003, p. 375).

Qualitative research is useful for obtaining deeper understandings of complex, sensitive topics and may uncover unknown motivating factors. It is used when the goal is to be more congruent with the ontology of human relationships. Often, influential phenomena cannot be measured but the result of the influencing phenomena *can* be measured (Boss, 2002; Slife & Williams, 1995). In other words, the immeasurable is real in its consequences. For example, a committed and purposeful relationship with God is real because it is linked with real outcomes (beliefs, attitudes, behaviors, etc.) (Hay, Reich, & Utsch, 2006).

People possess the ability to make choices and they react to events based on their subjective perceptions of the world rather than to the event itself. Qualitative research taps into this constructionist view most successfully through deeply respectful relationships with participants (Boss, 2002; Duncan & Goddard, 2005; Hay & Nye, 2006) and ends with a deeper, ontologically sound, and more organized understanding of the topic at hand (Kuczynski & Daly, 2003).

### **Construct of Faith**

Criteria for the construct of faith will be based on Boyatzis and colleagues’ (2006) three dimensions of generative spirituality as discussed in the previous chapter: spiritual

beliefs/paradigm, spiritual practices, and spiritual/faith community. Spiritual beliefs encompass the framework in which people may notice the potential for meaning. They may involve specific attitudes toward the significance of relationships. Spiritual beliefs may be defined as the personal inventory of thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and desires stemming from, and grounded in, one's relationship with God. Spiritual and religious practices whereby the meanings of spiritual life are actualized and/or honored might include prayer, religious study, and/or ritual. Faith community involves acting upon and engaging in spiritual practices within a community of service and support that is interconnected and bound by Godly relationships. It is critically important that all three dimensions of generative spirituality are considered as beliefs are often non-congruent with practices (Marks, 2004).

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative research based on the phenomenological approach (focusing on people's subjective experiences as a way of interpreting the world) typically relies on a purposive sample. A purposive sample is based on theoretical premises and meets specific criteria that are set prior to the data collection process for the intent purpose of discovering deeply held motivations which are often based on perceptions (Boss, 2002). Random samples are not used because the intent of the study is not to generalize but to explore and to discover (Trochim, 2000).

Criteria for inclusion in this study were highly religious parents. Highly religious parents were identified by clergy and were based on a quantitative analysis of the number of hours parents spend in faith-related activities per week and the amount of income contributed to their respective faith community. Also, couples with a strong marriage



(married 15 years or longer) were targeted. The 15 year mark was chosen for two primary reasons. First, the highest risk period for marital dissolution is typically seven years (Gottman, 1999). Choosing couples married 15 years or longer adequately surpasses this early risk period. Second, because this study addresses parenting, choosing the 15 year mark allows for couples to spend adequate time in their relationships as parents. Using these criteria focused in on the data of interest because as Boss (2002) suggests, phenomena is best understood by exploring prototypical examples.

Two sources of data were utilized. First, a primary existing data set was employed. The existing data set (27 couples) were drawn from a diverse, national, qualitative data set referred to as the *Faith and Family Project*. The project currently includes 184 families from all eight major geographic regions of the country (Total  $N = 445$  individuals) and has been conducted by Loren Marks of the Louisiana State University and David Dollahite of Brigham Young University and their respective research teams. More specifically, participants resided in New England (MA, CT), the Northwest (OR, WA), the Pacific region (CA), the Mountain West (ID), the Mid-Atlantic (DE, MD, PA), the Midwest (OH, WI), the Southern Crossroads region (KS, OK), and the South (FL, LA). Of the families, half (50.5%) represented an ethnic or racial minority including African American, Latino, Asian American, Native American, and Pacific Islander. Interviews were conducted with highly religious married parents including those of Christian, Jewish, LDS<sup>1</sup> (Latter-day Saint or “Mormon”), and Muslim faiths. Although many of the issues surrounding faith and family life are timeless, it is

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<sup>1</sup> The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS or “Mormon” faith) self-identifies as a Christian faith but the religion is addressed separately in this paper due to several distinct practices and beliefs and because of the argument by a leading sociologist of religion that it should be studied as a “new world faith” (Stark, 1984).

important to note that all interviews were conducted after the historically influential terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The 27 interviews utilized for this study had been previously coded for financial information, however, information regarding the processes underlying faith and the parent-child relationship had not been analyzed. The interviews were conducted between the years 2005 and 2010. Like the larger sample, this smaller sample included participants from several regions of the country including the south, southeast, southwest, northeast and northwest which, in part, accounts for regional differences in religiosity. Of the 27 couples, 12 were Christian (including Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist, and Non-Denominational), four were LDS, four were Jewish and seven were Muslim. The ages of participants ranged from 34 to 61 and most had some college. The average number of children in this sample was 3.6 (slightly higher than the larger sample).

The second data set was drawn first hand through the interview process with six new participants (three sets of parents) of Jewish and Episcopalian faith. This researcher was advised to target primarily Jewish families as the Jewish faith is least represented in the complete data set, however, due to access issues, the third couple interviewed were Episcopalian. Families were purposively recruited in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana, and Orleans Parish, Louisiana. Internal Review Board approval has been previously granted by the primary investigator (LSU IRB #E2768). The researcher contacted the clergy of a Jewish synagogue to determine potential participants based on clerical recommendations. Potential participants were then contacted through a follow-up phone call. Of the three Jewish couples who were referred, one accepted the invitation to participate and was interviewed at their place of worship. Another purposively selected

Jewish family was interviewed in their home. One of the referred Jewish couples accepted the invitation to be interviewed but responded too late to be included. One referred Jewish couple declined, but another purposively selected Jewish family was interviewed in their place. A third couple interviewed was identified in the Episcopal Church. These three couples had an average of three children and held a bachelors degree or higher. Their age ranged between 46 and 80. Following informed consent, both mother and father were jointly asked a series of open-ended and semi-structured questions (see Appendix D) based on literature concerning the influence of faith on parenting, their relationship with their children and their relationship's influence on adult faith maturation. Participants were encouraged to elaborate by sharing personal stories and/or experiences. The process lasted, on average, one to two hours.

### **Data Analysis**

Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews (both primary and secondary) were open coded which involved identifying concepts presented in the narratives. Then, identified concepts were organized into themes (axial coding). The themes, then, became the core of what is transpiring in terms of the processes at work between faith, parents, and children. Later, narratives that illustrate each theme were included in the findings section of the paper. Finally, themes were analyzed to determine any interactions and/or relations, linked together, and presented in total to end with a well considered explanation (Corbin & Stauss, 2008; Trochim, 2000) concerning the mutual influences between faith and the parent-child relationship. The primary themes underlying the relationship between faith, parent, and child are presented in Chapter Four. Also, several minor themes were identified and presented (see

Appendix A). The minor themes fit the objectives of this research study as well as the major themes, however, due to saliency and numeric count analysis they are listed in the appendix. Future research in these areas is highly recommended.

Specifically, the Marks four phase method of qualitative data analysis was employed. Phase one included determining the ideal purposive sample (as detailed above). Phase two involved data collection and analysis. During this phase, interviews were conducted. Following each interview, a memo was immediately written describing overall impressions and non-verbal communication. Then the interview was transcribed and open coded line by line. Concepts were identified explicitly and implicitly. For example, a participant might have said, “I try to be kind to my spouse.” This statement would have been explicitly coded as *kindness*. Another participant might have said, “I try hard to avoid criticizing my spouse.” This statement would have been implicitly coded *kindness*. After each interview was coded in its entirety and line by line, a Numeric Count Analysis was conducted. Post-it notes were used to tally how many times each concept occurred within and across interviews. Concepts were also analyzed for saliency. When all post-it notes were placed together, it became the picture of the study. Through the Numeric Count Analysis, four major themes and several minor themes were identified.

Phase three involved compiling a file for each theme. Narratives were cut and pasted into a new file with that theme’s name. The file was read through several times and the narratives that best captured the essence of the theme were chosen for inclusion in the write-up. Phase four involved “quilting” the excerpts together in a way that ended with an authentic, detailed, organized, and coherent story.

## **Qualitative Validity**

The value of qualitative research is judged by many factors. Such factors are credibility, confirmability, triangulation, and reflexivity.

**Credibility.** Credibility involves an appropriate match between what the participant is trying to communicate and how the interviewer interprets the participant's statements. For this project, this writer maximized credibility by conducting three interviews in person and then, personally transcribed the interviews.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability was enhanced by keeping available all data sources (the audio, hard copy and all analysis) (Dollahite & Marks, 2007).

**Triangulation.** Triangulation is a means of examining and analyzing conclusions by considering several points of view or vantage points. The procedure is used to check the integrity of conclusions by employing several data sources, several perspectives, several methods, and/or a team of several researchers. The underlying assumption of triangulation implies that truth is best revealed as an aggregate rather than by a single finding (Schwandt, 2001). Data have been triangulated by considering mother's response, father's response, and interviewer's observation (Schwandt, 2001). Also in line with the principles of triangulation, this study was supported by the three-pronged conceptualization of faith: beliefs, practices, and community.

**Reflexivity.** Although we must strive for objectivity in research, it is impossible to be perfectly objective. The most honest and truthful approach a researcher can take is to admit their subjectivity and bias that may skew data collection and data analysis (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004). It is in this spirit of reflexive disclosure that I offer the following personal and professional experiences. Personally, I am a blessed, married

mother of a ten year-old daughter and a six year-old son. I feel deep joy, gratitude, and purpose in my relationships with my husband and children and in our quiet and simple life on our small southern Louisiana farm. My husband and I have been a couple for over twenty years and together, we are members of the Episcopal Church.

Professionally, I am inspired by the work of the following authors. Haim Ginott was a renowned child therapist who focused his career on gentle parent-child communication. Jerome Berryman is an Episcopal priest and creator of *Godly Play*, an approach to religious education that uses silence and the stories of religious people to help children to explore the meaning of life and other existential issues. Daniel Siegel is a child psychiatrist who introduced me to the philosophy of mindful parenting and who teaches parents that the “first step in raising happy and healthy children is to fully understand and learn from our own childhood experiences.” And also, I am inspired by Parker Palmer, author of *The Courage to Teach*, who helps me to remember that “we teach who we are.”

### **Contributions**

As mentioned earlier, broadening understanding of faith and family may help family helpers to provide a higher level of quality care by increasing cultural competencies. For the field of family science, this research provides further understandings about the dynamics that underlie close and connected parent-child relationships. This information is important for families of faith as well as for secular families. Parents, themselves, may be inspired by the stories of successful family life. Also, understanding more about how children influence parents may benefit clergy and religious educators who are charged with facilitating the faith development of families.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **FINDINGS**

This chapter outlines four core themes that emerged from the qualitative analysis of thirty Christian, LDS, Jewish, and Muslim families. The participant's narratives are included to further illustrate the processes underlying faith and the parent-child relationship. As is the case in much of qualitative research, many of the concepts that make up each theme and subtheme will have varying degrees of similarity. Many of the concepts are not pure and mutually exclusive typologies and as such, will overlap considerably. The primary themes included:

Theme 1: Concerns about Contemporary American Culture: The Best Things in Life are Slow

Subtheme 1a: Opposing Values Stemming from the Media, Peers, and Time Pressures

Subtheme 1b: Opposing Values Stemming from Conspicuous Consumption

Theme 2: Commitment to Family Life: My Actions are the Ground Upon Which I Stand

Theme 3: Close and Connected Family Relationships:

Subtheme 3a: Social and Emotional Intelligence: Love is Patient and Kind

Subtheme 3b: Ritual and Prayer: Love is Intentional

Theme 4: Children's Influences: And the Child Shall Lead Them

**Theme 1: Concerns about Contemporary Culture: The Best Things in Life are Slow**

Parents expressed a variety of concerns about raising children in today's society. Some spoke of opposing values in the media. Some talked about their concerns regarding materialistic goals. Parents also discussed how they use their faith to manage their concerns regarding raising children in contemporary culture.

**Subtheme 1a. Opposing Values Stemming from the Media, Peers, and Time Pressures.** Many concerns of parents focused on the influences of popular entertainment such as television programs, music, and other forms of media that espouse opposing values. Some parents expressed concerns about what presently appears to be fashionable such as piercings and painted hair.

Even if parents were able to minimize these influences at home, it seems that children were usually exposed to these influences at school and in other venues, especially as they grew older and pushed out into the world. Parents typically dealt with their concerns about popular culture in a number of ways for example, they often talked about giving up being perceived as "in vogue" or a part of "the in crowd". Mark, a Christian father, uses exposure to negative influences as opportunities to teach his children about their own family values and how to cope with the pressures of high risk lifestyles. He said:

We try to shield...the children from certain broadly secular types of entertainment or things that they really shouldn't be seeing or hearing or participating in.... [A]s they become older, it's been our experience that you're not going to be able to



shield them forever, so we...let a little bit of that in, in controlled situations, and then sit down and talk about, “Now there are people in the world that...do this...and we don’t agree with that, but here’s one of the ways that you can handle that on your own.” Drugs, sex... you cannot shield your children forever, so you try to give them enough information where they can make their own decisions, and talk to them about consequences...

Often, parents expressed concerns about the tendency of contemporary cultural trends (technology, extracurricular activities, consumerism) to work against close and connected family relationships and against time to reflect and contemplate on the direction of one’s life. Zachary, an Episcopalian father, relates, “[my children] have difficulty being by themselves without some sort of distraction and I think that is very much a part of this culture.” On a slightly different but similar note, one concerned mother said:

We have to be careful about computer and TV time. There are times when we are just doing our own thing, especially now with all this technology. I think it can hinder our relationships. It takes time that we could spend together; praying together.

This mother seems to understand that if she and her family do not consciously monitor the amount of their screen time, their relationships may suffer. Laura, a Christian mother, echoes the above:

Many times our lives become so full of activities that it’s just hard to relate... we’ve kind of learned how to grab minutes, to reprioritize and not do everything.

As mentioned above, some parents appear to be choosing to go against the “tide,” or as one father termed, “this microwave society,” in order to spend more time as a family and to make sure that sufficient time is spent on reflecting on what is important. As Julie, a Jewish mother, explained:

...[during religious holidays] we shut out more of the external world and we do more as a family and more with the Jewish community...things that mean more to us. And we’re a little more focused on the things that we know matter.

And similarly, as a Jewish father living in south Louisiana explained:

I’m as familiar with LSU football, crawfish boils, Mardi Gras, all that stuff in the French Quarter, and the festivals as I care to be. A lot of people live for those things...I participated in those things when I was younger but they really don’t [hold] meaning for me anymore. I get a lot more meaning and a sense of quality and fulfillment out of spending time in my yard, growing roses or vegetables... And when I do yard work, it [becomes] a time for reflection.

In addition to concerns stemming from time pressures and technology, parents also talked about their concerns regarding materialism, as discussed below

### **Subtheme 1b. Opposing Values Stemming from Conspicuous Consumption.**

For the purposes of this paper, conspicuous consumption is defined as an emphasis on external material wealth as opposed to internal intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and/or relational pursuits and experiences (Moore & Asay, 2008). Although some families in this study were not concerned about conspicuous consumption, many reported feeling the tension between lavish spending and connected family relationships. One mother who

recently relocated to America from a foreign country described the temptation to hyper-consume:

...living here, I have to be careful sometimes because I see all this comfort around me [and] I want to have it. It's called the American Dream. I have to be careful of that.

Some parents perceived that too much time spent on external pursuits places additional stress on marital relationships and has negative consequences on the character development of children. Jim, a Christian father, talked about his feelings toward other men who are overly focused on material wealth and who lack the rewards of a close, meaningful and supportive family life:

Their goals are money. They want to build their wealth and they want to be able to do whatever they want to do. Well, that's not happiness. Sure, they're happy in their success, I guess, but it's not lasting. I've seen them in their personal lives go through some very difficult things because they don't have a good relationship. They don't have a good wife to stand beside them. They don't have children that will bring them joy in their old age. One guy is getting up their in age and I just feel sorry for what he's missing out on. He's got millions and millions of dollars. He could have anything he wants but all he has is work. He doesn't have anything else...it's really sad. So I think that they think we're missing out on those kinds of things. That's sad for them.

Likewise, Svenya, an Episcopalian mother raising her young teens in a culture of affluence expressed her frustration:

I think [kids] need to realize that getting the Uggs is not going to do it, getting the Popocho watch is not going to do it, doing all this external stuff is not going to do it...they may need to go through that external focus a thousand times before they really [understand] that it does not hold the key.

In her book, *The Price of Privilege*, Levine (2006) discusses the deteriorating state of affluent teenagers emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually. Levine argues that increasingly, affluent teens are narrowly rewarded. American society tends to place more emphasis on external successes (grades and appearance, for examples) instead of internal development (success in relationships and doing the right thing). This trend is reflected in the following concern which is again offered by Svenya, the Episcopalian mother quoted above:

I have a concern with everything being so externally focused; approval of other people, having to look a certain way, having to dress a certain way...this constant barrage against listening to your inner self and being true to who you are. That's extinguished in this culture. It makes it harder to hear those whispers (that little voice) and I think [the external is perceived] as a lot more glamorous than faith or spiritual connection...it's almost like you need to be entertained spiritually these days and I think that goes against the development of spirituality...

Later, Svenya explains how she and her family attempt to counteract the external focus prevalent in American culture:

...[before dinner] we have a moment of silence. We're listening to the silence inside...it's an attempt to counter the cultural external focus and we ask what happened today that we're thankful for...and who has needs.

Barbara, one of the Jewish mothers interviewed, also attempts to counter the cultural trend of external focus by attending to the value of internal character in her parenting efforts. She explained:

[T]he most profound thing...anybody ever said to me about parenting [is that] we should reserve our highest praise for our children's acts of kindness to others....

[W]e try to...make a bigger fuss over those [acts of kindness] than their grades, or their athletic accomplishments, or anything else.... [W]hen they do the right thing, when they are kind, when they reach out to someone who needs a friend, those are the things that we are most proud of. [T]hat is a totally Jewish concept.

In conclusion, families of faith are concerned about a contemporary culture characterized by a fast pace and a focus on external achievement. Covey (1989) has reflected that many people spend their life climbing to the top of the ladder, only to reach the top and discover that their ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. The families in this study do not reportedly desire to simply climb the popular ladder. They appear to make a conscious and mindful choice to avoid the often powerful pull of popular trends and to focus their attention and energy on living contemplative, Godly lives where family relationships are a priority. We see this more clearly in the narratives presented in *Theme Two: Commitment to Family Life: My Actions are the Ground Upon Which I Stand*.

## **Theme 2: Commitment to Family Life: My Actions Are the Ground upon Which I Stand**

The second theme that emerged from the interview data involved commitment to family life. Parents expressed strong convictions about their commitments to stay together, to work it out when times got tough, and to keep in the forefront what is best for

children. Drawing on an aspect of the previous sub-theme (conspicuous consumption), Martin shares his priorities in life:

[A]ll that stuff is...peripheral....[W]e have a beautiful home and everything that I could ever imagine. Life [is] how I was hoping [it] would turn out...[B]ut having kids the way that they are is so much more important. Having Maggie [with the] testimony that she has and Eva being the loving person that she is.

Parents talked about how their spiritual beliefs and involvement in their faith community helped them to prioritize family life, to avoid divorce, and to maintain their commitment as illustrated by the following comments:

Jack: “[My involvement] has caused me to realize what I need to do...I realize there are things I have responsibility for – like not only earning money but responsibility for [guiding] children.”

Sam: “I have certain responsibility; things that I need to do, whether they are to honor or to love forever.

Mathew: “[Faith]...gives me a sense of accountability to someone other than just me...”

Abodi: “God encourages happiness in a family and in a relationship. Islam promotes family...you start with family first...”

These beliefs parallel the teachings of existential psychotherapist Jim Lantz who based his life’s work on the concepts of Viktor Frankl. Lantz taught that if we are to have successful family lives, we must be responsible. We must do what is right and take care of each other. Without responsibility in family life, the by-products of freedom, meaning, and happiness are in danger (Lantz, 1993).

**Relationships as Sacred.** From the interview data, it appears that couples of strong faith are responsible to each other and to their family life from a sense of the sacred. In other words, faith seems to make family life special. The following narratives highlight this spiritual perspective. Scott, a Christian father, explains:

I think marriage is designed by God. Marriage is not our idea. It is God's idea...Divorce is not an option so we'll have to work out our differences. We have to learn to accept who our spouse is and to work it out.

Similarly, Marianne, a mother from the Church of Latter-day Saints described the notion of sacred responsibility in family life:

...[B]ecause we believe in the eternities and that marriage is forever, no matter how bad or whatever happens to us, we're going to make it work. We like to say that the "D" word never comes up in the house. It is not about getting mad at somebody and throwing that word out there. [Divorce is] not an option. That is the goal that you're both working toward. I can't separate my marriage from the spiritual part of it because I think of it as the same.

Other parents echoed the same message. Lacey, a Jewish mother explained, "The spark of the Divine is in all of us, and when that is a real thing, it can't help but affect your relationships with all people, and it should be especially so with your spouse." Likewise, Carlos, a Catholic father said, "God pleases you with the gift of grace to strengthen you to live out your marital vows to each other...Our ability to have a strong marriage originates from that sacrament that we received when we got married in the church. I think our strength in marriage flows directly from our faith." Caden reflects on the

amount of work involved in family life and describes how faith seems to transform the mundane into everyday blessings:

If you think about it, in [family life], we have so much concrete stuff. We have to wake up, we have to get the kids ready, we have to feed and bathe them, feed and bathe ourselves, we have to go to work, we have to do all this, and I think within our tradition, and the things we do at home with our family, it adds a special...different aspect of our life, from day-to-day and from week-to-week, and it helps to make it special.

**Commitment Is Action-Based.** Not only did the couples interviewed describe the sanctification of family life, a prevalent concept in the literature, but they also stressed their belief in the importance of action-based commitment. Commitment to family life is the force that drives one to put their energy and skills into action toward their spouse and children. Anna, a Jewish mother, describes this religious principle that she believes is important to relationships, “In Judaism, it is all about what you do, not what you said, not what you profess to believe, but what you actually [did]: it is all about the practice.” Anna’s spiritual principle brings to mind a similar Buddhist principal (one of the five remembrances). Thich Nhat Hahn, in his book *The Plum Village Chanting Book* (1991), outlines the fifth remembrance which states that actions are one’s only true belongings; their consequences cannot be escaped and that they are the ground upon which one stands. In this way, it seems as if the paradigm of commitment leads to actions and behaviors that increase a family’s success. Sarim, a Muslim father said, “I believe to have a good influence on my child, I have to spend time with him and to spend quality time with him. That makes them love you and if they love you, they will listen to



you.” While parents made several comments about their beliefs concerning action-based commitment perhaps Gwyneth, a mother in the church of LDS, most pointedly describes the potential power of intentional family life (family life that is based on conscious prioritizing). Gwyneth describes an encounter with her husband Joseph who had been busy attending evening church and community meetings for several weeks:

[Joseph] had a meeting and it was one of those [evenings] I had made a nice dinner expecting him to be home and then he [said], “I gotta go.” He’d been home for five minutes....I didn’t know about this meeting and he left. Deep breath... and the girls [said] after he left, “Why did daddy leave? We’ve not [even] seen him.” My heart started hurting. A few minutes later he showed up at the door. He said, “You know, this meeting’s not very important,” and that to me meant so much. He got almost there, turned around, came back.... That’s one of those things that make me keep him no matter what.

The families of faith in this study appear to be committed to family life. They appear to see their relationships as blessed by God. Their relationships seem special. This sacred paradigm seems to lead them to behave congruently and authentically. In other words, their beliefs and actions are synchronized. The narratives in this section call to mind the story of Nikolai. Written by Jon J. Muth, *The Three Questions: Based on a Story by Leo Tolstoy* (2002) tells of a young boy named Nikolai. The young boy asks, “When is the best time to do things?”; “Who is the most important one?” and “What is the right thing to do?” Nikolai learns that there is only one important time and that time is now, the most important one is always the one you are with and the most important thing is to do good for the one who is standing by your side. This is why we are here.

In summary, families of faith appear to have a sense of what Nikolai has learned. They appear to understand who is most important, the fragility of the moment (the time to love is now), and the significance of relationships for a meaningful life. In other words, the families interviewed appear to not only have their priorities in line with building a strong family life but they seem to have a sense of what it takes to do this, to “do good,” to connect with each other, and to stay close. The ability to nurture close relationships is highlighted in the narratives presented in the next theme: Close and Connected Family Relationships.

### **Theme Three: Close and Connected Family Relationships**

The third theme focuses on close and connected family relationships. From the interview data, it appears as if faith promotes connection in families by nurturing social and emotional intelligence and through intentional family life (engaging in ritual and prayer). This section begins with a discussion of what is meant by social and emotional intelligence.

#### **Subtheme 3a. Social and Emotional Intelligence: Love Is Patient and Kind.**

It is common knowledge that emotional intelligence is linked with satisfying, connected, and successful relationships. Howard Gardner (1983) popularized the concept of emotional intelligence through his theory of multiple intelligences. Gardner presented several aspects of intelligence that are present to varying degrees in every human being, two of which he described as interpersonal intelligence (communication, sharing, relating and cooperating) and intrapersonal intelligence (insight, intuition and self-reflection). Even though Gardner’s work and others like it (such as the work of Daniel Goleman and John Gottman) has been fairly recent, the concept of social and emotional intelligence is

ancient. Robin Stern, Ph.D., from New York University reminds us that Socrates advised “know thyself.” Along the same lines, Confucius said, “When you meet someone better than yourself, turn your thoughts to becoming his equal. When you meet someone not as good as you are, look within and examine yourself.” Buddha asked, “How can one ever know anything if they are too busy thinking?” And Jesus taught, “The light of the body is the eye; therefore when thine eye is single, the whole body is full of light.”

According to Stern, competencies of social and emotional development include: self and other awareness, understanding the consequences of ones actions and understanding the differences between feeling, thinking and behaving, managing one’s mood and outlook, communicating, resolving problems effectively and having the ability to empathize.

Beliefs concerning the importance of patience, respect, equality and tolerance, kindness and caring, flexibility and balance, forgiveness, gratitude, perseverance and personal strength, family communication, and stress management were commonly expressed throughout the interviews. Here we see the merging of psychology and religion or more specifically, the merging of parenting and spirituality. God is parent to the parent as Coles (1990) wrote in his book *The Spiritual Life of Children*. Further, Fraiberg (1959) argued that optimum mental health must include a solid and integrated value system in order to balance the personality between egocentric wishes and the demands of conscious and society. Sometimes couples talked about learning to find the balance of self and other awareness through their sacred texts. Sometimes they reported learning about how to make relationships work with the help of clergy who are often trained in professional counseling. Often, they spoke about the benefits of family life

education groups. Perhaps many of these groups are led by faith community members who have been trained in social work, psychology, education, or other relationship oriented professions. On many occasions, the couples reported that older and more experienced couples or parents acted as mentors.

However these skills, attributes and attitudes are formed, many parents reported their significance in the processes underlying faith and family relationships. As one father expressed, “Living with somebody is tough...to get along you have to have those refined qualities that come from [faith].” An LDS father offered the trinity of peace, belonging and hope that stemmed from his faith, “One is peace of mind in this life, in the now. Two is a sense of spiritual belonging, regardless of your faith. And three is eternal hope.” Many parents talked about a growing sense of peace as their faith grew. They reported feeling less depression, less anger, and less insecurity. Some parents simply talked about the joy of parenting such as this Christian mother of teenage children:

There are days the kids are stinkers and some days they are not stinkers. As they’ve grown older they have become a lot more fun and real evolved. Real people. [T]hey are real people when they are little but you’re always kind of over the top of them. Do this, do that. Do this, do that. When they start making their own decisions, they are just fun to watch, they are fun to be with. Teenagers are fun.

Parents also expressed that faith [and family life] is a continuous path as did this father, “[I]t’s a long journey...and you never probably get where you need to be...as long as you are moving in the right direction...” Family life is not perfect by any means and the narratives in this study reflected this notion. The families seemed to understand that

“chasing perfection is a good way to have your life pass you by...and it means that your life is stripped of real feeling, love and connection as you pound yourself and those around you with fantasies instead of welcoming realities” (p. 181) to borrow a quote from Levine (2006). Instead, these families appear to understand that conflict is unavoidable and that people sometimes fail and walk a crooked and often bumpy path in family life. Instead of rejecting limitations, mistakes and failure, they reported drawing upon their faith and the qualities of faith that helped them to be the best they can be in order to stay close and connected.

The most common aspects of social and emotional intelligence that ran through the interviews were kindness/patience, ability to manage stress, and prioritizing family communication. We now turn to each of these aspects in depth.

**Kindness and Patience.** Kindness is often thought of in terms of friendliness, pleasantness, good nature, generosity, and concern for others. This skill may seem simplistic (after all, kindness is the focus of every kindergarten curriculum) but all too often, our society faces the consequences of the very absence of kindness. A lack of kindness and tolerance in childhood may lead to bullying behavior; a problem that research indicates may lead to more serious issues later on such as suicide, domestic violence, child abuse, hate crimes, and other criminal behavior. A Norwegian study found that 60% of students identified as bullies in upper middle school and junior high were later cited for criminal behavior in adulthood (Fried and Fried, 2003).

The couples in this study often spoke about kindness, respect, and tolerance as significant principles in their daily family life. Nadira, a mother of Islamic faith emphasized this principle:

I always tell [my children], “[R]espect a person as a person. [T]here shouldn’t be any difference between [you]. [D]on’t treat this one better because this one is Muslim, or because this one is a Christian, a Jew, or an atheist.

Several parents made similar comments:

David: “I think one belief that is important to marriage, as well as important in life, is to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. And marriage is such a tough thing because...there is a lot of give and take. So obviously, you remember how you like to be treated or how you feel about things, you remember how to do that for other people, and especially for your spouse.”

Charlotte: “Sydney does a better job than I do of really living the practice of treating people like you want to be treated. [H]e’s the kindest human being on earth...and the same cannot always be said of me. It’s so much a part of what we do in a given week, [in our marriage], in our parenting and everything.”

Susan: “I think it helps to have a faith base in your family. [My child has] friends who are [Christian], Jewish, and Muslim where she goes to school and having that faith base, they teach you, regardless of what faith you are, this is how you need to treat other people. None of those faiths say, “Walk all over somebody else.”

Or, that you are better than somebody else...”

Ahbishak: “Islam requires you to be gentle and to not dissociate with a bond or attachment so that they [children] come back always to you [for] guidance and direction.”

The spiritual principles of kindness, respect, and tolerance were prevalent throughout the interviews.

Theresa, an LDS mother, describes learning the hard way about the importance of kindness in marriage:

[One thing] I learned is [not to] ever say anything unless you really mean it. [Y]ou can talk about saying “I’m sorry,” and “I don’t know what I was thinking” but those words are out there and they’ll always come back to haunt you. You can forgive somebody but those words leave scars...I knew that I could say, “I’m sorry.” And I knew that I could tell the Heavenly Father that I was sorry but I also knew how I felt when he [spouse] said something that was careless or uncaring. I hoarded that in my soul forever. [I]t’s not that I was mad at him, it just hurts so badly.

Closely related to kindness is the principle of patience which is highlighted next. The concept of patience brings to mind what Denise Roy (2007) calls “Late-for-School Practice” (p. 93). The practice can be utilized when a parent is running late or feeling stressed and involves the following:

- First, take a slow deep breath – for you.
- Become aware of your thoughts, your feelings, and your physical sensations.
- Pay attention to what is happening inside you. Are some of your buttons getting pushed? Are these old patterns?
- Now take another deep breath for your children.
- Notice what is going on with them. What is it like from their point of view?
- Then take a deep breath for the “Now what?” Ask yourself, what is needed in this moment?

- See if you can find grace in the chaos.
- Then choose what you want to do next.

Like the essence of Roy's meditation above, several parents talked about their faith and its apparent connection to increased awareness of feelings, to making conscious choices concerning behavior, and to the development of emotional maturity. Shawn said, "I lose my patience a lot...that's not good Christian behavior...I know I'm doing wrong."

Similarly, Henry shares, "...when I was younger I had quite the temper. I'm quite settled down now, thankful to the spiritual things that I've learned." It appears that these fathers take to heart the essence of the teaching of James when he advised, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to take offense and to anger" (NIV, James 1:19). Additionally, the following mothers also reflect on their relationships with God and its link to self-awareness and emotional intelligence,

Vanessa: "...when I'm closer to God...I'm more aware of the things I say and I'm [better] able to control my emotions.

Allisa: "And then there are times when I respond in frustration; fly off the handle. It's not really thinking about how I'm going to respond. I just react harshly at times...I'm learning to just hear what is happening and just think it through and then to respond. I want to respond out of love and concern and to look at it as a challenge and handle it the way the Lord would want me to. It's very much a learning process."

In line with the above narratives, Patti offers the following insight about the perceived value of patience in marital communication.



[I]n the beginning of our marriage, we just talked in the heat of the moment and there were so many things that we said that were just horrible. [W]e learned to not talk at all when we are in the heat of the moment. Even though, sometimes, one of us really wants to talk, especially me. Sometimes when I'm just really angry at something, I decide, "No, we just need to discuss it now." But he always says, "No, we just need to calm down." Sometimes, we don't talk [again] for a whole day, or a whole night, [or] until the next morning, until we can really talk. We know [not to talk] because some words you just can't forget.

Jane, a LDS mother, reflects on patience in marriage in terms of acceptance:

[One] of the deepest things that has come to me as I've struggled with developing a relationship into a better relationship is...not to be discouraged with what your spouse isn't...nobody is going to have every quality. You don't have every quality so to be patient with yourself and to be patient with your spouse.

Parents and spouses not only talked about their beliefs regarding the importance of kindness and patience but, like Roy's late-for-school practice, they discussed that their faith provided mechanisms for adopting the stress-management strategies necessary to achieve these attributes as shown below.

**Stress-management.** Stress is a reality of everyday life, especially in family life where multiple tasks require one's attention and where child development occurs rapidly. Parenting, at times, may seem like trying to balance on the bow of a ship sailing over rough waters. New parents experience the stress of adjusting to the demands of life with a baby, of negotiating the division of labor, and of finding time as a couple. For families with elementary age children, stress may stem from meeting the demands of school

responsibilities and extracurricular activities, helping children manage sibling rivalry, or dealing with social problems such as bullying. As children enter adolescence, parents must address the growing autonomy of their teenagers especially as they are faced with decisions potentially involving more detrimental or dire consequences. This balancing act during a time of rapid change requires a set of particular skills and strategies that may help parents to renew and to recharge.

Many parents reported that their faith helps them to access these necessary skills and strategies. They made such comments as, “When I go to mass, [it helps me] to recharge my batteries again for the next week.”; “Faith gives me an inner peace.” and “It is such a calming experience, when tensions and frustrations are high.” Elizabeth, a mother of a developmentally disabled child reflects on the following:

We have a special child that we have to do special things with, and in a sense we hope that God is somehow guiding us to do the best we can with that child.

So...when things aren't always as perfect as you would like them to be, [we] look to toward God to try to find some solace.

Likewise, Jessica, a Jewish mother talks about the stress management benefits of Friday evening services on family life:

Before you say something hurtful, think for a moment, catch your breath for a moment...that experience of just catching your breath at the end of the week allows you to do that...it puts you in a better frame of mind for the weekend which is when the family tends to spend more time together.

Denise Roy, author of *Momfulness: Mothering with Mindfulness, Compassion and Grace* (2007), wrote that parents are reminded, most times on a daily basis, that they are

not perfect. And if parents are prone to delusions of grandeur, children will bring them back to reality pretty quickly. As a mother of four children and one foster child, Roy shares her wisdom that parenting is not about perfection. It is about the practice of finding the grace that is always available if parents are attentive to the moment and create a little breathing room to be aware of it. For the families in this study, faith and a relationship with God seem to provide that space; a “little breathing room.”

Faith not only appears to highlight the essence and importance of kindness, patience, and the skills and attitudes to attain these virtues, but stresses the importance of prioritizing its practice as we see below.

**Making Time for Family Communication.** Prominent family therapist Virginia Satir (1988) wrote, “Communication is the largest single factor determining what kind of relationship she or he makes with others and what happens to each in the world” (p. 51). Couples spoke of the importance of finding time to talk, of friendship in marriage, and of the importance of equality. They spoke about the power of knowing that others care about each other’s problems, about the importance of working on issues together, and how sometimes, it is not easy but it is necessary. Connecting to each other through efforts to communicate and problem solve is illustrated in the narratives below:

Kathryn: “Go to the person and be brave. [F]ace them. Sometimes people have a lot of fear about that. Some people don’t like conflict and it’s not easy.

[Sometimes] I know that the next day my eyes are going to be swelled up...I know I am going to have a headache...but it’s worth it if we can be constructive and deal with it.”

Stephanie: “There is a certain amount...that you just have to blow off but then there are other things [that are really hurtful] and it’s really something I might hang on to, [then] I think you should talk about it and resolve it.

Margaret: “It’s been the cornerstone, something that’s always going to be there...[If] you’re mad at somebody or if you make a mistake, you can always go back to your core beliefs. And based on scripture, if you go back to beliefs, you know that when they’re wrong, you’ll know how to forgive. When you’re wrong, you know how to ask forgiveness. When it’s a mutual conflict, you’ll know how to resolve it. You know how to approach it in a loving manner.

Charles: “I’ve seen [others] turn away from their spouse and try to find their answers somewhere other than where they probably should find it...They turn away from each other instead of turning to each other. I think that’s the most frequent thing I see...[when families are torn apart].

Samantha: “I think one of the strong points of Judaism is the sense of personal responsibility and certainly in any conflict we’ve had, it’s been really important to own up to whatever part we have had in the conflict. And that is something that comes straight from Judaism, ‘Did I do something wrong? And if so, I need to fix it, and apologize for it.’ As opposed to just ‘Well, it will go away, forget about it’.

Angelina: “Back to those prayers that are said every night...[the children] have an opportunity to pour out things from the day. Inevitably someone’s feelings got hurt and we talk...”

This section highlights the perceived importance of attributes that define emotional and social intelligence such as kindness, patience, stress management, and family communication and ends with a long but poignant example of emotional intelligence. Ellen, an LDS mother, reflects on her relationship with God and her experience of relying on God to fill her heart with the gift of love for better or for worse:

If we don't work at it [marriage] you can have...little itty bitty worms that eat at your love. The toothpaste, the shoes left out--they just start gnarling at you and irritating you. You can find yourself maybe falling out of love. I found myself really bogged down with motherhood and feeling overwhelmed. I think it was about the time I had my fourth [child]; my fourth child in four years. We had a couple of other older kids and I was feeling very overwhelmed and doing a lot of things in the church. Huge responsibilities and just trying to be the perfect mom and having the clean house and doing everything that I knew how. I found myself letting the little things start [to] eat at me. He seemed to be, I thought, in a glamorous life where he was working in a jewelry store and he was meeting people, and it's not that I wanted to be there but I just didn't have a part of that life with him. I didn't know how to share that with him. It may have been a form of depression. I don't know. I found I started getting aggravated at everything he did until one day I woke up and I turned over and I looked at him and I [thought], 'I don't even know who you are.' It was the most awful feeling. [I]t wasn't that the love was gone, but it was just like I don't even know who you are. I felt sort of dead inside. I remember thinking, when that thought came to me, having total fear [and asking] what's happened? I prayed for several days because I was just

feeling irritated and not very loving. I believe...the problems [can] mold your [marriage] into a different kind of love so that when you reach a point where, heaven forbid, one of us is incapacitated to the point where you really have total care of them that you have that kind of love that gets you through that kind of thing. You are not going to have that if you haven't served each other. So, I started praying because I knew that what I was I feeling was not going to be conducive... I could see how it was going to erode our relationship. I was really afraid to talk to him about it because I knew that I didn't know how to express that. I was afraid he would think that I was saying I didn't love him anymore. That's not exactly what I was feeling but I was feeling something that was scaring me. So I started praying to Heavenly Father hoping to get an answer. Finally, the thought came to me just out of the blue and I know it came from heavenly Father. That was, "Why did you fall in love with him in the first place." I started going back to [when we fell in love]. I remembered the things that made me want to be with him. I needed to constantly go back to the things that I was attracted to and what endeared him to me [to him] and made me love him. Every time he did something where I wanted to scream at him, I started making myself go back to the things. The love that I felt then, came back and washed over me just like I fell back in love. I mean, it was just a total fall back in love. Everything that I ever felt about him was there. I have always felt that was such a blessing in my life because I don't believe I'm the only person that has had those things happen where you kind of fall in and out of love with each other during your marriage. If you don't grab it before you continue down that slope of being out of love...that's

where marriage can fall apart. [Nobody's] marriage is even keel where they're just happier, happier, and happier. It isn't like that and you have to physically and mentally/emotionally work at it every day. That's how it worked for me. [T]he prayer is what got me through. I knew that Heavenly Father had the answer but I didn't know how he was going to answer it. That has never happened since. When I do start getting annoyed, which everybody does in marriage, then I go back to that little trick, "*[H]e made my bed this morning and he doesn't even need to make the bed, but he knows I like the bed made. He did that for me. That's better than socks on the floor.*"

With the first sub-theme involving connection outlined and highlighted, we now turn to the second sub-theme involving connection. Families seem to stay close and connected through religious and spiritual ritual.

**Subtheme 3b: Ritual and Prayer...Love Is Intentional.** In each of the religious traditions represented in the data, Muslim, Jewish, LDS, and Christian, parents talked about the closeness they experienced to their spouses and children as they practiced their particular faith. Parents often expressed their belief that faith is the "glue" and that it "holds us together." Families expressed feeling closer to each other on Sunday more than any other day. One Christian mother reported that her family holds hands in church. One mother talked about religious study as a time "to have the family together, to come together to talk about what we need to talk about and to bond." Gretchen, a Catholic mother, shared the following thoughts:

...it's brought us closer as a family, it's a support system to our family. We feel cared for by more people, and more people reach out to us and we feel more worthwhile because we are able to contribute to them as well.

Parents talked about the bonding that occurs when sitting down to bless a meal together, reading and studying scripture together, and attending church together. But perhaps the most significant ritual for the participants involved the connection and closeness felt through the act of praying together. Gabrielle offered an illustration of how prayer influences the relationship between her husband and children:

We pray together as a family. Mike is so good about bedtime...he has never missed a night, praying with the children, the boys in their room, then the girls.

It's something they've learned to expect...that Daddy's going to be there...

Sometimes, prayer was reported as having connective powers to previous generations as Edward, a Jewish father, highlights as he reflects on his practice of praying in Hebrew:

I feel connected to all the past generations and I find that to be a meaningful type of religious experience. It's not just a personal expression...It feels that I'm being amplified through previous generations.

Hoosa, a Muslim mother comments:

...there are certain things that we do everyday, like the five times prayer, it does bring the family together...we try to pray together as much as we can.

Rosemary reflects on a time early in their relationship that she and her husband, Nicholas began to pray together:

...we actually started praying together. That was something that was very important to me because we experienced this closeness, not just to God, but with



each other. And sometimes you just know what the other is thinking while you are praying together. Sometimes it is hard to express yourself, and somehow when we are praying together, we express something that may not have come up before [like] finding out something about his struggle, or his inner thoughts, just by praying together. [T]hat is the most special [thing], being able to pray together, because we just have this closeness that I think cannot be done any other way.

In this way, it appears that prayer promotes connection and communion through a relationship with God that facilitates awareness and deep listening.

In summary and suggested by the interview data, faith fosters close and connected family relationships. Faith appears to facilitate connection through the practice of social and emotional intelligence (kindness, patience, ability to slow down, and live joyfully) and through communication and ritual, particularly prayer. A final theme is presented next. Sometimes the child shall lead them.

#### **Theme Four: Children's Influences: And the Child Shall Lead Them...**

The holy texts in Christianity, Judaism and Islam all share similar perspectives regarding the significance of children. Jesus highly valued children; "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (NIV, Mathew 19:14). Jesus also taught that children can be models of faith and sources of inspiration, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (NIV, Mathew 18: 2-5). In this way, Jesus may have been encouraging adults to hold on to the spiritual perspectives so often expressed by children such as

natural curiosity and openness, ability to live in the moment without worrying about the future or regretting the past, and being quick to forgive (Bunge, 2006).

Judaism also holds children in high regard, considering a child the ultimate gift of God and recognizing the child's ability to reveal the presence of God for adults. In the book of Genesis, we see Sarah rejoice at the birth of her son, Isaac (Shire, 2006).

The child is recognized as the greatest of gifts in Islam as well and it appears that Mohamed valued the parent-child relationship, "When I stand for prayer, I intend to prolong it, but on hearing the cries of child, I cut it short, as I dislike troubling the child's mother" (Sahee-I Muslim, Book 4: Book of Prayers) (Yildirim, 2006).

Although Hindu and Buddhist religious traditions go beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to note some similarities with the Abrahamic faiths that are the focus of this research in terms of parent-child relationships. The Hindu tradition involves many rituals that worship the divine mother (Agarwal, 2006) and Buddhism also regards parenting as a divinely inspired practice and path to enlightenment (Nakagawa, 2006). In fact, in order to raise a child well in the Buddhist way of life, a parent must work on themselves to develop the "four immeasurable minds" within: loving-kindness (metta), compassion (karuna), sympathetic joy (mudita), and equanimity (upekkha). Stemming from the cultivation of these four immeasurable minds, parents may pray for peace and happiness for themselves and their child, may relieve the child's suffering through compassion, may rejoice together when the child explores life with curiosity, and may observe non-judgmentally as the child experiences the world (Nakagawa, 2006).

Several parents expressed that they have grown in their faith along with their children. "It's kind of funny, they more teach us than we teach them," reported a Jewish

father reflecting on his children and faith in the family. This influential and inspirational nature of children was a common theme across interviews.

Parents reported being influenced in a number of ways. Some parents became involved with faith or returned to faith after starting a family. Madeline said, "...we got involved in religion and...our journey for faith when our son was four." Abigail, a Jewish mother stated, "...[faith] became more important to us when the children were born." Beth, another Jewish mother made a similar comment, "My son's Bar Mitzvah was the turning point for me converting [to Judaism] because I had been thinking about it for a long time, and as a matter of fact, the day after his Bar Mitzvah, I went up to Rabbi and I said, "I'm ready."

Parents reported feeling influenced in their own faith when their children made their own decisions about faith and when they made responsible choices as seen in the following narratives:

Susan (speaking about her college age son who continues to practice faith): "You know it's not something that we force them to do [practice faith]. That's their choice. And that's an influence to me as well as a blessing."

Peter: "It's a big influence on us to see to see them...making the right choices and walking in the right path as to what they want to do in a spiritual setting. They say, "train up a child in the way that you go and when they get older they should never depart from it." [W]hen they see that what we taught and what we have discussed with them...they see the negativity...and they make the right decision and we're not going to make all the right choices and I know they are not, but as they are growing and see certain things, they know that there are certain avenues

that they don't want to travel. So it's a blessing just to see them coming up and standing strong for something which is Christ."

In addition to feeling influenced by the things that children can teach adults, parents spoke about feeling inspired by the gifts that children bring to the world. A Christian mother named Jennifer mirrors this view as she comments on her son:

[F]rom time to time I see God using him to speak to us and he can come up with some things. His music for instance; God has given him a talent and he is richly blessed because other people have seen him and tell him...he is a blessing to them.

When asked about her children, Almay, a highly educated and career oriented Muslim mother, said, "I think it is so amazing being a mother...or a father...but being a mother, children are a part of your body and you never stop loving them...it's an unselfish love." This sentiment parallels several comments made about the nature of children and their influence on adult development including a parent's relationship with God and their faith. This paper proposes that faith and parenting may follow along the same path. This notion is mirrored in the following narrative offered by Margaret, an Episcopalian mother of two daughters:

[Parenting is a] practice of letting go and surrender. It is a spiritual practice.

When I'm in my good moments, I recognize that. [For example], Lilly might be doing something and [I want her to] hurry. [It's about] having the patience to let her do it at her own pace. It's those little day to day practices of coming back to the moment, taking a deep breath, and not making her do something according to my pace or to my expectations. That's a [daily practice].

Although other parents made comments that reflect the idea of parenting as a faith walk, perhaps Catherine offers the most clear and poignant illustration of how parenting as a spiritual path tends to give support to the core idea of this project, the idea of generative spirituality:

I would have to say that becoming a parent is the greatest challenge that has changed me. It has made me more selfless. We are so self-centered, in general, because we are descendants of Adam and Eve. It has made [me] look past my own needs...for me; it's made me die to self. That's why in our relationship, as a husband and wife, we have the ability to create life. God gives that to us to mold us in his image and his image is laying it all down and dying, so that there may be life. That is the hardest challenge but...it's changed me. [I]t's not just looking out for me, it's looking out for all these other little ones, knowing that you have the responsibility to raise them and you have been counted worthy to have them put into your charge and into your care. It's an awesome responsibility but it's also a daily not-what-you-want, [but] what is better for them. And that's what our relationship to Christ is like, that's probably why it's changed me more in my relationship to Christ, to do that in the physical realm, with children.

The above narratives highlight the notion that children have a significant influence on adults. Parents expressed feeling inspired and changed by their relationships with children. These data provide support to the idea that parenting and spirituality share common ground, which in turn, lends credence to the study of the child's role in the development of mature faith.

## **Limitations**

The limitations of this study are as follows:

- The findings of this study are not generalizable. Although the findings are in-depth, the conclusions drawn were based on subjective analysis. Also, because of the limited number of interviews, the subjective analysis serves to contribute a small piece of potential theory. It may, however, serve subsequent qualitative, grounded theory-oriented research by offering a commencement point for more comprehensive theory development. The study also provides quantitative researchers with potential new variables to examine statistically. In other words, the findings, although narrow in breadth, make a significant contribution to the on-going chain of knowledge.
- Children's perspectives are absent. The perspectives of children may increase the rigor of the analysis, however, due to feasibility issues, the interviewing of children will be a recommended course of action for further research.
- Analysis was conducted based on a single interview as opposed to several interviews over time. Longitudinal studies will also be recommended for the future.
- This project was subject to social desirability bias of participants. People have a tendency to want to be seen in a positive light. Parents, therefore, may have responded to questions in an overly positive manner. Parenting and faith are two sensitive and important contexts. It is possible that respondents inflated or exaggerated their responses.

- There are many sample limitations. The sample excludes several types of non-traditional families (single parent families and gay/lesbian families for examples). Because this project is a part of a larger scale *marriage* and parenting based project, the sample included only families with married parents. The sample was also limited in socio-economic terms as the range of participants fell between lower-middle and upper classes of socio-economic status. Also, in agreement with employing “prototypical samples” (Boss, 2002) less religious and non-religious families were excluded from this project. Although we know more about highly religious families from this study, the sample is not comparative. Populations of interest that do not meet the criteria for inclusion in this study are recommended for future investigation.

Despite these limitations, this methodological approach yields interesting, important, and relevant themes concerning the unique relationships between parents, children, and faith.

## **Summary**

In summary, four key themes emerged from the interview data. The first theme involved understanding more about how families of faith operate in a world that contradicts the goals of family life of faith. This theme was *Concerns with Cultural Trends: The Best Things in Life are Slow*. The second and third themes focused on two of three essential ingredients to competent parenting as discussed in Chapter Two. These were *Commitment to Family Life: My Actions are the Ground Upon Which I Stand* and *Close and Connected Family Relationships* which involved social and emotional

intelligence, ritual, and prayer. The fourth theme was *Children's Influences: And the Child Shall Lead Them*. This theme brought to the light additional understandings around the role of children in family faith development.

Despite the above limitations, these findings provide a deeper understanding of the story behind the processes at work between faith, parents, and children. The parents in this study seem to pay attention to the trends of popular culture, work to understand culture's impact on their children and, at times, choose to live differently and according to their faith. These parents appear to be committed to learning from difficult times and to making their families work. They tend to look to their faith as one means to accomplish this goal. Also, families of faith in this study appear to seek close and connected relationships with each other through practicing kindness, patience, stress-management, and communication as well as through religious ritual and prayer. Finally, many parents of faith appear to believe that children bring special gifts and meaning to the world and appear to consider the influence it has upon them as adults seeking mature faith. It seems that this perceived influence has a role in the development of transcendent commitment, care and concern for the next generation; what has been coined *generative spirituality*.



## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **CONCLUSION**

The goals of this project included examining and exploring the processes underlying faith, parent, and child relationships. These goals were based on the premises that parents and children mutually influence each other and that faith is an important and beneficial influence in family life. Religion and spirituality are important and essential considerations in family therapy (Carlson & Erikson, 2002) and in family life education (Duncan & Goddard, 2005). The religious and spiritual issues of family commitment and closeness are significant therapeutic and educational issues. Increased understanding of families of faith and of what makes families of faith successful, may aid family professionals by offering insights that may be useful in planning appropriate and effective interventions for both religious and non-religious families. Through stories of real life experiences, families of faith shed light on how they work toward creating close, connected, and generative family relationships.

This project supports, in part, existing research concerning cultural trends and the processes of commitment and connection underlying family relationships. It also adds to the small body of research that exists concerning the child's role in family faith development. Taking into account the child's influence in general family dynamics and the idea that children have an innate sense of a spiritual world, this project is a step in

answering a call by interested scholars to look more deeply into the child's influence in the development of mature adult faith.

As this qualitative research suggests, families and family professionals may benefit from understanding the following: 1.) Families of faith in this study appear to be vigilant to their environment and to the risks of their environment, using that information to make conscious decisions to either live differently and/or to provide faith as a buffer. 2.) Families of faith in this study appear to prioritize family relationships which seem to increase active participation in family life. 3.) The data suggest that families of faith in this study have a sense of how to create and maintain bonds in the family especially through efforts to increase kindness, patience, communication, stress management, prayer, and ritual. 4.) Families of faith in this study appear to value children in a way that influences the development of faith in the family as a whole.

The above points lead to several implications for future research, for society, and for families in general. Each of these areas is addressed in turn.

### **Implications for Future Research**

These findings illustrate not only *what* families have done to work toward staying together and remaining close and connected, but it also highlights *how* they work toward accomplishing these meaningful goals. It is recommended that future research continue to focus on the processes underlying faith and family correlations, particularly in previously unstudied areas, such as children's influences in family faith development. A growing body of research in the areas of bidirectionality and children's spirituality that highlight children as active participants in the development process point to the value of understanding how these influences play into the development of adult faith.

Also, it is recommended that future research in the area of faith and the parent-child relationship examine differences between families with varying levels of faith involvement (highly religious, moderately religious, seeking, uninvolved) to better measure the degree to which faith influences family development and to explore if certain elements of each theme tend to be universal in nature. Adding perspectives from other world religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism and studying families by socioeconomic status may also serve to highlight increased understanding and offer additional dimensions of family dynamics to explore. Finally, it is important to consider further, not only the beneficial influences of faith on family relationships, but also, those influences of faith on family relationships that may be harmful, particularly the negative impact on the bidirectional influences between parents and children.

### **Implications for Society**

The purpose of this study included generating greater knowledge to help families be the best that they can be from wherever they stand and to understand further how parents connect with children to help these children to reach their full potential as human beings. This goal is important because many researchers suggest that stable family life contributes to stable society.

As shown in the literature review portion of this project, many cultural trends work against close and connected relationships that lie at the heart of strong and stable family life. First, multigenerational ties have weakened in American Society. Promoting committed, close, and connected family relationships in early family life may increase the odds for supportive and caring relationships with grandparents and other community elders. Second, creating better visions of generative family life may work to prevent the

high divorce rate that is associated with negative childhood adjustment, higher rates of physical maladies, and decreased monetary wealth (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). What is learned from families of faith in terms of commitment and communication may decrease the incidence of divorce. Specifically, couples in this study consciously avoided what Gottman (1999) calls the *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*; blaming, criticizing, contempt, and stonewalling. The presence of these four pitfalls in communication has been shown to predict the risk of divorce by 91% (Gottman, 1999). Also, studies have shown that communication between parents and children that focuses on the emotional development of the child (such as recognizing emotional times as opportunities for intimacy and teaching, helping children to identify emotions, listening empathically, and setting limits while helping the child problem solve) works to not only to establish close relationships but also, may buffer children from the stress of divorce (Gottman, 1997). Perhaps this style of communication may buffer children from the stress of other cultural trends such as long work hours and the socio-economic risk factors found in both poverty and affluence.

The families in this study appeared to focus on living more contemplative, slower paced, and intentional lives. These factors carry many implications for prioritizing family goals over individual goals as it has been shown that family rituals correlate with family commitment (Chaney, et al., in press). Also, these processes carry implications for increasing mental health (which is associated with more positive parenting) and counteracting the negative effects of cultural trends such as materialism and perfectionism that seem to negatively impact stable family life and child mental and spiritual health (Belsky, 1986; Levine, 2006).

Additionally, although participants represented different faiths, there were significant common threads concerning the influence of faith on family relationships. These common threads point to the notion that diverse faith structures tend to be more similar than different.

### **Implications for Families and Family Professionals**

Family professionals are charged with understanding families within the context in which these families live. Family professionals study the influences of culture, race, gender, socio-economic background, and other demographic characteristics to better serve, help, and address problems at both the micro and macro level. For some families, religion and faith are the primary influencing factors determining motivation, drive, and meaning. If family professionals are to understand highly religious families, they must not overlook faith, they must prioritize it.

Finally, families of faith may facilitate the efforts of parents by sharing their experiences of creating close, connected and generative relationships with children. This is important for families of faith and non-faith alike. Coles (1989) in his book, *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, talks about his experiences growing up with parents who loved to read great literature to each other. His parents were passionate about great literature because it inspired them and helped them to become better people. Coles calls stories “reservoirs of wisdom”. Simply, the stories embedded in a qualitative style of research, as they are here, may be inspiring. They may also bring to light previously unrecognized points for future consideration. Experiences, insights, and perceptions of others can be significant learning tools. Parents may be reminded that they share the crooked, shaky path, the joys and the blessings of raising children. They

may share the imperfections, the dreams and the fears, the discomfort, and the sweetness of real family life. In other words, the sharing of stories is both educational and therapeutic.

### **Summary**

Furthering the vision for establishing close, connected, and committed relationships with children include significant implications for theory, society, and families in general. Religious and non-religious parents alike may benefit from knowing the ways in which families of faith in this study use their faith and the characteristics of faith to live a more meaningful, purposeful, and joyous life. Parents may benefit from the ways in which families of faith in this study live a mature adult life; a life that involves living *generatively*, or as Wendell Berry said, living like a gardener who plants an apple tree whose fruit will never be sustenance for the gardener, but will nourish the gardener's children for generations to come.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **MINOR THEMES**

Several minor themes emerged from the data and are recommended for future manuscripts. These themes include: 1.) faith provides guidance in family life, 2.) the importance of prayer, 3.) religion as central or the core of family life, 4.) God working through the love of people, 5.) faith community as extended family, 6.) religion and existential issues (meaning and purpose in life, loneliness, freedom and death) and 7.) gratitude/blessings. The section below will briefly describe each of these themes to provide the reader a “snapshot” of the themes that go beyond the scope of this paper but work to explain and illuminate additional processes underlying faith, parents, and children.

#### **Faith Provides Guidance in Family Life**

Parents expressed that faith provides guidance and structure for family life. They talked about the stability and security that faith provides for children and for the family as a whole and that faith informs choices and influences decisions. Parents talked about praying for guidance, seeking guidance through holy texts and stories, finding answers through faith community and leadership, and through contemplative practices that facilitate their relationships with God. As a mother in the church of LDS said, “Benefits in the family are huge because our church is talking about family all the time...if you want to make your family better, there are ways to work on it every day.”

#### **The Importance of Prayer**

Prayer was highlighted in this paper as a means for facilitating close and connected family relationships; however, prayer was mentioned as having multiple

purposes. And for some families, prayer was mentioned as being the most important component of a life of faith. For examples, parents talked about finding comfort through prayer, finding strength through prayer, using prayer to “let go” of anxiety, and to find answers to various life issues. Mothers and fathers talked about praying to express gratitude, to buttress hope, to form intentions, and to feel closer to God. As one Methodist father expressed, “...there is no [right or] wrong way to pray. You’re just talking to God.”

### **Religion as Central or the Core of Family Life**

Parents in this study also discussed the centrality of faith in their lives. They used phrases such as; “faith is our family backbone”, “our whole lives revolve around our church,” “every choice we make is faith based,” and “It’s who we are.” The theme of *religion as central or the core of family life* carries many implications for professionals working with families. For some families, faith is the primary influencing factor. As one mother described, “I think every decision we make has something to do with our faith. What we’ve been taught or know to be true...I don’t know how to separate this stuff.”

### **Faith Community as Extended Family**

Another important thread that emerged throughout the interviews had to do with the value of faith community. Many parents talked about their congregation as extended family members; people to count on who will support them, encourage them, lift them up and help them raise their children. Parents also talked about the perceived inter-generational benefits of drawing ones family wide (including others outside of one’s own biological family) especially when, for example, they experienced the loss of biological

family through death or living long distances for examples. “It gives our kids grandparents,” explained one mother. Family therapist, Denise Roy, wrote, “We have many mothers. People who have come along and loved us into wholeness. Their acts of kindness, their willingness to see us, to be there for us, to support us...” (p. 190). Beth, a Jewish mother shares a story about such community of care,

“We had a real tragedy a few years ago in our synagogue where a family (who was not even a member of the synagogue, but a Jewish family in town) lost a child, and it was a horrific situation. People just showed up...came out of the woodwork. It was a very painful situation to walk into. You felt like you were invading someone’s privacy at such a painful time...yet they needed a Jewish community to help them pray and to do what Jews do at this time, and people just showed up. They brought food. They came night after night...bigger numbers every night. People were just there.”

### **God Working Through the Love of People**

Closely related to the theme of *faith as extended family* is *God working through the love of others*. For most people, the foundation of faith is serving others and transcending self. The theme of *God working through the love of people*, indeed reflects the essence of this study in the family context (families members serve each other through a life lived for God). Here, however, this principle is extended to the community and to the world. Jewish parents talked about healing the world through charity and volunteer works. Christian parents may think of serving as being Christ’s hands and feet. In all faiths represented, the interviews suggested that it is important for parents to not only be involved in serving but to create opportunities for their children to serve as well.

Daniel, a Christian father, reflects on the simplicity of this core belief, “there’s someone that God uses to encourage you...he sends that spiritual anointed blessing through that individual to let you know [that] he is there, that he hears you cry and he hears your prayer. The individual may say an encouraging word or ease your heart but it’s through the work of the Holy Spirit.”

### **Religion and Existential Issues**

Another interesting theme that unfolded from the data analysis is the connection between faith and its ability to help people explore the existential issues of their lives. Parents discussed their beliefs about how faith helps them to come to terms with loneliness, meaning and purpose in life, and in death. Parents addressed loneliness as they spoke about their relationship with God. Some might say that even though humans are ultimately alone (are born alone and die alone), a relationship with God and a faith community appear to bring about a sense that one is never truly alone. Parents discussed how faith provides structure around the big questions of life such as “Why am I here?”, “Why was I born?”, “What am I here for?” And many parents talked about faith as the most significant factor in dealing with the ultimate question, “Where do I go when I die.” especially when faced with the death of loved one. Mary Therese, a Methodist mother explains, “[Faith] helps me as a mother to teach life lessons that I don’t know if she [child] would get [any other way].

### **Gratitude and Blessings**

“Wake at dawn with a winged heart and give thanks for another day of loving,” wrote poet, Kahlil Gibran. The families of faith in this study appear to understand that

joyful living stems from a sense of gratitude, good things come with children, and family provides endless opportunities to count their every day and mutual blessings.

## APPENDIX B

### STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT

#### Purpose of the Research

I am being asked to participate in a study that examines families and religion. My participation in the study will take 60-90 minutes. I understand that the interviewer will audio record my interview and that she or he will later analyze the interview data.

#### Rights of Participation

All information that I provide to the researcher will remain anonymous. If any information from my interview is used in any form, this information will not be accompanied by my name or any other identifying information. I have the right to refuse to answer any question(s) I am uncomfortable answering or request that the tape recorder be turned off for certain responses. I also may end my interview at any time by telling the researcher that I do not want to participate any longer.

#### Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks for participating in this study. However, this research will help family scholars and professionals better understand the relationships between parenting and religion.

#### Contacts

I have had time to address any questions or concerns I have with the researcher. If I have additional or future questions or concerns, I may contact Carol Le Blanc at ccleblanc1@bellsouth.net or (985) 807-7021.

#### Participation Assurance

I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary.

#### Consent Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Please sign and date above if you agree to participate in the study.

**APPENDIX C**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Circle One: Male    Female

Faith Affiliation: \_\_\_\_\_

Number and Gender of Children (i.e., 1 girl, 2 boys): \_\_\_\_\_

Child(ren's) Age(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Educational Level (High School, College, etc.): \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX D**

### **INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

I'd like to ask some questions about links between faith and parenting.

1. What does faith mean to you? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
2. What are your greatest joys as a parent?
3. What does the parent-child relationship mean to you? What does it mean to be a mother/father/couple as parents? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
4. As a parent, what are your main concerns with today's culture? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
5. Does your faith help you to counteract concerns in the culture? If yes, will you tell me a related story or experience?
6. Do you see that families and youth are more materialistic in today's culture? If so, how does that interfere with faith and family?
7. What challenges do you experience as a result of your faith?
8. Does your faith influence your relationship with your child? If so,
  - a. What are your deepest and strongest spiritual beliefs that pertain to your relationship with your child/children? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
  - b. What are your most important and meaningful religious practices, rituals and traditions pertaining to your relationship with your child/children? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
  - c. Describe your faith community. How does your faith community influence your relationship with your child/children? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
9. Does your relationship with your child/children influence your faith? If so,
  - a. How does your child/relationship with your child influence your spiritual beliefs and experiences? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
  - b. How does your child/relationship with your child influence your religious practices? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
  - c. How does your child/relationship with your child influence involvement in your faith community? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
8. Has your child influenced your faith?



- a. In terms of spiritual beliefs? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
  - b. In terms of religious practices? Will you tell me a related story or experience? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
  - c. In terms of faith community engagement or involvement? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
9. When your child and/or family challenging circumstances, is your faith helpful? Will you tell me a related story or experience?
10. As parents, how do you share your faith with your child? Will you tell me a related story or experience?

Is there anything else about your faith and your family that you consider important or interesting to mention?

## VITA

Carol Le Blanc received her bachelor's degree in general studies from the University of New Orleans and her Master of Social Work from The Ohio State University where she was invited to study on a full academic fellowship. Prior to entering the doctoral program in the School of Human Ecology at Louisiana State University, Carol worked with children and families in a variety of settings. She began her career as a counselor and child advocate in a domestic violence shelter and in the district attorney's office in Savannah, Georgia. Later, Carol worked as a family therapist (specializing in play therapy) in a variety of settings including a nonprofit agency, a public school system and in private practice. During her time as a graduate student at Louisiana State University, Carol taught undergraduate coursework in child and family development in the School of Human Ecology and provided parent education workshops in St. Tammany Parish, Louisiana. She is licensed in clinical social work, previously licensed in marriage and family therapy and is certified to provide professional development to preschool teachers in Louisiana. She is also a certified *Godly Play* Teacher. After graduating from the Louisiana State University with her doctorate in human ecology, child and family science, Carol plans to continue teaching undergraduate students on an adjunct basis. Presently, Carol is in the process of developing a yoga and stress-management program for young children and their parents called *The Mindful Child* and is awaiting criteria to pursue a contemplative practice fellowship sponsored by the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society and funded by the Fetzer Institute.