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# Student Perceptions of How People, Practices, and Culture Within a Christian Secondary School Contribute to or Detract From Their Spiritual Development

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STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF HOW PEOPLE, PRACTICES, AND CULTURE WITHIN A  
CHRISTIAN SECONDARY SCHOOL CONTRIBUTE TO OR DETRACT FROM THEIR  
SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

BY

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### **Abstract**

This is a phenomenological study of five Grade 12 students and their perceptions of the factors in their Christian school that have contributed to their spiritual development. Through interviews with each of the students, the details of the students' perceptions revealed how and why specific people, practices, and elements of school culture affected their spirituality. All of these students provided keen insights through honest and vulnerable reflection. The major thematic categories that emerged were teachers, peers, spiritual practices, and the positive school community and ethos. The major recommendations for practice is to consider how the school can find avenues for the students to participate in formational spiritual practices that meet both corporate and individual needs. In addition, the school might consider how the implementation of restorative practices and how a redesign of the Bible curriculum might address the unique spiritual needs of students.

## Acknowledgements

When I began my studies in July of 2013, I found myself in a classroom on the campus of George Fox University with some people I did not know. Little did I know how important those strangers would become in my life. These people are now my dear friends who I have leaned on for encouragement, wisdom, and laughter. I already miss the walks through the forest on short breaks in the middle of class. I miss coffee in the morning before class started. There were countless text messages, emails, and pictures that allowed me to keep pressing on. Special thanks to Randy, Derek, and Elaine for your love and care. I will also miss Darren, Liza, Jason, Candace, Michael, Jonathan and others who joined us along the way.

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Finally, I want to dedicate this project to my Opa. My Opa died when I was two years old. I never knew him, although I wish I did. He had a passion for Christian education and I imagine long conversations with him. One day we will walk and talk about all this and more. The stories I hear about him tell me he was a wise man with a heart for others. One of his favorite passages from the Bible was Psalm 103:

“The Lord works righteousness and justice for all the oppressed.”

Soli Deo Gloria

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

*“[E]ducation is not primarily a heady project concerned with providing information; rather, education is most fundamentally a matter of formation, a task of shaping and creating a certain kind of people” (Smith, 2009, p. 26).*

As I embarked on a study about student perceptions of how people, practices, and school culture influence spiritual development, I found myself reflecting on those factors in my own life. My hope in providing these introductory stories is not to look back at my spiritual narrative with naïve sentimentality, but to create a context that shapes this study and shares some of my motivation for inviting students to reflect intentionally on the factors within a Christian school that are shaping their development.

My dad was a hard-working Dutch immigrant who worked long hours and committed much of his free time volunteering on the board of the local church and Christian school. His hour-long drive to the mill at which he worked when I was a child meant he needed to be up with the sun. As his bedroom sat across the hall from mine, each morning I would hear him close his bedroom door quietly so that he would not wake my mom. He would walk quietly down the carpeted hallway, the floorboard in front of the bathroom always creaking. I listened for the flick of the light switch in the kitchen, which was my cue that I could go and join him. I was six and, although only 40 at the time, he seemed like a giant of a man with wisdom and life experience I could only imagine.

My dad had the same routine each morning, a trait that still defines him to this day. Then, as now, he turned the stove on each morning to warm up the porridge he made the night before. He would carefully put a little bit in a bowl for me, never saying a word, and we would

sit in the same places at the table each morning. This was our dance. The smell of sawdust was so powerful in his hands and clothes that the smell of cut wood today takes me back to those mornings sitting around the Formica table. Before eating, we would always have a time of silence for prayer. I never knew what to pray for, but what I did know was to sit quietly with my hands folded and my eyes closed. When I thought I heard him begin eating, I would open one eye just slightly so I could check if I could begin as well. I can remember placing my hand on the bowl and my elbow on the table, trying to replicate my father's every move.

My dad's pace of eating was so steady and consistent; I could set the pace at which he ate to a metronome. I can still feel that rhythm in my bones. We said very little, if anything at all. Then as soon as it started, the daily ritual was complete. Without saying a word, he would stand up and go over to the only closet in the kitchen, and he would reach up and take the Bible down. He would read a passage and pray quietly once again. He made his way to the bedroom where I always supposed he said goodbye to my mother. Moving quickly now, he would take his lunch out of the fridge, descend the stairs and go out through the basement door. I heard the start of the car and the exhaust pour out of the carport. I felt it was my duty to stand in the window and watch that 1976 Cutlass Supreme makes its way down Gilley Road. I would watch until it would make a left turn on Westminster Highway and disappear behind the fire hall.

Even though there was little talking on those mornings, in retrospect I do believe there was more going on in that moment than just eating a bowl of warmed-up porridge together. There is probably a sentimental side of me that believes this was the one way I came to know my dad, a soft-spoken but loving man. More than that, without my even knowing it at the time, there was an aspect of faith formation or spiritual development that was happening in me, or maybe it would be better to say *to* me. The silent prayers and the reading of the Bible were acts of

faithfulness that I participated in, and although I was not sure how those rituals were shaping my spiritual development, they did; and, I would say, still do. The moments of spiritual mentoring went beyond the prayers and Bible. It also happened in observing the faithfulness in which he put in a hard day's work and cared for our family. At the time, I had no idea that those rhythms and patterns that took place across the corner of a kitchen table would influence my spiritual development in such a way, but they did at a very deep level. My dad, in his own way, was showing me a way of being in the world and reminding me that the story of our lives needs to overlap each day with God's unfolding story of redemption, both in what we do and in who we are and are becoming.

Thirty-five years later, my own work as an assistant principal at a Christian secondary school included coordinating weekly, communal chapels. Many viewed these chapels as integral to the spiritual development of students. In addition, our enrollment practices allowed for students from different religious backgrounds or, conversely, students with no religious background at all. Although the purpose of chapel was not evangelical in nature, I did want to make the time as meaningful as possible for all students. Each week, chapel included spiritual practices such as prayer, blessing, singing, and liturgy. Youth pastors and other members of the community often spoke at chapel, offering up a variety of perspectives on how to live out of the Biblical narrative. Informal conversations with some students led me to believe that this formulaic approach succeeded at encouraging the spiritual development of students within our school.

In one telling and memorable conversation with a student, I realized that my perception did not hold true for all students. In a conversation that took place in the school office, the student had the courage to tell me that he detested every aspect of chapel, and in his struggles

with his faith, chapel was only confirming that following Jesus was not for him. In fact, his cynicism about Christianity had increased due to chapel. While of course there was no way for me to control the external factors that contributed to his reality, the conversation had a significant influence on me. The conversation ended with my wondering why he never shared this with anyone; he simply stated that no one had ever asked.

Within that same year, I attended a worship conference in Grand Rapids, Michigan. It was at that conference that I heard James Smith speak. Smith had written a book titled *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (2009). In that book, Smith's essential question is, "What if education isn't first and foremost about what we know, but about what we love?" (p. 18). Smith posits that spiritual formation and development does not happen strictly through the mind and development of one's worldview, but through the shaping of one's heart through formational practices that point our desires to a specific telos.

I began to wonder about school practices and what messages they sent to students about faithful living. What did the words and theology in contemporary Christian music communicate about what the community valued? I began to wonder if the people, practices, and the culture were teaching our students how to love, and if so, what were students learning to love? Smith's book and the conversation with the students regarding chapel lingered, and thus began the slow process of disarming my long-held presuppositions that the ultimate goal of Christian education is about the shaping of the mind. Smith forced me to consider how the practices within a Christian school shape the desires and spiritual development of students. In addition, I began to wonder if daily and weekly practices, such as chapel, helped or hindered student's spiritual development.

My experiences with my dad, that student, and Smith spurred me on to undertake this qualitative study. More than that, the desire to provide an opportunity for students to give voice to their thoughts about spiritual development motivated me to undertake a phenomenological study. Studies on spiritual development often seek out the voices of adults such as alumni, university students, or school administrators (Astin, Astin, & Lindholm, 2011).

The rationale for this study is to help fill the gap in the literature where the voices of current Christian high school students are invited. This study invites students to articulate how the actions and interactions of people, practices, and culture within a school enhance or detract from positive spiritual development. Research indicates that social relationships with peers and school friends influence the faith development of students (Regnerus, Smith, & Smith, 2004), and that people are pre-disposed to spirituality formed through the narrative in which they live (Hyde, 2008). Yet, schools often leave students to themselves to search for answers to their questions, doubts, and frustrations regarding spiritual development. Consequently, those students often create their own version of the good life that redirects the target of their desires and offers a skewed version of the good life (Smith, 2009).

Many competing ideologies wrestle for the minds and hearts of teenagers. It is hard to walk through a mall, listen to the radio, or watch television with my teenage daughters without perceiving the complexity of growing up in a Christian home, worshipping at a Christian church, and attending a Christian school while living in a post-Christian, secular culture. These competing and complex narratives can cause anxiety and stress for many students and can raise questions about their personal, spiritual development. It is integral for teenagers to know that they have a voice that can identify the variety of people, practices and elements of school culture that have shaped their spirituality.

Teenagers of any religious background struggle with doubt about their belief system, and identifying those struggles can be complex for a school or church because some teenagers have feelings of shame and aloneness during these times that prevent them from opening up (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012). It is not only important to identify how people, practices and culture within a Christian school can support them in their spiritual journey; it can also empower them to know they are not working through these issues in isolation. Students may then realize they have a community that encourages and supports them. This study focused on the experiences of a small group of students within a local Christian school that has a strong reputation for integrating a Christian perspective and practices into every aspect of education. This study has the potential to provide insights for other schools that might allow them to consider how better to enhance the spiritual development of students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The purpose of this study was to explore the spiritual development of five students attending a faith-based, Christian school. Specifically, in a phenomenological context using personal interviews, I spoke to five participants who are in Grade 12. These participants were asked questions regarding how the people, practices, and the culture in a Christian school have influenced their spiritual development. The objective of the study was to understand more fully how students within a Christian school perceived the factors that have influenced their spiritual development.

### **Research Questions**

Based on the purpose of this study, I posited questions that allowed me to understand how people, practices, and school culture have positively enhanced or been a barrier to a

student's spiritual development. Thus, associated with the identified problem, an examination of the following research questions took place:

1. How do the actions and interactions of people associated with a private Christian high school contribute to the spiritual development of students?
2. How do corporate spiritual practices in a private Christian high school contribute to the spiritual development of students?
3. How does the school culture associated with a private Christian high school contribute to the spiritual development of students?

### **Key Terms**

Even a cursory survey of the literature indicated that there is little consensus on many of the definitions and terms surrounding spirituality and spiritual development (Davies, 2007; Shek, 2012). The struggle in defining these terms was due to the complex nature of the terms, the various constructs that make up a person's personality, and how those people viewed spirituality and spiritual development. My rationale for using *spiritual development* as the centering term in the research question is that it is my opinion from conversations with young people that this term is most accessible, widely used, and understood by students in Christian schools today. For the purposes of this research, the following terms and definitions are used:

*Abraham Kuyper*: Abraham Kuyper was a Dutch theologian, politician, Prime Minister, Calvinist, and proponent of Christian education who lived from 1837-1920 (Bratt, 2013).

*Formational Practices*: the movements, routines, words, habits, and other actions that shape our orientation towards the world (Smith, 2009).



*Reformed Christian Tradition:* Christian tradition rooted in the teachings of Christ and influenced by the writing of John Calvin that emphasizes the authority of the Bible, the sovereignty of God, and Christianity as a religion of God's kingdom (Plantinga, 2001).

*School Culture:* the sum total of attitudes, values, practices, and beliefs within a school community (DePorter & Reardon, 2013)

*Spiritual Formation:* the process of responding to God's grace by being shaped into the likeness of Jesus Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit for the sake of the world (Greenman & Goertz, 2005).

*Spirituality:* spirituality can refer to a belief system, worldview, behaviors, practices, or faith community, and can be developed privately or corporately (King & Boyatzis, 2004).

## **Limitations**

The objective of this study was to understand student perceptions of how people, practices, and culture within a Christian school enhance spiritual development. Interviews with five students currently in Grade 12 at a Christian secondary school took place in the school principal's office.

One limitation of this study was the inability to generalize the findings to other Christian secondary schools, other faith-based schools, home school, or public schools due to the local nature of the study. In addition, the school's history rooted in the Reformed tradition, limited the ability to generalize to other faith-based schools from other denominational backgrounds. Another limitation was due to purposive sampling. While purposive sampling is the most widely used sampling method in qualitative research and is used to deepen one's understanding of a participant's lived experience (Devers & Frankel, 2000), the difficulty to generalize to the larger population can be limiting (Patton, 1990). In addition, because the study was limited to

interviews with five students, the research is limited to the range of experiences of the participants. Finally, choosing the number of participants in phenomenological interviews is difficult because it can be difficult to ascertain the amount of data that will be gathered in each interview (Baker & Edwards, 2012).

While it is almost impossible to have researchers agree on a minimum or maximum amount of participants needed for a qualitative study (Mason, 2010; Patton 1990), five students were chosen because in phenomenological research, a sample size of at least five participants is recommended by some experts in the field (Creswell, 2013). Even though the sample size is small, all phenomenological studies have the potential to posit ideas and theories that may lead to further research (Russel & Gregory, 2003). Finally, the insights provided from rich, thick description that does justice to the topic is more important than the sample size itself (Patton, 1990).

The study is delimited to Grade 12 students that have been enrolled in the school for a minimum of four years. This was done because these students have the ability to reflect on their spiritual development within the community over a sustained amount of time. While choosing students from one grade is limiting, these older students were chosen because they have a stronger sense of identity, meaning, and social concern (Furrow, King, & White, 2004). Another delimitation was that participants had to self-identify as Christian. This biased the responses and did not provide a voice for students in a Christian school who may offer an alternative, secular perspective. In consultation with the Biblical Studies teacher, the principal selected 11 students to attend an initial meeting. From this group five students chose to participate. In addition, the researcher provided a list of students that could not be considered for the study due to existing relationship with researcher's children. A further delimitation was that students enrolled at a

specific Christian secondary school in a specific geographic location; that is, a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia.

### **Bracketing**

Bracketing is the setting aside of one's beliefs, values and experiences so that the experiences of the participants can be accurately portrayed (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). It is important to acknowledge my personal history with Christian education and the way it has shaped my life, both at a personal and professional level. Bracketing was not only vital for me during the interview stage of the research, but also during the data analysis as researchers can, without knowing it, be influenced by what data they recognize or ignore based on their personal presuppositions about the topic (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

Not including kindergarten and one online, undergraduate course taken through a secular university, the entire breadth of my formal education as both a student and teacher has occurred at Christian institutions. For the most part, those schools have been rooted in the Reformed, Christian tradition with as strong Kuyparian worldview. Christian education has been significant in shaping my world and life view and I have a debt of gratitude for that. One reason for this project is that I desire to understand better how Christian schools can more faithfully fulfill their mission and vision. This study was one avenue to attempt to recognize how partial fulfillment of that vision happens via the spiritual development of students.

In addition, my current position as a Christian school administrator is in close relative proximity to the school the participants attend. I am familiar with many of the parents, teachers, and administrators in the community. As well, it is important to note that prior to my current work, I was an administrator at the participants' school. That said, the participants had not yet entered kindergarten when I departed for my current position. In addition, the school where the

research took place is the same school my children attend. As my older daughter will be in Grade 12 in the 2015-2016 school year, I interviewed her peers. Due to this, there was some level of familiarity already established with some of the participants. Strategies used to keep bias to a minimum was to offer the principal a list of students who could not be chosen as participants because of the relationship I have with them through their friendship with my daughter. A more detailed discussion regarding researcher bias takes place in chapter 3.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **Review of the Literature**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter two provides a review of the existing literature that is associated with spiritual development of adolescents and teenagers. The research associated with themes found in the literature review provide a deeper understanding about spiritual development and assist in the coding and data analysis portions of this study. This literature review examines the wide range of definitions surrounding spirituality, the spiritual practices that shape student's spirituality, and how those practices might contribute to spiritual development.

#### **Stages of Development**

A brief overview of Fowler's (1981) work is integral to understanding the stages of spiritual development in students. It is important to note that Fowler does not define faith as a set of beliefs, but as a way of being in the world. In short, Fowler sees faith as a vehicle to make better sense of one's self and the world in which one lives (Parker, 2006). Fowler identifies six stages of spiritual development. In particular, stage three and four of his six-stage overview is relevant to this literature review as those stages are applicable to teenagers.

Fowler (1981) titled stage three the "synthetic-conventional" stage, meaning that young adolescents develop a stronger sense of personal identity and understand they are part of a larger, more significant story, characterized by participation in a faith community and a maturing of beliefs. While many teenagers or adults do not make it past stage three, Fowler states that stage four, or the "individuality-reflective" stage, marked by critical examination of a person's belief system, can, but does not necessarily, lead to cynicism and unbelief.

## **The Role of Spiritual and Formational Practices**

Spiritual practices often associated with the spiritual disciplines encourage people to add depth to their faith commitment (Dillon & Wink, 2002) and support a student's spiritual identity (Benson, Roehlkepartain, & Rude, 2003; Crick & Jelfs, 2011; LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012; Tirri & Quinn, 2010). These dynamic practices acknowledge that a person's spiritual identity is not first and foremost constructed through their mind as humans are not primarily "thinking things," but through the shaping of one's desires (Smith, 2009). Smith goes on to state that embodied practices such as prayer or scripture reading contribute to the spiritual development of students because people were created to be lovers, and these practices in a Christian school direct the students love to the proper telos—that is, in a Christian school, God.

The Christian school community then has a responsibility to create the space and place for students to participate in a wide range of spiritual practices. A spiritual practice such as communal worship, when done well, has a positive impact on spiritual development as it helps students understand they are part of a larger story (Dillon & Wink, 2002; Gay, 2000). There is evidence that writing or journaling as formational practice can lead to positive spiritual development (Sink, Cleveland & Stern, 2007; Huitt & Robbins, 2003). Journal writing offers students a time to explore safely their doubts or fears and other questions they may have about their faith or other matters. Huitt and Robbins (2003) suggested that the practice of spiritual journaling assists students in coming to a better understanding of self, which, in turn, can create a safer atmosphere in the classroom that is conducive to learning. Finally, in a world where most students are plugged in and surrounded by technology and other noises, creating a daily or weekly time for silence and contemplation is a key component of spiritual development (Davies, 2007; Gay, 2000; Hyde, 2008).

## **The Role of the Community**

Positive spiritual practices grounded in faith allow students to practice holy living that leads to spiritual development (Holm, 2008). Schools can play a vital role in this as adolescents and young adults all have the capacity for positive spiritual formation if they remain involved in healthy communities over a long period of time (Dowling, Gestsdottir, Anderson, von Eye, & Lerner, 2003). These communities understand that students have a predisposition to spirituality and this spirituality is often shaped and nurtured through a student's narrative (Hyde, 2008; (Revell, 2008). Smith (2009) suggested that, "to be human is to desire 'the kingdom,' *some* version of the kingdom, which is the aim of our quest ... that hoped-for, longed-for, dreamed-of picture of the good life—the realm of human flourishing—that we pursue without ceasing" (p. 54). While a multitude of complex versions of the good life provides students with competing stories of human flourishing, spiritual practices in a Christian school context are integral because they invite students into a faith-based version of that life that redirects their desires and telos towards God.

Christian school communities then have the opportunity to offer students a counter-cultural narrative; a narrative that allows students to develop a set of beliefs and values that make them more aware of others while giving them a safe place to ask questions (Benson et al., 2003; Gay, 2000). In short, any aspect of a school that assists students in discovering who they are and how they relate to others contributes to the spiritual development of its students (Davies, 2007). As students continue to develop spiritually, a maturation of faith occurs and their identity as a unique person with a specific purpose continues to unfold.

For many students, the faith foundation that grounds their worldview and belief system cannot hold due to the increasing rise in secularism and other ideologies that have significant

impact on the spiritual development of students (Bartholemew & Goheen, 2009). Nietzsche's popular but often-misrepresented quote that "God is dead" did not mean that God is no longer present, but rather warns that if we reduce God to a bystander in our culture, people will no longer know in whom to put their trust (Fisher, 2009). Schools, whether public or private, can assist students in restoring and re-storying their spiritual center so that it is redirected at a life-giving telos, whether that is faith in God, participation in a faith community, or a positive, faith-based philosophy that is at the center of a student's world and life view (Kimball, 2008).

Christian schools have a unique opportunity to affect the positive spiritual development of students because youth who are part of a community that puts a high emphasis on values and morals emerge with a positive spirituality that focuses on serving others and contributing to the common good (Furrow et al., 2004).

### **The Role of the Teacher**

Due to the nature of the student-teacher relationship, teachers have many opportunities to model, mentor, and partner with students who can learn these practices in the context of learning (Dykstra, 2005). The teacher plays a significant role in fostering positive spiritual development and transformation, specifically through students' perceptions of a teacher's Christ-like persona as well as participation in the spiritual disciplines (Marah, 2009; Moore, 2014). Teachers could be intentional in their mentoring or it could simply be a by-product of a positive relationship with students (Buzzanell, 2009). Teachers who understand the paradoxes of an adolescent's spiritual development (Rossiter, 2011) embody these positive relationships. In addition, these teachers provide learning experiences across the curriculum that are formational in that they shape both the mind and heart of the student, and help them make meaning of the world in which they live



(Buchanan & Hyde, 2008; Cricks & Jelfs, 2011; Davies, 2007; Neusch-Olver, 2005; Revell, 2008).

By modeling positive spirituality, teachers have the ability to influence their students (Fleming & Canister, 2010; Sink et al., 2007). Not only can teachers model these practices, they can also explain the practices and help students understand the reason and the values entrenched in them (Dykstra, 2005). Spiritual development is also promoted by participating in peer relationships. Doing so can often assist students by offering a better understanding of their own belief system as well as the belief system of others (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012).

In conclusion, teachers realize that spiritual development is an ongoing process influenced by many factors, both external and internal to the institution (Benson et al., 2003). Individual practices such as prayer or journal writing or larger communal practices such as corporate worship as well as participation in positive relationships with teachers and peers all contribute to the spiritual development of students. Spiritual practices, whether individual or communal, encourage and develop common bonds among staff and students (Revell, 2008).

### **Benefits of Spiritual Development**

Because the communal and individual benefits of spiritual development are too vast to discuss individually, this review of the literature focuses on several dominant themes. Those themes include maturity of faith, the development of morals and ethics, relating to others, and vocational call.

**Maturity of Faith.** A major study of Seventh Day Adventist schools demonstrates that private, faith-based schools contribute to the faith maturity of students (Rice & Gillespie, 1992). As students' faith matures, so does their worldview. This faith maturation allows students to assess critically the world in which they live and how their faith relates to the current culture (Holm, 2008). For students, faith matures through asking questions, expressing doubts, and articulating struggles as they take ownership of their religious beliefs (Gay 2000; LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012). This process of moving from unwavering conviction as children to questions of doubt as teenagers can also be seen as students develop in their relationship with a transcendent other, moving from dependence to independence to interdependence (Gibson, 2004). King, Clardy, and Ramos (2014) indicated that this process of spiritual development ultimately strengthens young people's commitments to their belief system and worldview. Christian schools can create spaces, both within and outside the classroom, where students can develop spiritually in a safe environment.

A mature faith can provide students with a sense of hope, comfort, and meaning (Sink et al., 2007), which then gives them a confident framework from which to live. It is through this framework that students develop character, positive social connections, compassion, and an orientation to do good work and help others, all of which leads to personal transformation (Dowling et al., 2003).

Research by the Cardus Institute (2011) compared the positive impact that graduates from Christian, public, and Catholic schools have on the public good. Cardus found that Christian school graduates are more involved in making a positive contribution to their community than their public or Catholic school counterparts. In a sense, Christian education is public education in that it prepares students to contribute to the common good, not just within their own Christian

community, but also to the neighborhood through activities like coaching children's sports teams, sitting on community boards, or initiating neighborhood programs (Pennings, 2013). In short, communities should want Christian school graduates as part of their neighborhood because those graduates make a difference in the lives of others.

**Development of Morals and Values.** Another significant benefit of positive spiritual development is the impact on a person's morals and values (Gay, 2000). One study demonstrated that youth often associate morality as central to their spirituality and the need to do the right thing and be righteous in their actions (King, Clardy, & Ramos, 2014). In addition, King et al. (2014) stated that youth indicate that spirituality helps clarify what is truly important in their life, such as compassion, fairness, prayers, and honesty.

For other youth, personal spiritual development was associated with lifestyle choices, such as not drinking, swearing, or smoking (King et al., 2014). Many adolescents see the interconnectedness of spirituality and morality (Donnelly, Matsuba, Hart, & Atkins, 2006). Beyond adolescence, many people acknowledge that faith and spirituality are the catalyst for their morality (Walker, 2003).

Christian schools not only have the ability to foster morals and ethics within their students through the context of Christian teaching, but to provide them with a framework for positive morality as it relates to faith formation. By doing this, students understand that the reason for acting morally or ethically is that it is one way to show others that they are spiritually grounded.

**Relating to Others.** A person's spirituality can act as a guide in relationships with others and self (Tirri & Quinn, 2010). With positive spiritual development comes a greater sense of others (Gay, 2000). In addition, a positive consequence of spiritual development includes helping and respecting peers and adults, including the religious belief systems of others (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012).

Adolescents and teenagers often attempt to discover and understand their identity and role in the larger social group. For many, this means the need to pacify or placate those in their peer group and those in authority to them in order to fit in (Fleming & Canister, 2010). Conversely, when spiritual development leads to understanding others and maintaining personal identity, then a residual effect is the building of a positive ethos and community that develops in a school, as cited by both public and private school teachers (Revell, 2008). The challenge, as cited by Revell (2008), is that there is an assumption that community in Christian schools is present while students in these schools indicated that community must be created and cared for over time. In short, a positive ethos of care must not be taken for granted in Christian schools. Teachers in these schools suggest that this could happen by putting spiritual concerns and spiritual practices at the center of community building (Revell, 2008).

**Vocational Call.** Schools have an opportunity to assist students in coming to a deeper understanding of their vocation and place in the world where they might serve (Engebretson, 2002; Sink et al., 2007). For many teenagers, their view of where they fit in the culture might have a different emphasis than it does for adults. Conversely, teenagers are often still in the process of developing their identity and how that relates to contributing to the common good (Furrow, et al., 2004). Christian schools must respond to this by offering curricular and extracurricular practices and learning opportunities that help students to understand better their vocational call.

Research studies indicate that a significant number of teenage boys associate spirituality with identity and belonging, but males often define spirituality as any experiences where joy, peace, hope, or freedom are found (Engebretson, 2006). Many teenagers link their spirituality with personal identity because spirituality develops a sense of self in relationship to others and the culture in which they live (Furrow, et al., 2004). Spirituality guides how and why students respond the way they do in certain situations, and these responses indicate who they are and what they value (Revell, 2008). Consequently, spiritual formation informs a student's purpose in life (Tirri & Quinn, 2010), and Christian schools have an opportunity to connect a student's belief system with vocational identity and calling.

The Christian school can have a significant role in fostering practices that lead to positive spiritual development. The benefits, such as the maturity of a student's faith, the positive development of morals and ethics, a stronger sense of others, and affirming a student's vocational calling should all indicate that spiritual development is not just integral for individual students or even the local school community, but for the larger community and the public good.

## **Barriers to Spiritual Development of Students in Schools**

Christian schools and the larger community would do well to be aware of the substantial factors that might hinder the spiritual development of students. For the purpose of this study, it is important to know the barriers teenagers face so that schools can foster a culture of positive spiritual development, as well as implement practices and equip people that address these needs. Although many individuals may have personal and unique theories regarding the decline of spiritual development, the review of the literature and research indicates some common barriers to positive spiritual development.

**Imposed or Manipulated Worldview.** Each Christian school has a unique vision, and most Christian schools are purposeful in the integration of faith and worldview into the subject matter. Integrating faith into every aspect of the curriculum is an opportunity for a school's vision to inform its practice authentically. The risk is that teachers try too hard to force a faith-based worldview into places where it does not fit. Students can become jaded or cynical; research literature indicates that students react negatively when spirituality is imposed on them—in a sense, it is happening to them, not with them (Hyde, 2008; Nuesch-Olver, 2005).

Whether schools are private, faith-based, or public institutions, they need to consider that each of its students comes through the front doors shaped by their own narrative and with their own worldview. The challenge for any school is to understand that each student is not in a class simply to be filled with information given to them by a teacher, but that the heart and mind of must be developed in partnership with the students in the context of their story (Hyde, 2008). When schools ask or imply that students need to discard their worldview and thus potentially destroy their sense of identity, Christian education and its teachers ignore the rich faith traditions of students that give meaning to students' lives (Bosacki & Ota, 2000).

**Individualism and Isolation.** Teenagers, who often feel they do not have a safe place to express their doubts, indicate that they tend to internalize this anxiety, which often leads them to isolation and individualism (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012). As students journey through high school, their lives are filled with a myriad of factors that leave them feeling fragile in their relationships with parents or teachers, or even within themselves (Zapf, 2008). Students need trusting adults in their community who understand the importance of spiritual modeling and mentoring and can provide support in times of distress and doubt (King, Ramos, & Clardy, 2013). In addition, King et al. suggested that when this emotional and spiritual support is in place, then students are able to identify with a larger community beyond themselves. Mentors, specifically teachers or youth pastors, must take their role seriously and invest in the lives of students to squelch feelings of abandonment and aloneness that many feel (Clark, 2004). It is essential for those who play significant roles in the lives of students to build trust by investing in the lives of students over a long period of time (Fleming & Canister, 2010).

In this sense, the Christian school can have a profound impact on students as they interact with positive role models that come in the form of teachers, administrators, coaches, and other staff. Students today need adults who are authentic and real, who model faith and who are consistent in their character (Fleming & Canister, 2010). Teenagers are at a developmental stage where they will seek relationships outside of the home as they begin to search for their identity, and Christian organizations such as a school have an opportunity to provide a safe environment that includes rather than isolates (King et al., 2013).

The staff in Christian schools then knows that their students have specific spiritual needs and they must connect what is meaningful to teenagers with the larger curriculum, which is what students indicate they need (Huitt & Robbins, 2003). In this way, schools must then tailor their

teaching and pedagogy to meet the cognitive, spiritual, and affective dimensions of students (Buchanan & Hyde, 2008). This helps students understand that their learning and their faith has relevance in today's world, and that the answer in a time of crisis might be more complex than simply calling on Jesus to make everything better (Nuesch-Olver, 2005).

**Competing Ideologies.** Ideologies such as consumerism, individualism, and relativism can lead many young people to become cynical about faith-based institutions, in particular the church and Christian schools. The competing ideologies of the secular world work on the heart of children in such a way that a students' desires can isolate them from the faith values of the community (Smith, 2009). The task of Christian education is then to promote spiritual practices as a counter narrative that demonstrates to students that the communal love others feel for them is unconditional (Revell, 2008). These spiritual practices may include serving others, contemplation, gratitude and self-sacrifice, all of which may strengthen their faith commitment (King et al., 2013). When communities participate in these practices, people discover God is present and have opportunity to experience life in a new way (Dykstra, 2005).

### **Conclusions from the Literature Review**

Repeated readings suggest that even though the definitions of spirituality and spiritual development are varied, Christian schools have a unique opportunity to affect positively a student's spiritual development. Christian school communities affirm that all of its students are spiritual beings, and schools can use spiritual practices to shape the hearts and heads of its students. Practices such as communal worship, prayer, journal writing, silence, and contemplation all have a positive impact on the spiritual development of students. Christian school teachers also have the unique opportunity to cater their pedagogy to include practices in



their curriculum, and get to know students as they make authentic connections between a student's spirituality and learning experience.

Students who undergo a transformation through spiritual development are more likely to have a stronger sense of personal identity, to understand the multiple perspectives of others better, and to have a healthy set of morals and values rooted to their faith commitment. Through spiritual development, students might discern their vocation as a way to contribute to the public good.

Christian schools need to be keenly aware that attempts to coerce students to believe that there is only one way to develop spirituality will result in jaded and cynical students who feel spiritual development is happening *to* them and not *in* them. Christian schools, in being faithful to their vision, must use spiritual practices as an invitation to positive spiritual development.

However, there is a gap in the literature surrounding the relationship of faith practices and spiritual development in Christian schools. While many research studies indicate the positive impact of spiritual practices on spiritual development, there are still more avenues that can be explored. For example, does gender play a significant role in the spiritual development of teenagers? Are the barriers to spiritual development the same for younger teenagers than older ones? A student's voice can provide insight into how people, practices, and culture can be more effective in enhancing the spiritual development of students in Christian school context. At this time, however, their voices are largely silent.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **Methods**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions five grade 12 Christian school students have regarding their understanding of spiritual development, and in that context discover the factors within their school that have enhanced or hindered the participants' spiritual development. Specifically, I used personal interviews to explore how practices, people, or Christian school culture influence spiritual development.

As a means to guide this exploration, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

1. How do the actions and interactions of people associated with a private Christian high school contribute to the spiritual development of students?
2. How do corporate spiritual practices in a private Christian high school contribute to the spiritual development of students?
3. How does the school culture associated with a private Christian high school contribute to the spiritual formation of students?

#### **Setting**

The research location was a Christian secondary school comprised of approximately 300 students. The school is located in a suburb of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. The secondary school is part of a PreK-12 school system of 1,000 students. While the elementary school has existed for approximately 50 years, the secondary school graduated its first class in 1999. The school has its roots in the Reformed tradition, but is now denominationally diverse with over 100 churches represented in the school. The school is a member of the Society of Christian Schools of British Columbia and Christian Schools International. All staff members

are required to be professing Christians and involved in a local church community. The school has a closed enrolment policy, meaning that at least one parent must be actively involved in a local church and must include a reference letter from their pastor as part of the enrolment policy.

### **Research Design and Data Treatment**

Phenomenology is appropriate for this study on student perceptions of spiritual development because phenomenology attempts to understand the world as people experience it (Van Manen, 1984). Spirituality is integral to our humanity, and Van Manen (1984) suggested that a phenomenological approach allows us to discover what it means to be human through being mindful and paying attention to the world in which people live. This approach then allows us to pay attention to teenagers and to be mindful of where they are in their development by taking a posture of hospitality through the asking of questions and listening intently to the factors that have enhanced or been a barrier to their spirituality. Phenomenology enhances the humanity of others because “phenomenological research has, as its ultimate aim, to fulfill our human nature: to become more fully who we are” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 39). Creswell (2013) stated that phenomenology is not limited to describing the experiences of participants, but also calls on the researcher to interpret such events.

A purposive sampling strategy was appropriate for this phenomenological research approach because participants were needed that understood the phenomenon and this ensured that they could offer rich insights (Creswell, 2013). Purposive sampling not only allowed for rich detail and understanding, but it also allowed for the development of concepts and theories (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Purposive sampling is used when the researcher knows the participants have specific and appropriate traits to study in the context of the topic (Nardi, 2014).

The study included personal interviews with five participants who attend the same school. Criteria for participation in this study required each student to be enrolled full time in the school from grade 9-12. The rationale for the criteria of having students enrolled for the entirety of their secondary school time was that students have been embedded in the school for a longer time period and can reflect back on their spiritual development over multiple years. The unit of analysis was each individual student. Other criteria for participation in this study was the need to self-identify as Christian, a willingness to participate, and an eagerness to engage in dialogue and appropriately answer the research questions as adequately as possible.

Data collection took place via personal interviews with each participant. Longer interviews are common in phenomenological research and are often informal and typically open-ended to leave room for spontaneous comments and questions (Moustakas, 1994). The interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Audio from the interviews was recorded, and later transcribed so that data could be analyzed and coded. These interviews took place in the principal's office, a location agreed upon by the participant and researcher. The researcher conducted the personal interviews. While the primary questions centered on how the people, practices, and culture have a positive affect or hindered spiritual development, the researcher asked appropriate follow-up questions.

Students were permitted to bring any writing or notes on the topic to the interview, and were also encouraged to bring any artifacts that might help them demonstrate or speak to the research topic. Participants were also invited to bring an artifact beyond writing that was created as part of their school life, should one exist, that might be a tangible expression or symbol of their spiritual development and would allow them to express their thoughts more clearly. While it was the student's choice to bring in a symbol or writing, the motivation for giving participants

this option was the hope that it might ease their anxiety by giving them an object to which they could refer. In addition, it was hoped that students would feel empowered as a participant, and this would allow them to be as comfortable as possible so that they could offer rich description about their experiences.

Field notes were kept of each interview. Some notes were written down at the conclusion of each interview. The field notes along with the transcripts of the data as well as any writing or artifacts brought to the interview constituted the data source. Each interview was captured with a digital recorder and transcribed upon completion of all interviews.

Critical analysis and organization of the data took place by coding data in three steps: initial coding, focused coding, and thematic coding. Coding is a step-by-step process in which the researcher moves from sorting through all the data and forming initial observations to developing and defining specific themes and categories (Hahn, 2008). A code was initially identified through words or short phrase that captures the lived experiences of the participants (Saldana, 2009). Aspects of interpretative phenomenological analysis were used as a guide throughout the coding process, which included moving from what was unique about the experience for each participant to what was shared, a description and interpretation of the participant's lived experience, and the deep desire of the researcher to understand the participant's point of view (Cooper, Fleischer, & Cotton, 2012).

Initial coding is the reading and review of all transcripts and field notes with the objective to identify the ideas and patterns in the response of the participants (Huffman, 2015). The goal of initial coding was to engage the data, which is why it was necessary to read the transcripts a number of times and make notes and headings in the text while reading (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). While there were no clear boundaries on what was and was not commented or noted in the

margins, there was a focus on identifying key words or phrases in each interview as well as contradicting or repeating ideas (Smith & Osborn, 2007) using in vivo coding. In vivo, Latin “for that which is alive” establishes codes using the exact language of the participant (Saldana, 2009). Saldana stated that using in vivo coding when interviewing young people works well because they often have unique words or language that can help adults better understand the experiences.

Foundational to the initial coding process of initial coding was to find statements or phrases that seemed integral to the description and topic (Van Manen, 2014). Integral to the initial coding process was the horizontalizing of data, where the researcher considered each relative statement as equivalent in value to any other statement (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas stated that each statement is a potential new horizon that can potentially add depth and understanding of the phenomenon. Not only did initial coding allow the researcher to begin to identify possibly common responses and themes via in vivo coding, but it also allowed the researcher to sift and discard non-essential information, thus reducing the overall amount of data (Hahn, 2008).

The goal of focused coding was to develop a number of significant categories or themes; this was done by taking responses from each interview that had similar characteristics and grouping them together into categories, and then categories were compared and connections and themes were made (Saldana, 2009). Once each interview had gone through the process of initial in vivo coding, the researcher began to search for redundancy of words or phrases that might help identify common ideas. While the language of each participant was not the same, the researcher discerned which words or phrases had similar characteristics and meaning and then began to categorize the data. It was important at this point for the researcher to identify which of

the initial codes deserved their own category, and which codes were a subset within a larger category (Lichtman, 2012). These categories then begin to form emergent themes.

These emergent themes formed the basis for the final step in the coding process, called thematic coding. Themes are rich, encompassing ideas that are formed by several codes (Creswell, 2013). The identification of emergent themes and the process of thematic coding involved “the analyses of the data in an attempt to identify theoretical connections between the themes” (Huffman, 2015). The theoretical organization of themes allowed the researcher to make connections across the interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2007). While the grouping of themes across interviews was somewhat interpretive, the researcher checked thematic clusters against transcripts to ensure that the thematic groups that the researcher developed were consistent with what the original source intended (Smith & Osborn, 2007). The goal from the beginning of the coding process to the end was to move from a tentative list of 25-30 in vivo codes to 5-7 major themes (Creswell, 2013). The grouping and labeling of themes was identified and discussed in rich detail in the dissertation and provided answers to the research questions previously outlined in this study.

## **Research Ethics**

The researcher met with school principal to obtain permission to conduct research at the school. As part of that conversation, the researcher spoke to the principal to explain the research objectives, and asked him to compile a list of potential candidates in concert with the Bible and English teacher. The goal was to find participants that met the criteria and could offer insights that would help meet the research requirements. These specific teachers were asked because they are the only teachers in the building who teach all grade 12 students as all students are required to take these courses. Once the researcher received the list of students, he asked to meet

with all potential candidates at a lunch meeting in the principal's office, where an outline of the goals and procedures of the research was offered and students had a chance to ask questions. Those students interested in participating took a parent letter of consent home (Appendix B). Those parents agreeing to allow their children to participate signed the letter and returned it to the secretary in the main office at the school where the researcher collected them.

Data derived from the interview were analyzed and have been presented in the dissertation in an anonymous fashion. No participants have been identified and all personal information has been kept confidential. Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

To reduce risk, all research materials (i.e. audio recordings, transcripts, artifacts, consent forms) will be kept in a locked location for no more than one year after publication. No one will have access to the information except the researcher. After one year, the researcher will shred all paper material, and all other materials will be destroyed in an appropriate fashion. For example, the researcher will delete audio recordings.

### **Role of the Researcher**

On a practical level, this study is one of the requirements towards completion of the Doctor of Education degree through George Fox University. My first engagement with spiritual practices in a Christian school came in grade 1, where I can remember having to memorize Bible verses and hymns we sang in church each week, verses that I still remember and hymns that I still find myself humming. On a personal level, the research topic is one that I am passionate about and is important to me because of the many ways that Christian education has shaped me spiritually, whether through ongoing spiritual practices or relationships with students, teachers or coaches.



In addition, as Christian school administrator, there is the potential perception of having a desire to find a positive result. *Epoche* is a Greek word that means to “refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) stated that in the epoche, presuppositions and judgments must be set aside so that the phenomenon can be explored almost naively with an open mind as if considering it for the first time. The epoche then allows the researcher to experience the phenomenon in a unique and even transformational way (Bevan, 2014)

Due to my vocation as a Christian school principal and the nature of the posed research questions, there is a wide range of potential pitfalls that might lead to bias, and the epoche is a critical step in maintaining research ethics. These pitfalls might include an affinity with certain kinds of participants, the personal qualities and values of the researcher, and the capacity for boredom, patience, or concentration (Rajendran, 2001). Essential to avoiding these pitfalls is the need to let go of the notion that I am the expert and transition to viewing the participants as co-researchers with me in this journey (Schmidt, 2005).

A researcher can guard against bias by bracketing his or her presuppositions about the challenges or factors surrounding the phenomenon so that they can fully understand the lived experiences of the participants (Yüksel & Yıldırım, 2015). Groenewald (2004) suggested one way to bracket is to guard against the categorization of data during data collection.

### **Potential Contributions to the Literature**

This study has the potential to offer new insights from participants whose current everyday experiences in schools can either hinder or promote spiritual development. Although there is growing interest in the spirituality and spiritual development of young people, little empirical evidence or theories exist (King et al., 2014). There is a gap in the literature about this

topic, and it is important to hear the insights of students who currently attend Christian schools. While it might be more convenient to gather data from alumni of faith-based schools since they have the gift of hindsight and maturity to look back and reflect, this study is an opportunity to hear from the students whose current reality finds them as students in a Christian school.

My hope is that other Christian schools (or schools from other faith backgrounds) will use this study to spur discussions that will help them better understand the unique perspective current students can offer about their spiritual development. Christian schools, in particular, often set up weekly rhythms and patterns, and trust that they are positively enhancing a student's spiritual development. Christian schoolteachers are uniquely positioned to walk alongside students in their spiritual development. In reading this study, I hope Christian schools are motivated to put a process in place where students can actively reflect and give feedback about what specific practices are assisting them grow in their faith. Conversely, students should be given a chance to offer critical feedback so that schools have opportunity to improve where needed. School administrators and staff need not respond to each critique with sudden reactive changes to weekly practices, but hearing these voices creates a culture of dialogue and understanding (Palmer, 2004). It is easy as teachers and administrators to forget the difficult struggles that all teenagers work through, in particular with their faith. In reality, there are times that Christian schools contribute to some of the angst and cynicism students feel about their faith, and that is a fact that schools should not overlook.

One essential mission of Christian schools is to help students understand that the whole world belongs to God, including, but not limited to, theology, algebra, art and even the playing field (Wolterstorff, 2002). Yet, sin taints the world in which we live and needs restoration. Through their academic and extracurricular offerings, Christian schools teach students that they

are part of God's restoration project. But these schools must also pause and understand that academics are only one way schools foster spiritual development. Schools help students understand that spiritual development can also be enhanced through authentic practices and the building of relationships. Through practices and people as well as teaching students to think critically about their role in the world, schools care for the spiritual well-being of our students. Furthermore, if we do not care for our students first and foremost in this way, then not much else matters in the Christian education project.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

This research study includes the stories of five Grade 12 students at Highlands Christian School (HCS). Two of the students have been enrolled at HCS since kindergarten, while two of the students transferred from public schools in grade 9. The final participant transferred from another local Christian school after grade 8. All students self-identified as Christians. I met with each of the students at the beginning of their second term of their Grade 12 year. The interviews took place in the principal's office at Highlands Christian School. This setting allowed the interview to take place in a public setting while still offering the participants a level of privacy. The conversations were casual and pleasant, and all students seemed comfortable sharing how the school influenced their spiritual development. The participants were extremely cordial and all thanked me for the opportunity and wished me well in my work.

This chapter begins with a brief overview of each student's background and spiritual biography. The participant overviews contain relevant details about the student's faith journey and time at Highlands Christian School. After introducing the five students, the chapter discusses each student's experiences along categories listed in the research question: how people, practices, and culture at their school influenced personal spiritual development.

In listening to the students share their stories, it became apparent that these students took their spirituality and faith seriously. All participants could offer critical insight and feedback as to how the school contributed to their spiritual development. Students could all identify specific people, practices, and aspects of school culture that enhanced their spirituality, while also

offering critical analysis into how a Christian school might provide more support for students in this area.

**Student one: Joel.** Joel is a gregarious, outgoing student who others view as a leader in the school community. Joel is active in a local church and spends time as a youth group leader in his faith community. He is quick to smile and laugh, and he has a playful spirit. When I asked Joel to describe how others might describe him, he used words and phrases such as “outgoing,” “like to be the center of attention,” and “bring lots of energy to school” (Joel’s interview, 12-16-15).

Joel lived in the city of Highlands all his life and attended two local public elementary schools. Joel recalled how friends from church and the community played a significant role in his decision to transfer to Highlands rather than attend the local public secondary school:

What drew me here really was the talk from the friends that I would hear...everyone’s friends here...I had so many friends who go here. I kept hearing about how they talk about it, and it seemed fantastic. It is fantastic. (Joel’s interview, 12-16-15)

When asked about some factors or events outside of school that contributed to his personal spiritual development, Joel could identify the break-up of his parents’ marriage as having significant impact. While Joel could name that he has a close relationship with his mother, it was clear he cares and loves both his parents deeply.

When asked about the word “spirituality,” Joel offered a concise definition:

Spirituality is having faith that everything is going to turn out right, that everything is...not like a fairy tale ending, but God turns bad things into good. Keep that in mind throughout your life and not worry so much. (Joel’s interview, 12-16-15)

When I followed up with Joel about where he learned about this concept of redemption and restoration, he cited a youth pastor. Joel also referenced his mother's faith after his parents break up, and his perseverance to rehabilitate for his football season after being in a car accident as tangible examples of how good could come from sad events. As Joel said, "If you experience bad things, they end. It's good" (Joel's interview, 12-16-15).

**Student two: Sophie.** Sophie was born and raised in Highlands and is a thoughtful, intentional and engaging student who thinks deeply about her faith. She is transparent and outspoken about her love for the Lord and her desire to live her life out of her Christian worldview. Sophie's entire family is fervent in their faith and is active in a local church. Sophie is close to her family, loves them, and feels safe with them. The aspect of church that Sophie values and sees as integral in her spiritual development is the weekly Sunday sermon. Sophie's deep hope is that church and school is a place that influences her life throughout the week. Sophie is passionate about playing soccer and reading fantasy literature, citing *Lord of the Rings* as one book series she appreciates.

Sophie attended Ocean Public Elementary School until Grade 7. Because Sophie started kindergarten a year later than did other children her age, she was the oldest in her grade throughout elementary school. Wanting to rectify that and go to school with people her own age, she actually skipped her Grade 8 year and began Grade 9 at Highlands Christian School. Sophie could recall some of the struggles that led her to want to transfer to a new school, as well as the complexity of starting in a new place:

I did not really fit in [public school], with the girls and stuff. I didn't have a lot of good friends...it wasn't like physical or really verbal name calling, it was more like not inviting you to things, not welcoming you in, kind of starting to shut you out of things. I

was just really different from them, we just did not really click at all....In Grade 9 it was a tough transition...but I felt like it went okay...I do not regret it. I am happy to be graduating now with my birth year. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

When asked how people might describe her, Sophie was not sure how to answer because she values her privacy and she is not sure how well she is known:

I do not know. It is tough to say. I feel a lot of people would say I am kind and caring but I feel a lot of people do not really know who I am. It is like I do not really want to open up who I am. I do think I am kind. I really go to a lot of effort [to be kind] because of Ocean and wanting to leave and stuff, I know what it is like to not be welcomed. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

Due to being a somewhat private person, I was curious as to why Sophie would agree to participate in a process that might require a level of vulnerability:

I would regret more not doing it than doing it. I thought this was a cool opportunity to just say my thoughts. It would be really painful to think about what you would ask me, and then be continually thinking about it. But now I can outlet what I think. I thought about it a lot, the [research] question. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

I also asked Sophie what aspects of her spiritual life she values deeply and practices on a daily basis, and her response speaks to the person she is trying to become:

Compassion...even selflessness and serving others. I think I like taking the tough road and serving the underdog. Also love and acceptance because even though I think you have to balance that with not accepting sin, but still accepting people for where they are at and building a relationship with them. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

Sophie was baptized the fall of her Grade 9 year and, while that was a seminal moment in her life, she had few friends with whom she could share the moment. Sophie admits that she shared that story with one person but that, “I was kind of sad with my spiritual journey, I guess that test took me through a tough place. I just did not really love myself” (Sophie’s interview, 12-9-15).

Finally, when asked what she thought of when she heard the words “spirituality” and “spiritual development,” Sophie was quick to look towards the life of Jesus:

When I hear development, I think of developing a relationship just by working through what Jesus says in His sermons. I do not think there can be one exact definition for what He says in all of them. I do not want to say it is different for everyone and everyone can do their own thing, but I think it is not cemented in the Bible either. (Sophie’s interview, 12-9-15)

Although I only had an opportunity to spend 70 minutes with Sophie, her energy, love for others, and desire to love her neighbor was inspiring and moving.



**Student three: Jane.** Jane has been a student at Highlands Christian School since kindergarten. Jane is an excellent, hard-working, and independent person who thinks deeply about life and has keen insights. Jane takes school seriously and is a diligent student who succeeds academically. When asked why she was willing to participate in a study about spiritual development, she remarked, “I guess it’s something we all think about, especially as a Grade 12 student” (Jane’s interview, 12-9-15). When asked why she thought about spirituality more now than as a child, Jane replied that she was going off to university on her own and would have to carve out her identity. Thinking about her future made Jane reflect on her spirituality, as well as how it shapes the entirety of her life:

You will have to think for yourself, your life, not “I am not just so-and-so’s daughter.”

You are starting to be on your own. Okay, what do I actually think about this? Do I just believe what my parents believe, or do I believe what my friends believe, or what do I actually think about it? I think [spirituality] influences everything. It influences who you will become friends with and who you marry and how you raise your kids...it is actually a really serious thing to think about. (Jane’s interview, 12-9-15)

It was not until later in her schooling that Jane began to realize that Christian schools might be different from public schools, and how that might shape her in a formative way:

You are growing up and your parents put you in a Christian school. You are like, “Yeah, it’s totally normal,” and whatever. Then I started to think about it when I started playing soccer with girls [from other public schools]. It is like “Well, yes I go to school. Yes, we’re learning the same things,” but how are we different? (Jane’s interview, 12-9-15)

In thinking about her post-secondary pursuits, Jane noted that she would be attending a secular university. I queried as to whether she considered how the adjustment to that

environment might challenge or encourage her spirituality after spending so many years in a Christian school:

I am ready to just go out on my own and see what else is out there. I think a lot of people worry about not going to a Christian school post-secondary. They worry they are not strong enough, but I feel like it will really solidify my beliefs...I just think there is a lot of room to grow on my own. I am really, really excited. (Jane's interview, 12-9-15)

Jane shares that she has big questions about faith and spirituality and that she has more questions than answers at this point in her life. She admitted that at times it could be difficult to be vulnerable about the complexity of one's spirituality in a Christian community:

I guess what I really struggle with is...it seems like everyone has these ideas and they are all put together. They have all their lives together. They do not ever doubt things. They do not ever have these questions. That's something I still struggle with because I do not not believe there is a God. Obviously, there has to be a God. It is just like, "Well, why do people die? Why do people get sick? How does this work? Why have terrible things happened in this world?" I feel like I cannot always say that because I would sound like a bad Christian. (Jane's interview, 12-9-15)

Jane identified spirituality as "more than just a belief" (Jane's interview, 12-9-15) and cited yoga as one example of something that has enhanced her spirituality, although she was quick to point out that "I don't believe all the spiritual stuff but it does help. It is just about making yourself better. It takes you where you are and it meets you there." (Jane's interview, 12-9-15)

**Student four: Laura.** Laura has been a student at Highlands Christian School since kindergarten. When asked at the beginning of the interview why she agreed to participate, Laura said that the opportunity to speak about the impact of Christian education on spiritual development came at an intriguing crossroads in her life. Laura grew up in a Christian home and has always been part of a church community. She admitted that she had a difficult year last year but because of those struggles, she felt like she “came into my faith at the end of last year for the first time” (Laura’s interview, 12-17-15).

At the same time, she was on the cusp of transferring to a public school for her final year of high school. It was an intriguing opportunity to talk to someone who was ready to leave Christian education after spending her entire life in the community, but then consciously chose to stay. When asked if she cared to elaborate on that, Laura was willing to share some more insights and talk about the importance of people loving her unconditionally in the midst of her brokenness:

Last year, I hit a pretty low point with friends and lost a lot of relationships, made some poor choices. Being part of our school, being part of my church, I kind of just lost that aspect of it. But once I started looking around a bit more, there was a couple of people in my life...they did not shove Christianity down my throat...it is more just the way they act. They are loving and caring...I want to be that kind of person to someone else.

(Laura’s interview, 12-17-15)

When asked why she decided to share some of the struggles of the past year, Laura was forthright and confident in wanting to share that just because people go to a Christian school, it does not mean that life is easy or simple:

I definitely thought I needed to tell maybe a little about my past. I have not been on this perfect spiritual journey of, “You go to Christian school, and everything is going to be fine.” That is not always the case. It can be, but for me, it is okay to mess up. It is okay that you are not going to be the perfect standard because it does not mean you are not loved. You can still find faith. (Laura’s interview, 12-17-15)

When asked about how she defines spirituality, Laura viewed spirituality and religion as influencing one another, but also stated that she believes they each have their own unique qualities. Laura associated spirituality with how you treat one another regardless of one’s faith background, whereas the actions of a Christian are motivated by their faith:

Obviously, they [spirituality and religion] are tied in, because both come from God, but I think your spirituality does not have to be literal to the Bible. It can be just who you are. I know tons of people who are not Christians, but they totally have the actions that a Christian would have; they are kind and loving. (Laura’s interview, 12-17-15)

In addition, I wanted to understand the greater context in which Laura thought of the words “spirituality” and “spiritual development,” so I asked her what ideas she associated with those terms.

For me, it is someone who acts like a Christian. Someone who decides to be caring, to be loving, shows grace to people. I do not think it has to be the most literal sense, I do not think you have to go around preaching on the side of the streets. For me, it is just more of the little things. So if you get to reach out to one person and just show them a little bit of kindness or something, they can see God in you in that way. (Laura’s interview, 12-17-15)

Perhaps what was most inspiring in speaking to Laura is that she could reflect back on her struggles over the past year and have a sense of gratitude. Laura was able to see that some of her suffering influenced her spirituality and renewed her faith in a unique way:

‘For me, I was a Christian, but did I really know who God was? I just kind of went with it. I went to church. I went to school. Yeah, that is totally fine and I agree with it, but then after coming through what I did, you kind of need something to cling on. For me, I find God when I see a loving person and someone you want to look up to, and you want to be like that. I am thankful for that because I feel like I am better because of it.

(Laura’s interview, 12-17-15)

**Student five: Andrew.** Andrew is a serious, stoic young man who is very philosophical about his faith. Andrew has grown up in a Christian home and transferred to Highlands Christian School in grade 8 after attending another local Christian elementary school until grade 7. Andrew transferred to Highlands because he was a student at a school that did not have a secondary school attached to it, so there were no options to continue there. Wanting to continue in a school that had Christ at the core of its vision, Andrew came to HCS.

In sharing his spiritual biography, Andrew identified himself as a “conservative” who attends a “conservative church” (Andrew’s interview, 12-17-15). Baptized as an infant, Andrew went through the confirmation process at age 13. The confirmation process is, according to Andrew, essentially when a teenager takes catechism classes to learn about the sacraments and doctrines of the church. It is also an opportunity for students to take more ownership of their faith rather than simply believing what their parents do. Andrew stated, “I have a fairly strong faith and I find theology very important” (Andrew’s interview, 12-17-15). I followed up by asking Andrew why theology was important to him:

Because you believe in God, but what do you believe about God? People are just...they do not really care. Some people do not care but it is really important, because if you are not believing what truth is, then you are wrong. (Andrew's interview, 12-17-15)

Andrew sees his interest in theology at his age unique and suggested that not many people his age share that same passion. His interest in theology and desire to participate in meaningful conversation, along with his personal belief that his personal opinions are different than most, motivated him to participate in the study.

While some might view Andrew as cynical, he is far from it. Rather, Andrew is discerning in his thinking and in his beliefs. When asked to elaborate on how he is discerning, Andrew offered the following:

Like knowing what is true and what is not. If somebody says to me like, "Yeah, you need to do good works to get in heaven," as an example, then some people who do not really know what they are talking about would be, "Oh yeah, that's great." Then I would be like "No, not true." (Andrew's interview, 12-17-15)

When I asked Andrew about how he defined the words "spirituality" and "spiritual development," he was quick to offer that the words actually make him cringe a bit, saying the words sound "nice-ish" (Andrew's interview, 12-17-15). He also added that he is actually unsure what people mean when they use those terms. When I asked how he defined the words when he used them in writing or in conversation, he was sure to share his views on the word:

I do not use the word "spiritual," I think there is usually a better word to describe whatever you are talking about than "spiritual." Because if somebody says, "I'm super spiritual," then that is moral...trying to gain moral superiority or something. (Andrew's Interview, 12-17-15)

In wanting to proceed with the interview and not get lost on definitions, Andrew and I had a short discussion about the phrase “faith formation” and “faith development.” He said that he would be more comfortable if I used that language in place of other terms. Andrew liked those terms better because in his mind, it is more concrete and he knows what they mean. I then followed up by asking Andrew what “faith development” meant to him and he said, “It is learning more about the Bible and what God has to say about different things. It is believing... faith is that you believe or you do not believe.” (Andrew’s interview, 12-17-15)

Outside of school, Andrew has been a summer camp counselor and does that because he relishes being a positive role model and being with kids. While Andrew suggested that outside of summer camp he can be introverted, at camp, he is free because it offers a break from work and life, and he gets to be a leader.

### **Thematic Overview**

The Grade 12 students interviewed for this research study all offered unique perceptions on how the people, practices, and school cultures have shaped their spiritual development. Although each student’s spiritual biography and journey at Highlands Christian School is unique, each of the following themes will be used as a framework to explore the role of the school in each student’s story of spiritual development: teachers, peers, spiritual practices, and school culture.

**Theme one: Teachers.** Each student identified the role of the teachers and teacher care as one essential component to their spiritual development. Teachers in a Christian school are presented with multiple opportunities to mentor, model and collaborate with students, both in and out of the classroom (Dykstra, 2005). The students had confirmed this as they spoke about the high level of care they received from all staff. In addition, participants identify at least one teacher who had significant influence on their spiritual development.

*She knows the most about my story.* Joel identified Mrs. Schutt as a specific person who has influenced his spiritual development. Joel is good friends with Mrs. Schutt's son and often finds himself over at their house. Joel identified the Schutt family as a safe place and that "Mrs. Schutt knows the most about my story in the whole school" (Joel's interview, 12-16-15). It is important for Joel to be known for who he is, and it can be wearing for him to be seen as the person who is always happy-go-lucky. Joel identified Mrs. Schutt as the person who knows and loves him in good times and in his struggles. This love and care has not only been integral in his own spiritual development, but also in how he views others and accepts them unconditionally. Joel shared a story about a student in the school who often sits in his truck at lunch by himself, and Joel has tried to enfold and care for him in his own way.

Joel is a person who admittedly is high energy and takes up space in the classroom and teachers might not always know how to handle that. Mrs. Schutt's energy, positivity, and passion are what drew Joel to her. As Joel was going through a difficult time in his life, he appreciated that Mrs. Schutt held him accountable even though he was struggling. When asked how he knew that Mrs. Schutt cared, Joel was quick to offer that her raised voice and passion for his well-being had a positive impact on his life:



She's yelled at me a lot of times. I think that's part of the thing, she does care enough to yell at you. If you do something wrong...she gets to the point. She doesn't beat around the bush. I don't really like when people beat around the bush. And she cares enough to have a smile on her face in the classroom. (Joel's interview, 12-16-15)

Joel also noted that he wanted to live up to the positive expectations a teacher had of him. He said, "Mrs. Schutt, I know, thinks highly of me" (Joel's interview, 12-16-15) and he wants to keep the trust that she has in him.

While Joel built a close relationship with a teacher, Sophie did not feel as strongly about her relationship with teachers. She was quick to point out that this was not because she found teachers hard to approach or that they did not care for her. Rather, she had made a choice to guard herself:

Not that I don't trust them but I don't trust them because they don't really know me. I enjoy talking to some teachers, but there is no one I would ever really confide in. It's not really their fault; I just don't want to keep my secrets to a limited number of people. I don't want to give them all away. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

Sophie could also list many teachers who influenced her spiritual development. She spoke of the band teacher and his devotions; the Bible teacher who challenged her thinking even though she did not always agree with him.

Laura also noted the close relationship between the staff and students made her feel safe to ask questions and discuss big issues. What made Laura feel safe with some staff members was the confidence that she could ask big questions without fear of being judged. That freedom allowed her to explore different topics and ask a variety of questions while still knowing she would be loved and accepted:

You can just tell that [teachers] care and they are passionate about their job. There are people like Mrs. Fraser, who is not here this year, but I loved having her here. You could talk to her. You could say anything you want to her. She won't judge you. She will always be caring and loving and give you support and advice, and I loved being able to have an open relationship with her. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

***Even though it shows weakness, it shows strength.*** While Sophie is more open and expressive than most students about her faith, she did admit that she did not have a specific staff member who had significant impact on her spiritual development. She was quick to point out that this was not because she did not trust staff; rather, "I want to keep my secrets to limited number of people" (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15). In addition, her desire to remain somewhat private with staff was because she knew very little about the teachers or their worldview. While she did speak about some staff members by name, she often spoke about the overall positive impact that the staff had on her spiritual development.

Sophie noted that it was her observations of teachers living out their faith as role models that influenced her own spiritual development. On a macro level, she mentioned it could be disheartening to observe a teacher not investing in their work or in people. In addition, even her observations on a micro level, the small things she observed teachers doing would either encourage or discourage her in her own spiritual journey. While she noted it was important what teachers said, their actions affected her even more:

It is not often, what they say but what they do. It is easy to say stuff but it is a lot harder to do. It does not mean teachers have to be perfect...even just own up to things that they did wrong. I do not know of an exact situation, but its eye opening to realize they are not perfect, when they are able to come to you and be like, 'We aren't perfect either,'

that makes you respect them more. Even though it shows weakness, it shows strength.

(Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

Sophie also noted that she is encouraged in her own spiritual development when a teacher has put an effort into what they do, whether that is devotions to begin a class or the content itself. She noted one teacher who puts significant thought into daily readings and one way she honors his work is by taking to heart what he shares. Research literature indicates that teachers who model these practices in a positive way can influence a student's spirituality (Fleming & Canister, 2010). Sophie noted the importance of "having a teacher being invested in them and interested in them and doing their best to make school interesting" (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15), and this encouraged her to offer her best in every area of her life.

Joel also mentioned that a teacher's authenticity and desire to build relationship with him also influenced him as a person. He shared a story about never signing up for choir, but the choir teacher kept encouraging him to join, and he is thankful he did saying "I didn't like music, I didn't like singing...I'm having a blast" (Joel's interview, 12- 16-15). Joel also mentioned that he also found a role model in his P.E. teacher, partly because the teacher is so authentic and an advocate for Joel, and because one day he hopes to be a P.E. teacher:

Mr. Jones has done what I want to do. He is a volleyball player and he went to university for volleyball. He became a teacher. He is a funny guy. He's relaxed. I try to take that with me. How he shows that he cares. He wants me to find success.....I want to bring the community that I've found here...I want to be one of the teachers that people enjoy seeing and be involved in their students' lives, even if it is only for a year. It can make a big impact, like I've only had Mr. Jones for a year. (Joel's interview, 12-16-15)

***He does not try to censor your thinking.*** Jane has been a student at Highlands since kindergarten. While she has a good understanding of the Biblical narrative and appreciates the stories of the Bible that are taught at the younger grades, she appreciates that teachers in the secondary campus seem to allow more room to doubt and question their worldview. The importance of providing space for teenagers to doubt and ask big questions is integral as they think critically about the culture in which they live (Holm, 2008). It is through the request to consider other perspectives and feeling safe to ask her own questions about faith that Jane has been encouraged in her spiritual development, and research studies state that this leads to a maturation of one's faith (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012). She cited Mr. Cultus as one person who created a safe place in his classroom:

Mr. Cultus is good at that, he says, "What do you guys think?" He says, "I'm not trying to force you to think one way," and then you start thinking about it, too. You are like "Oh, I never thought about that." We are all mature enough and respectful enough to not be yelling at them, "You're so stupid for thinking that." (Jane's interview, 12-9-15)

Jane not only cited the work that Mr. Cultus does in the classroom that has an impact on her spiritually, but also his connection with the larger student body in the hallways that has led many students to trust him. When asked why people trust Mr. Cultus, Jane offered some important insights:

He just understands the way people think. He makes you think about stuff. He creates a positive atmosphere. It is open for discussion. It is open for learning. He does not try to censor your thinking. He does not ignore you or your thoughts because it is not what he wants to think. (Jane's interview, 12-9-15)

Joel also added that he appreciated that a Christian perspective was evident in his classes, but also added that teachers could actually push a little more. That said, he did admit that if there was an overemphasis on spirituality in every class, it could suffocate a student's thinking:

I do not feel like there is enough emphasis on faith at the school. It is a Christian school and it is evident it is a Christian school. The teachers teach according to the Bible and stuff like that, but at the same time, it's not too spiritual. (Joel's interview, 12-16-15)

Laura suggested that some teachers and staff were more open to divergent thinking, but also realized that disagreement can lead to growth, even if at first others do not validate her ideas:

I think for me, it is not so much the class; it is sometimes the teacher or the people. I feel like some people are not open to discussion. So you will say your perspective on God...and they will be, like, "That's completely wrong, what are you saying?" and they'll shut you down. It feels kind of crappy, because you are like, "This is my faith. This is the God I believe in" and they're telling you "No, that's wrong. That's not the God that's true." But you totally have to wrestle with it, because you're thinking, "Well, if they're telling me that this is wrong, should I re-read what I was thinking and maybe I'm looking at it wrong or maybe I have a biased opinion..." (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

***You can just tell when someone cares about what they are doing.*** The most significant encouragement to Laura's spiritual journey is the time and energy that teachers put into the work. This work encourages her because it is one way that a teacher honors her and the student body; for Laura, that work is a tangible expression of a teachers spirituality. In a sense, Laura does not need to have a teacher tell her that they care for her; rather, their actions demonstrate this. Laura was quick to cite Mr. Lewis, the school's band teacher, as a specific example of someone whose actions encouraged her in her own spiritual development:

People like Mr. Lewis I really appreciate because I see how he put so much work into everything he does. He has that spirituality in him. He is so passionate and he brings his faith into everything. You can just tell when someone cares about what they are doing and they care about their students. You can just feel they care...he went on our trip to Quebec and he was talking to some of their students. Then their students came up and said, "Your school seems totally different. You're super nice and your teachers are super open. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

When asked if she could be a little more specific beyond just knowing that a teacher cares, Laura cited some small but important examples that demonstrated that teachers saw students as real people. Laura cited a science teacher as having significant influence on her life and on the proper way to treat others:

When you have conversation with a teacher, and they actually want to talk to you, not just say "thank you" when you hand in a paper. But when you hand in a paper, they actually have a conversation with you and they ask you things. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

Conversely, there are also times for Laura when a relationship with a teacher can hinder her spiritual growth. This is hard because she seemed to have tremendous respect for all the teachers. Laura admits there are times when teachers and students are not going to agree on topics and she accepts that, but these disagreements can hinder her own spirituality when topics seem to get shut down without a teacher being willing to listen to divergent thinking:

It just feels that sometimes people are not open to discussion. So you will say your perspective on God...like if you ask a question and they will be like, "That's completely wrong. What are you saying? You cannot say that. That's not who God is." And then they will shut you down. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

When I asked Laura for advice she would give Christian schoolteachers that would encourage students at a Christian school in their spiritual development, she suggested that schools should focus on creating relationships between students and teachers that centered on dialogue, asking questions and listening. Laura believes that would not only affect relationships within the school, it would alter the school culture:

I think just having an openness between teachers, students, and making it a safe place to talk...somehow have that atmosphere everywhere you go and just experience God in the whole sense in the whole school. You would get to feel it everywhere. When you are going on a volleyball trip. When you are in the band room, not just Bible class or chapel. You just get to experience it. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

Andrew indicated that he measured teacher care through their wisdom and insights. Andrew does not seem like a person who needs to hear emotive, loving responses. Rather, he feels cared for when teachers offer strong, intelligent discussions that push his thinking. While

knowing that the teachers care for him in every respect, he alluded to a few classes that helped him in his faith development:

You can tell [teachers] are Christians, and they mean well and they care about the students and everything like that...There's one project. Bible 12, we have to have a moral issue question such as abortion and research the heck out of it, which is, I think, that's a good thing because it forces people to think deeply at least about one subject...Bible 9 with Mr. Hope is really good, too. He got some really good insight [about] what the Scripture really means. (Andrew's interview, 12-17-15)



**Theme two: Friends and Peers.** All students could identify their friends and peers as encouraging them in their faith journey. Whether through classroom discussions that leak into lunchtime walks, or experiencing grace when making a mistake, participants all identified their class as close and most suggested that their class was closer than any other in the school. While all were clear in suggesting that they did not believe their class was morally or spiritually superior, all felt they were part of a caring peer group. That said, some felt more emotionally and spiritually connected than others, in part due to personal choice or perception of others.

*I am not super close to anyone here.* I decided to begin this thematic discussion by focusing on Andrew, as he seemed to be a bit of an outlier when it came to his perception of how the school enhances his spiritual development, in particular, the role of peers. While many students cited examples of how their peer group encouraged and challenged their faith, Andrew seemed to have little emotional connection to the larger community. This is not to suggest that he spoke poorly of his peers; rather, it seemed hard for him to find specific example of how they have been an important part of his life. Andrew attributed that to his perception that most of the students in the school seemed to have a shallow view of Jesus and faith. Ironically, one might conclude that his perception might encourage his own belief system because, in his mind, he has tangible examples of what faith should not be. That said, Andrew acknowledged that his grade for the most part is close and works hard to honor God with their actions, but it can be hard for Andrew when he sees people his age who call themselves Christians but their actions do not support this claim:

It bothers me a lot. I do not say anything. It probably makes me a little more cynical about Christian school and where it is going, because if these people are the Christians of our age, then let go. I'm worried about it, more cynical about what people's intentions

are and why people are thinking like that...because if somebody doesn't know about their theology then they'd be like, "Oh, I guess this is what Christians are like...it's not really worth it." (Andrew's interview, 12-17-15)

One of the frustrations for Andrew is his perception that either people do not know how to engage in a conversation or they are unwilling to risk making their opinions known. Andrew said that at times people ask him his opinion on a matter and his response is, "How much time do you have?" and that usually puts a stop to the dialogue. While Andrew did acknowledge that there are some people that he does like to have a conversation with, he did not attribute his perception of peer apathy to Highlands specifically, but rather offered a larger critique of the culture:

Just the general culture of North America almost is like everybody just sits and does their own thing and doesn't want to bother anyone else, or doesn't want to go anywhere than where they are right now...they have their routine. They go about it and if anything interrupts that...they either just ignore it or freak out. Sometimes I have political conversations with people and sometimes they agree with me and sometimes they think I am hateful. (Andrew's interview, 12-17-15)

It is clear in talking to Andrew that he is not hateful. He has a deep passion to serve the Lord and be faithful in his life. While it may be hard for him to identify specific friends who have enhanced his spiritual development, one does get a sense that the peer group that surrounds him has still strengthened his resolve to live faithfully as a disciple of Jesus in the post-modern culture.

*All it takes is for one or two people to show you a little bit of love and grace.* Part of Joel's work this year has been working in the resource room with a child named Morrison, who has Down's syndrome. Joel identified his work with Morrison as has having a significant impact on his spirituality. Joel spoke specifically of Morrison's deep joy and resolve, and mentioned how that specific relationship encourages him in his own spiritual journey. It was interesting to note that Joel wanted to work in the resource room so that he could work and help with those who have specific needs; yet, Joel could identify that in a different way he has been the one who has received care and support:

The care he has is just tremendous. My dad had a stroke in June, the last day of school actually last year. When Morrison found out about that, he came. He gave me a hug. He prayed for me. He prayed for my dad. I think he met my dad twice. He sat there on the balcony and prayed. To see him do that without anyone asking him to, anyone telling him to...that is just phenomenal to me. (Joel's interview, 12-16-15)

Laura also talked about the importance of friends and the love and grace they showed her when she went through a difficult time. She said the fact that Highlands is a Christian school and while the student body is far from perfect, students can be stigmatized when their ethical and moral shortcomings become public knowledge. Laura noted that when that happened to her, there was an aspect of public shaming that took place, and people who were in her perceived friend group were not sure how to best support her. Conversely, she was also surprised at who did accept her:

All it takes is for one or two people to come up to you, show you a little bit of love and grace, and just because you made a mistake, it does mean you are permanently bad. That made a big difference for me. And you expect it to be your closest friends, but it really

was not them. It was people that I did not know very well or people I do not talk to that were genuinely kind. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

Joel also identified that he also does not feel like he has much room for error in the choices that he makes. Though at times under the microscope because of his outgoing personality and the public nature of his leadership role in the school, Joel spoke about the importance of one good friend who encouraged him in his faith simply by remaining positive and hopeful. Joel recalled his "roller coaster" summer and mentioned how his friend Jason just kept reminding him "it's going to get better." Joel concluded by saying that there was a level of trust among his peers and between teachers and students that he appreciated.

***It is exhausting to not let people know what I am struggling with.*** While some participants chose to make themselves vulnerable and others became vulnerable because of the choices they made, participants could also identify that even though they loved their peers, they did not always feel free being themselves. Sophie spoke about feeling the need to "wear a mask" (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15) because of her perception that so many people have a perfect life and the pressure she sometimes puts on herself to reflect that same image. Research studies indicate that some youth feel the need to do this in order to fit into the larger group (Fleming & Canister, 2010). Sophie said that for some students "their lives could be off the rails" (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15) and she is not always sure and wondered who else wore a mask each day because the pressure one feels to present a conflict-free life. Sophie spoke to feelings of being overwhelmed to live like this, and there was a sense that she longed to be able to let her guard down so that she could receive care from others:

I am trying not to let my life fall apart. In that way it isn't necessarily but in another way it is exhausting to not let people know what I'm struggling with and to not have their

encouragement. But in a small school, it hard even to trust people sometimes. I am not even sure if I am who I am, I am kind of being what other people would like...I am not even sure who I am anymore. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

Jane also spoke to the closeness of the class and often felt safe with her peers. Yet she also identified that it was difficult to be completely free with her struggles because "I don't want my friends to think I'm....at the same time, they are probably struggling with it too. I am sure they are" (Jane's interview, 12-9-15).

**Theme three: Practices.** Participants who have been a part of Highlands Christian since kindergarten could identify the importance of spiritual practices. They posited that spiritual practices deepened their faith commitment, which is supported by Dillon and Wink (2002). In addition, participants recalled the singing of songs, the memorization of Bible verses and the reading of Bible stories in elementary school. At the secondary level, participants could think critically about how and why some practices affected them positively. Conversely, other practices left them longing for something more significant.

*Chapels aren't always so hip.* When I asked the students to talk about some of the weekly rhythms of the school that had the potential to enhance their spiritual development, the most polarizing topic was chapel. All participants had strong opinions on chapel. No participant said chapel was helpful every week, but most realized that communal worship has the potential to influence his or her spiritual development in a positive way. The work of Gay (2000) and Dillon & Wink, (2002) indicate that communal worship supports spiritual development. While some participants did not always enjoy chapel, no one dismissed it entirely. All could identify when and why chapel aided their spiritual development and when it did not.

Participants spoke of a disconnect between worship at school and places like youth group or summer camp. Participants used words like “free” and “safe” when talking about singing enthusiastically or raising their hands in those settings. Yet, when singing those same songs in corporate chapel settings at school, there were times where participants expressed feelings of being watched by others and a fear of being labelled. Conversely, there were times when students did feel as if they could be free. What seemed hard for participants was the unpredictability of the situation. That is, students seemed to have no idea what the prevalent culture would be for any given chapel. Sophie described her feelings about chapel this way:

I think sometimes that it is not totally okay to put your hands in the air. Or you just need to put a lid on it. It is very ironic. But then I am hesitant to put a lid on it because sometimes it seems okay to be totally invested. It is so situational. It seems to depend on people's moods. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

Joel and Laura spoke about the singing in chapel as having the most significant impact on their spiritual development. When asked about how and why chapel worked, Joel identified the importance of the people leading it, using a word like “dynamic” (Joel's interview, 12-16-15) to

describe a strong chapel leader. Joel indicated that strong chapel leaders set the tone for the rest of the school. Conversely, Joel also identified that it was the responsibility of students to support leaders by singing along or paying attention.

Jane also spoke of how the mindset of others affected the potential of chapel, suggesting that not everyone is sure why the school has weekly chapel or it is unclear what the goal of chapel is. Ultimately, Jane could clearly identify the fact that chapel attendance was mandatory as a primary reason why chapel might not work at school and yet work in other settings:

It's a different environment say, if you go to church or if you go to youth group because everyone there wants to be there. They are all trying. They are all there for a reason, you all have a similar mindset. Chapel is just...it is just okay. Because it is not what is supposed to be. It is supposed to be a time of worship and reflections. But it is hard when you see other people who are like "I'm just not going to care. I'm going to talk."

(Jane's interview, 12-9-15)

Laura also spoke about the irony of being at a Christian school where people felt unsafe to sing and worship freely in corporate worship settings. She felt empathetic for the people who led music, and she felt frustrated about why there were different expectations *not* to participate in chapel:

I love our worship team and think they are awesome. We have awesome music, but then you are in a room full of people who are at a Christian school who should be able to worship, but we do not. You feel like you are being judged...then people will look at you like "what are you doing? That's so lame." At school, you suddenly feel like you have this boundary where you have to live up to expectation of not being cool. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

Ironically, Andrew identified the attempts to use chapel as a tool to enhance spiritual development as a weakness in the school. He referred to his peers as having a wide-range of feelings about chapel, citing some who “couldn’t care less” and others who really enjoyed chapel. Andrew could articulate that chapels were an important part of a Christian school, but personally found them “too spiritual” and described the songs as “mystical” and “watered down,” because songs in chapel had “nice sounding words that just say God is great 50 times in a row.” Andrew finally pronounced that chapel songs “are not really Christian, in a way” (Andrew’s interview, 12-17-15).

Laura acknowledged that not every chapel is going to work for every student, but that certain speakers will spark something in her and help her understand who she is and how she can contribute to the common good. Laura shared a story about a nurse who used her gifts to serve in a third-world country, which inspired Laura to serve in an orphanage last year and pursue the same vocation. Whether through chapel or other means, research studies demonstrate that schools do have an opportunity to help students come to a better understanding of vocation and their calling in the world (Engelbreton, 2002; Sink et. al., 2007). Laura thought that chapels could improve if speakers could make a personal connection with more students.

Sophie also wondered if students in a Christian school do not always embrace chapel because they take it for granted. Having attended a public school until grade 8, Sophie was initially surprised at the student body’s general apathy towards weekly chapel, as she thought it was one of the best things about going to a Christian school:

That was one of the coolest things that we went to chapel and worshipped together. I thought that was awesome. I was kind of surprised when people did not appreciate the novelty of being able to, as a school, worship the King. (Sophie’s interview, 12-9-15)



Though there were varied opinions about chapel, all participants agreed that chapel does have a role in a Christian school.

*It shows how much people really think about our spiritual development.* Another integral practice at Highlands Christian is daily devotions. These devotions can take different forms, from Bible reading, reading a devotional, writing in a journal, times of silence or open prayer. Like chapel, participants had a wide range of opinions about the role of devotions in the school. In addition, students had varied responses on how that daily practice contributed to their spiritual development. Similarly, all agreed devotions had a place in the daily rhythm of school.

One intriguing theme that participants identified as important was the attitude the teachers took towards devotions. This is not to suggest that they thought teachers were flippant or apathetic towards devotions, but rather it was clear to some participants that some teachers actually took the time to plan meaningful devotions. Participants like Sophie and Joel suggested there was a correlation between the effort the teachers put into planning devotions and the meaning and seriousness with which students listened and drew inspiration. For example, Sophie suggested that the band teacher reading from a variety of books for devotions was thoughtful, and she often finds herself thinking about his insights throughout the day. Joel noted that he appreciated a teacher who shared stories during devotions and put some energy and thought into it, rather than simply reading in a monotone voice, which for Joel was a sign of devotions not being that important. Sophie summarized her thoughts this way:

I can definitely appreciate when someone puts effort in it. To me it shows, and maybe it is not fair to assume this, but it shows how much people really think about our spiritual development. To me it shows that the teachers who put a little more effort into it actually care a little bit more. (Sophie's interview, 12-9-15)

Laura also correlated a teacher's passion and personal vulnerability in devotions with their level of care and way to encourage teenagers in their spiritual growth. She finds a teacher's passion in any area of their life contagious.

I love it when people are passionate about things, because if you are just going to read me a Bible story and you are going to read it like an essay, I really don't care, to be perfectly honest. If you have some kind of personal connection, or if you actually really care about it, then people are going to listen and get something out of it, which I think is huge.

(Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

Sophie noted there is a danger when devotions lack meaning or teachers do not give it the attention it deserves. Without teachers and students understanding why they are important, Sophie worried that they just become a habit if they seem meaningless to the teacher. Jane added one way to ensure that devotions did not become meaningless is to not just give easy answers but to "make them look for [meaning]; you have to make it more hidden so they appreciate it more" (Jane's interview, 12-9-15). Sophie also referenced two teachers who offered students some times of silence simply so they could contemplate and reflect on their spirituality and faith. There is evidence that creating a space for silence and contemplation does assist in positive spiritual development (Davies, 2007; Gay, 2000; Hyde, 2008). Sophie noted that she appreciated those times but almost needed more opportunity to practice solitude and silence because she is not used to the rhythm of it.

Andrew saw devotions as integral because of his belief that devotions was one clear marker that distinguished Christian schools from public schools. Andrew expressed some frustration that many students did not see the value of devotions or prayer, but also said that to not pray or do devotions would further secularize the community. While he did not articulate

exactly how devotions benefited his own spiritual development, it was clear that he thought devotions were a necessary practice for the larger community.

Prayer was one specific aspect of devotions about which a number of participants spoke positively. Students cited small practices, such as teachers giving time in a low-pressure environment for students to share their prayer requests publicly. Students also appreciated having prayer requests written on the board. Interestingly, some participants noted that they valued the prayer requests not only being written on the white board, but being kept up on the wall there throughout the week. By not erasing them at the end of class, students felt honored when teachers or peers would follow up and care for students by asking them about what they shared. Joel shared a story about a student who graduated last year who was recently diagnosed with cancer. Joel appreciated that his Bible teacher has kept that student's name on the board all year and that they prayed for this former student each day.

*I don't care that this dog just threw up all over me.* The practice of serving others outside of the school building was something participants longed to do more. When reflecting on the practice of community service or getting together with their "buddies" at the primary school, students spoke with enthusiasm and passion. Participants could articulate that working with others outside of the building was integral to contributing to the common good, and when they worked with others, this enhanced their own spirituality and understanding that they were active participants in a bigger story.

Jane suggested that the school might consider meeting for chapels less often and using that time to serve others in the community. While she liked the idea of planned service projects, her hope was that there would be an openness in the school to go on spontaneous service project when there was an immediate need in the community. Participants also suggested that the school

should give students the opportunity to pick a service project they are passionate about, rather than having a project assigned to a homeroom or class. In addition, service projects allow students to discover who they are and how they relate to others better, which Davies (2007) suggested leads to spiritual growth. Jane shared a story about a group of girls who volunteered at the local SPCA shelter, and how that helped her understand herself and others in a new way:

The best one is when you go to the SPCA shelter and you play with kittens. We all really bond together. Just for some reason, kittens and cute animals and you are like, “I don’t care that this dog threw up all over me. I love this dog.” Everyone just agrees. Then you see how happy, how much people really appreciated when you come and work and help others....and I think it is a lot more than just spirituality. It is teamwork, how to work together, how you can see other’s people’s gifts and they really shine, especially when you take them out of the school setting. You get to learn about people. (Jane’s interview, 12-9-15)

Laura shared a story about being in choir and sharing their love of music with elderly people at a senior’s care home in the community. Bringing joy to others not only encourages her in her own spirituality, but also brings the people closer together because they know they have had a positive influence on people who might be lonely or isolated. Laura talked about how much she appreciated getting to share something she was passionate about with others outside of the school. She also noted that service projects might allow students who feel constricted in the building to experience freedom in a new way. Laura could articulate that serving others is one way to help students understand the larger narrative in which they live:

For me, when I experience that ...I do not think we are just here to go to school, get a job, and get married. We are here for something more. We are here because God put us

here. You are supposed to have something meaningful in life, and I think if you can share God with people and they can see that, and that is who you are, then that's pretty incredible. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

Sophie expressed some frustration that the school did not offer more volunteer opportunities outside of the school that were catered to Grade 12 students who already feel so much pressure as senior students. Joel suggested that whether the school provides the opportunities to be involved in the community or not, students should be encouraged to participate and engage the culture in which they live. He suggested that perhaps the school should mandate service hours but have students serve in non-Christian organizations. One reason Joel suggested this is because that type of service will help students understand that students are called to love their neighbor, whether they are Christian or not. Joel cited a few stories where Christian students in the school would say, "Hey, that guy's not a Christian, I'm not going to hang out with him," (Joel's interview, 12-16-15) and Joel found that sad.

**Theme four: School culture.** The overall school culture at Highlands Christian School has had significant influence on the spiritual development of most participants. Participants cited the intentional and inclusive nature of the school as key factors in their own growth. In short, participants feel empowered by others and have a strong sense of ownership and investment in the school.

*It is an awesome community for those who want it.* When asked to describe the school culture and aspects of that culture that influenced their spiritual development, the word “community” was most prevalent. Although articulated in many different ways, it was clear that the Highlands Christian community has played a significant role in the lives of these participants. Conversely, an interesting aspect of living in a tight-knit, small community is that there can be added pressures because everyone knows each other. There is very little that is private, which means that when students are hurting, there is both a level of care and judgment attached to their actions. According to the participants, that paradox can push some students away.

In addition, students have the freedom to be involved as much or as little as they want. They can give of themselves in many areas. Jane suggested that for those who choose to be involved, there is a variety of options:

It is an awesome community for those who want it. If you want to be involved, there are so many opportunities. There is outreach. There is working in the community itself. If you do not care, you are not going to get anything. You have to give in order to receive.  
(Jane’s interview, 12-9-15)

Participants spoke of community both in and out of the classroom. Many of the participants felt a sense of responsibility to the community and worked hard to be a life-giving

member of the school. Their motivation for doing this was a desire to leave a legacy in the same way senior students before them had done. Although on the cusp of leaving, Laura could not stop smiling about what the school had done for her life and the blessing that comes with watching others grow spiritually through the years:

I love our community. I come here and this feels like home. This feels like a family. You are with these old [friends] who have their own journeys or their own experiences. You get to share that with them. You get to hear that and it is encouraging. Yeah, I love it, and I love it more now that I am here, because I want to go here and because I want to grow in faith. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

Laura also pointed out that the pervasive positive atmosphere throughout the school enhanced her spiritual development. Whether it was through class discussions that connected the academic world to her faith-life or her involvement in extra-curricular activities where she developed closer relationships, the school culture played a significant role in her life:

To me, I don't know, somehow, that atmosphere is everywhere you go, and you just experience God in the whole sense of the whole school. You get to feel it everywhere. When you are on a volleyball trip. When you are in the band room, not just in your Bible class, not just in chapel. You get to experience it. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

*I can't fit in here if I'm not going to be at their standard.* While students positively identified community as integral to their development, the shadow side to that close community is that some students felt external pressure if others perceived their spiritual lives outside the community standards. According to participants, this communal pressure has consequences for those who are outspoken and passionate about their spirituality, as well as those who struggle or no longer believe. There seems to be an unspoken standard of moral excellence at Highlands Christian among the student body. While participants believe these moral expectations are not necessarily bad, some see the expectations as a burden that can lead students feeling isolated or even cause some to leave the school. The assertion that youth often associate morality with spiritual development is supported by the work of Gay (2000). Moreover, youth often see morality as a hallmark of spirituality and the conviction that one must make positive choices (King et al., 2014). Consequently, when one makes what others see as unethical choice, their spirituality comes into question.

Joel and Laura both spoke of friends who left the school because they could not find acceptance, and while understanding why they left, they felt sad about the situation. Joel spoke of students who left because there was a perceived pressure that they needed to go to church or receive the sacrament of baptism. Laura spoke about her own journey through high school and some of the struggles that she encountered and how having high standards is good for the community, yet she also wondered if there could be more conversation and dialogue when people struggle so they know that trust has been broken, yet still feel loved:

I think because we hold our students up to a high standard, which is awesome. I think that's really good, but then we also make it seem that if you do fall under these other



categories, that you're wrong, you're bad. You are not in your Jesus when you are doing that, which kind of makes you feel worthless in a way. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

While ultimately she experienced love and grace from friends, she did come to a point in her life that almost led her to leave the school with a group of peers who actually left. As she reflected back on her relationship with them, there was a sense of sadness that her friends no longer had a sense of belonging and community that she found at HCS, and she thought of what drove her to consider transferring:

It is kind of sad when you see them leave because they did not feel like they could be here and be that person. It feels bad. One of the reasons I wanted to leave is because I felt like I cannot fit in here if I am not going to be at their [school community] standard. I felt bullied by people who did not respect me anymore. I felt that I couldn't live up to their standard, so I might as well not try. (Laura's interview, 12-17-15)

In addition, some of the participants felt as if they needed to wear a mask to be part of the community. Both Laura and Sophie used the word "mask" in the context of feeling the need to be perceived as a positive person for fear of being judged by students and teachers. The thought of wearing a mask and even the discussion surrounding this idea seemed tiring to both these girls. Research literature supports these students' fears, as youth often associate evidence of one's spirituality with morality and lifestyle choices, such as not smoking, swearing, or drinking (King et. al, 2014). Conversely, the danger for them as students wearing a mask is that they become spiritually thin because they begin to lose sight of who they are and what they value.

Andrew and Jane felt that holding high standards was important, and both seemed to indicate that perhaps the spiritual and moral standards at the school were not high enough. Jane's desire for higher moral standards was because of her love for the community. Research

studies suggest that Jane might feel this way because faith and spirituality often drive one's morality (Walker, 2003). In short, Jane is protective of the spiritual and moral culture that exists at Highlands Christian School. Andrew mentioned that he did not see the school community as helping him in his spirituality as much as it did not hurt him. He pointed out some of the profanity and other explicit conversations he heard bothered him, but he worked hard not to let those conversations affect him. While Jane wanted a school where people could have doubts and ask questions about their faith, high moral standards were integral in shaping a strong Christian community:

Yeah, obviously, if students make mistakes, you can give them another chance, but I do not think you should risk the community and the environment of the school in order to let these people continue doing what they are doing. (Jane's interview, 12-19-15)

Research literature supports Jane's assertion that high moral standards within a Christian school not only contribute to positive spiritual development, but students often leave school with a stronger sense of serving others and a responsibility to contribute to the common good (Furrow et al., 2004).

*I feel like it should be more of a big deal.* Sophie suggested that it could be difficult being a Christian in a Christian school. She mentioned that it was “cooler” to be a Christian at the public school she attended. There are times when Sophie has been outspoken about her faith and said, “It’s just kind of interesting that sometimes [peers] are like, ‘why are you so into this?’” When asked if she thought people were scared to be seen as a Christian, she suggested that some of the morality at the school made it complex, because at times it felt like those who were open about their faith were judged more harshly:

Sometimes it is fine to be a Christian and it’s sometimes good. I think it is because it takes courage to say that...I feel like sometimes people don’t want to be labeled with that. I do not really want to be labeled as hypocritical person even though it is hard not to be. (Sophie’s interview, 12-17-15)

Joel also mused that it could be difficult to be a Christian in a Christian school, and wondered aloud why people downplayed being a Christian. Having come from a public school, he appreciated being able to be in a place where faith and spirituality was at the core of the mission. Conversely, he wondered if other students took Christian education for granted and even thought that some kids walked away from their faith because they were oversaturated with a Christian worldview:

“[Being a Christian] is not a big deal. I feel like it should be more of a big deal. I know it is hard to make it a big deal when everyone is a Christian. It’s like, “Well, you’re are Christian, you’re a Christian, you’re a Christian....” It’s not as big of a deal. I’ve seen a lot of kids who jumped in to [Christian] schools like kindergarten. They’re like in grade 5 [and] they have lost their faith and stuff because it’s not a big thing to be a Christian at this school. (Joel’s interview, 12-16-15)

**Summary**

Students have a variety of perceptions about how their Christian school education has contributed to their spiritual development. The participants' identity and spirituality are tied together; that is, they do not separate their spirituality from who they are as persons. In a sense, their spirituality defines them. Students spoke of the influence of teachers and peers and the wider community on their spiritual development, as well as some of the difficulties of fitting in a small, Christian school. Chapter 5 will provide further discussion of the results of this study as well as implications and recommendations for other Christian schools and further research.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This research was conducted to investigate the perceptions that Grade 12 students in a Christian school hold regarding the factors they believe contribute to their personal spiritual development. From the review of the literature, several themes emerged to guide the coding portion of the student responses: people, such as teachers and peers; practices, such as chapel and prayer; school culture and the larger school community. This proved a comprehensive organizational framework. This chapter will explore these insights, offer some conclusions, suggest implications for Christian schools, and identify avenues for future research.

#### **Findings**

The participants provided key insights into how a Christian school affects their spiritual development. In addition, their conversations revealed that spiritual development is a complex topic about which the participants think deeply and seriously. All of the participants think highly of their school, but opinions varied on the level of influence the school has on personal spirituality. The students who spoke highly of the school's influence on their spiritual development participated in various aspects of the school beyond the classroom. Whether involved in athletics, school leadership, or arts programs, those students could more easily identify the spheres that influence personal spirituality. Conversely, those students could also provide specific feedback on how the school could play a more significant role in the spiritual development of students. Their involvement gave these participants a deeper and wider perspective because they interacted with more teachers and students in a variety of settings. These students did not give this feedback in a begrudging or critical manner; rather, they offered it in a spirit of wanting the school community and all its members to flourish.

As a former staff member at Highlands Christian and as a person whose children currently attend the school, I know there is a deep desire in the school community to encourage positive spiritual development. Staff want to be a part of students' faith formation because they have an extremely high level of care and concern for the whole person. Students are seen as much more than mere receptors of knowledge. Staff view students as children of God with unique gifts and treat them accordingly as they seek to help students develop and discover gifts for the benefit of others. In all things, staff are trying to connect academic learning outcomes with a students' spiritual and emotional life. The goal of teachers at HCS is not simply to push students to graduation day so they can one day get a sufficient job and make enough money to serve themselves; rather, the teachers' deep hope is to shape and form students for a life of service as responsive disciples of Jesus. Further, there is a high level of care among the student group. Most participants could identify going through a variety of struggles in school, whether those be spiritual or emotional in nature, and could identify their peers as being able to listen well and accept them for who they are.

All of the students in this study identified how and why the school contributed to their spiritual development. The factors that influenced their spiritual development were consistent with some of the themes identified in the literature review: people, practices, and school culture.

**Personal Factors.** The five participants came from a wide range of backgrounds and each has a unique narrative that has contributed to their spiritual development. While the participants are all Grade 12 students who have been at HCS since at least grade 9, each participant's narrative comes with its own set of circumstances, struggle, and conflict that affects his or her spirituality. All the participants self-identified as Christian, but all have unique insights on what spirituality is and how it should and could affect their whole lives. These personal circumstances have shaped their perception of how the school has or has not contributed to their faith formation.

Some of the participants live in homes where they feel physically, emotionally, and spiritually safe, attend church regularly, have been students at HCS since kindergarten, and have embedded themselves in the community. Due to their connection to a faith community outside of school, they appreciated the school's contribution to their spiritual development. Conversely, the school is but one of several contributing factors to spiritual development. For others, the circumstance of their story meant that HCS was central to their spiritual development. School was a key place to connect with peers and adults who have a strong sense of spirituality. For some, the HCS community provided the only place where they could foster vibrant, authentic relationships with others of a similar faith background. Some of the participants transferred into HCS and were able to compare the community they experienced at HCS to what they experienced in other settings. Some participants would never think of leaving the school, while others wanted to leave but ultimately chose to stay, offering themselves a renewed sense of ownership in the school and the relationships they valued.

All of the students identified areas of school where they struggled. At times, participants expressed frustration with being judged when not living up to community standards. Other

participants felt frustrated with those who did not appear to live out of or speak about their faith; conversely, others felt irritated with those who they perceived to be too overly outspoken about it. Participants seemed to suggest that HCS could be a hard place for those who are passionate about their faith, as it can set them apart from the larger group. This could be one reason why some participants wanted to maintain a level of privacy about their spirituality with staff and peers.

In the context of Fowler's (1981) stages of faith, the participants were living within stage three, while some were in the process of moving into stage four. Stage three in Fowler's framework, known as the synthetic-conventional stage, is the place where most teenagers find themselves in their spiritual development. The word "synthetic" suggests that a person's worldview has been passed down from parents or others in authority, while "conventional" suggests that you believe what others in the community believe and your identity is found there. For these participants, they place their trust in those who have significant roles in their life. This trust was evident in how the students spoke of their parents, pastors, teachers, and peers. While students could articulate wanting to take personal ownership of their belief system and all did at some level, there was also a need to be part of a larger faith story and community. This is not to suggest that students do not ask difficult questions, have struggles or express doubts. All identified difficult moments in their spiritual journey.

The articulation of these questions and doubts suggest that some but not all of the participants were transitioning to stage four of Fowler's (1981) spiritual development framework. Stage four is known as the individual-reflective stage. Participants in this stage of spiritual development relied less on those in authority, but rather had a desire to take personal responsibility for it. This ownership could be seen as some participants questioned the beliefs



that parents passed down to the participants, wondered why the school mandated participation in some of the spiritual practices, and the participants felt that it was necessary to ask difficult questions about faith as one matured. Fowler suggest that many people never move past stage three, and those who do often do so in early adulthood. That some participants are moving into stage four as teenagers and are permitted to wrestle with their faith in the classroom speaks to the school culture and safety some students feel with teachers and peers.

**School factors.** Highlands Christian School's motto is "Equipping Students, Transforming Lives." The school's enrolment policy requires at least one parent to be a professing Christian and that families be active participants in a local, Christian church community. This enrolment policy is one way the school tries to maintain and foster Christian community, linking the school culture with a supportive home environment. This policy is not unique among local, Christian schools. That enrolment policy comes with an understanding that all students come from Christian families, and that most students would likely self-identify as Christian. When I spoke with participants, it was clear there were both gratitude and questions about how to live faithfully in a community where there is a presupposition that most come from Christian families.

The school requires students to attend weekly chapel and enroll in a Biblical studies class each year. Students expressed thankfulness for chapel, but wondered if chapel should be mandatory for all people, or even if weekly chapel was too frequent. One student suggested the school alternate chapel and service projects so that students had the opportunity to make ongoing contributions to the community outside of the school building. Students also wondered about why more people do not sing or participate during chapel. It was intriguing that singing seemed to be the most consistent talking point regarding chapel. Most participants felt free to sing in

youth group or at summer camp, but felt a sense of worry that they might be labelled as excessively Christian if they are too expressive in chapel. In short, students seemed to be more receptive to chapel when fellow students were leading music or speaking.

In addition, the school has a culture of embedding a Biblical worldview in each class so that students can make connections between the academic world and the culture in which they live. Teachers at the school are intentional about ensuring that this Biblical worldview is not just simply a quaint addition that bookends the class and spiritualizes the lesson. Rather, there is an attempt to embed that worldview in authentic ways. For example, students' spirituality might be enhanced in a literature class when students not only study character development and conflict, but also begin to understand how those characters are a tangible demonstration of the brokenness of humanity and the need for a Savior. The school community believes that the whole world belongs to God and one goal of Christian education is to teach students how to redeem and restore what is broken. Students could identify that teachers did this with varying levels of success. Overall, there was strong sense that the integration of faith in the class contributed to positive spiritual development.

Some participants identified the fear they felt about questioning their faith in a community that was so clearly Christian. Students could discern the classes where they could ask difficult questions about faith, and other classes where they felt such questions were not appreciated or welcome. While most participants named at least one teacher or peer with whom they could express their doubts, they also said that it was not safe to do so with everyone in the community. Research does indicate there is risk of students feeling jaded and cynical when a worldview is imposed on them (Hyde, 2008), and could explain why some students never move past stage three in Fowler's (1981) stages of spiritual development. For example, one participant

was on the cusp of leaving the school after feeling judged about a decision she made, only to feel enfolded by a group of students who demonstrated unconditional love. Another participant had been more outspoken about her faith, but was quieter now due to not always feeling safe among her peers. The need to feel accepted within the community was essential to one participant's decision to stay at the school. Westerhoff (2012) described the correlation between the need for communal acceptance and spiritual development in his important examination of Christian education and spirituality.

Students also identified daily practices such as prayer and readings as having a positive impact on their spirituality and adding depth to their faith, observations that are supported by Dillon and Wink (2002). Participants suggested that having a safe place to offer prayer requests or the act of praying for others had a positive influence on their spiritual development. In addition, when people shared prayer requests, it offered unique insights into peers they did not know as well. Students also shared that the act of offering a prayer request allowed them to be vulnerable in a safe, but concise way. They also appreciated teachers or students who followed up days or even weeks after sharing their concern.

### **Discussion of Results**

Many aspects of Highlands Christian School enhance the spiritual development of students. HCS is commended for the good work that the teachers, students and overall school culture does to promote positive spiritual development in its students. While there is always room for improvement in any school community, the insights of the participants indicated that they all perceive that their time at HCS has directly led to positive, spiritual growth. I intend to use the results of this study to guide conversations at my own school that might lead us to better understand and implement practices that aid students in their spiritual development. My hope is

that we can be intentional in developing strategies that meet the spiritual needs of all our students, regardless of where they might be in their spiritual journey.

In this study, all of the participants could name two or more aspects of the school community that aided their spiritual growth. Participants also recognized how and why some people or practices supported their spirituality in a more positive way than others. For most of the students, foundational to their spiritual development was a trusting relationship with a peer or staff member. Participants spoke of different staff whom they see as trustworthy people, those who tangibly demonstrated their love for students. For students, evidence of this care comes through a teacher or coach's caring attitude and empathy, their listening ear, their knowledge of subject matter, and their ability to create safe places for divergent opinions. While participants agreed that most students at the school would identify themselves as Christian, they believed it was very important for teenagers to have a safe place to ask the big questions, such as, "How can I really know if there is a God?" or "If God loves us, why do so many bad things happen in this world?" Participants spoke highly of teachers with whom they felt safe to have discussions on such topics. Conversely, there were also places where they would not bring a complex question for fear of being judged or the question being dismissed.

Perhaps an initial step in creating a place for students to feel safe would be for staff to participate in Restorative Practices training. Restorative Practices is a model some schools use when discipline situations arise, and the protocol for restorative practices involves people sitting in a circle with a facilitator who asks questions to help participants understand the harm that is being done (Costello, Watchel, & Watchel, 2009). However, Restorative Practices is not just a protocol used for discipline; it is a pro-active model for creating a safe and positive school culture. While clearly a positive school culture exists at HCS, there is a feeling among

participants that there are certain people and places in the school that are safe to question one's spirituality. By providing training for all staff, more teachers might be equipped to ask the right questions and create space and place for students to ask difficult questions.

In restorative practices, one protocol often used is placing students in a circle at the beginning of class and having a "check-in" time. The facilitator simply asks a question and students have opportunity to respond. The question might be as simple as "What is the weather like in your world right now?" or "What is one question you sometimes struggle with about your faith?" The school might consider how such a procedure might allow students an opportunity to explore some of the issues that weigh them down, as well as build safe community in every classroom.

While participants seemed to understand that practices such as daily devotions or weekly chapel are things that make HCS peculiar from secular schools, the perception of how these practices effect spiritual development was varied. Westerhoff (1992) noted the importance of formational practices as integral to spiritual development, stating "While instruction is a useful means for transmitting beliefs and teaching decision making, and education is useful for making sense of an interpreting experience, only through formation do persons acquire Christian faith, character, and consciousness" (Westerhoff, 1992, p. 268). Teachers and students should be encouraged to continue with such practices, and consider how to help students understand how such practices shape their habits and virtues.

With regard to the practice of weekly chapel, the school might consider a way to seek feedback on what makes chapel effective and what does not. This form of data collection would allow administration and staff to hear the voices of students and see where gaps exist in students' understanding of chapel and what they believe makes chapel effective. Another option might be

to conduct small focus groups of students where they can provide input into topics such as chapel, devotions, and other spiritual practices. This phenomenological study affirms that teenagers have incredible and wise insights to share when asked, but often that questioning needs to be done in one-on-one conversations or in small groups.

For example, participants had varying opinions on topics such as music selection (traditional hymns or contemporary songs), speakers (students and teachers or outside guests), and the overall goals of chapel (church worship experience or assembly). It was clear that participants appreciated student involvement, and the school might consider what it would look like to give more control of chapel to students. These feelings corroborate work done by Gill (2004) which indicated teens actually miss the tradition found in primary schools of classes or peers leading an assembly. Perhaps the school could consider the impact of students leading all the speaking, praying, and singing.

In addition, the school might consider the overall goal of chapel. Participants, at times, indicated that they were not always sure if they should take a posture similar to church when in chapel, or if there was supposed to be a different ethos and experience. That there might be a disconnect between a staff perspective on the goals of chapel and the student's actual experience is consistent with research (Gill, 2004). Students seemed to have their imagination captured by speakers who share stories, evoke laughter and other emotions rather than what they perceived to be another Sunday sermon. No matter what the school decides is the end goal of chapel (and it could differ each week), it might be wise to share that with students so they understand the learning target and the desired atmosphere when they gather each week.

Research studies indicate that teachers play a significant role in the lives of students and their spiritual development (Marah, 2009). One intentional way HCS teachers do this is through

daily devotions. Students expressed gratitude for the time that some teachers spent on preparing devotions. Some participants correlated the preparation a teacher put into devotions with the level of care they had for their students. In feeling as if they were cared for through devotions, participants were more willing to take the devotions to heart and ponder them throughout the day. While it probably would not be wise to have all teachers use the exact same format for devotions, they should consider that devotions make a more significant impact than they realize. As part of devotions, participants were thankful when staff prayed for them and others. In addition, participants noted that something as simple as leaving prayer requests on the board so peers and staff could follow up was important because they did not want their prayer request forgotten. Moore (2014) indicated that teacher's participation in the spiritual disciplines such as prayer has significant impact on student's spiritual development and transformation.

Participants also indicated a deep desire to contribute to the common good outside of the school building. The idea of Christian students wanting to contribute to the common good is consistent with research by Cardus (2011) that demonstrated how active Christian school alumni are in their neighborhoods. Student felt they made a positive difference in their community when given the opportunity. In addition, they also felt such projects allowed them to build relationships with people outside of the Christian community. Students told stories about how service projects strengthened their spirituality by giving them a sense of purpose. They also felt as if these opportunities allowed them to build community with other people in the school in a setting other than the classroom, and that service projects removed barriers and left all students feeling equal because they had a unified purpose. Students suggested finding ways for students to serve in areas in which they are passionate so that they might also develop potential future

vocational skills. In addition, through participating in service projects, participants felt that the practice of serving might become part of the pattern of their life after they left school.

One of the questions that was asked of a majority of participants was “Is it hard to be a Christian in a Christian school?” Of the participants that were asked, all agreed that being a Christian in a Christian school is complex and can be hard to navigate among peers. One intriguing aspect of this is the perception that one’s spirituality is reflected in their behavior. In short, the more someone acts like a Christian, the closer relationship one has with God. While of course there is an element of truth to this, the danger is that aligning spirituality with morality can often lead to feelings of being judged or even unhealthy competition. Participants could articulate this in a variety of ways. One participant could articulate her own story of making an error in her lifestyle choice that became public knowledge. Some of the initial judgment she felt almost led to her leaving the school. However, some of the students enveloped and accepted her, which ultimately led her to stay at school.

When I began this study, I knew that Highlands Christian School was a strong school whose teachers intentionally incorporate a Biblical worldview into all aspects of the school. Whether the music room, classroom, gym, or hallways, the school places Christ at the center of all they do. The participants in this study indicated their deep appreciation for that approach. While being a Christian school is complex, it was clear that students have deep loyalty and love for their school. These students indicated that they grew spiritually through the care they received from staff and students. Participants indicated feelings of being known in the community, and all felt as if they also had life-giving gifts to offer the school and did so out of deep desire to encourage others.



Students also spoke highly of their Bible and Religious Studies teachers and the guidance they provided. It is interesting to note that all students, regardless of background, engage the same curriculum as their classmates. While this offers a clear scope-and-sequence of curriculum through a student's tenure at HCS, it does not take into consideration the specific spiritual needs, background, knowledge level, or interests of the student. The school might consider developing and offering mini-electives within the Bible curriculum. These short one-term electives could address specific areas of interest that could enhance spiritual development. For example, for students who are new or struggling with their faith, a Bible elective that incorporates some sort of discipleship program (e.g. Alpha program) could be considered. For others, the exploration of multiple formational practices could be considered as an elective.

While I knew that the students I would meet would encourage me in my own spirituality, I was also struck by their confident vulnerability. Their willingness to speak about their struggles and doubts reminded me that asking big questions is an important part of anyone's spiritual journey, regardless of age. I walked away from these interviews convicted that I need to continue to affirm the questions they may have about faith, and that asking hard questions might actually be a sign of strength. Students need to know that God is a God who is big enough to handle student's emotions, and that He loves students no matter what. Perhaps one of the reasons students find it hard to be a Christian in a Christian school is because there can be a culture of needing to have an answer to questions about faith, whereas it might be valuable to teach students that it is more important to ask the question than to find or have the right answer.

### **Suggestions for Policy and Practice**

While there are many insights that Christian schools can gain from the insights provided by the participants, the following suggestions offer a summary of the discussion.

1. The administration at Highlands Christian School should elicit responses from the community about the overall purpose and effectiveness of chapel. This can be done through staff discussion, parent survey, and student survey and focus groups. Questions could include, but should not be limited to, the following topics: frequency of chapel, song selection, student and staff involvement, church or assembly ethos, seating plan, and whether chapel should be mandatory.
2. Staff might consider being trained in some of the basic protocols of restorative practices as a way to create safe places in a classroom for students to make themselves vulnerable.
3. HCS might hold a discussion with staff about the importance and format of formational practices such as daily devotions and prayer as students see these practices as integral. All staff should be encouraged to be intentional in their planning and give devotions the time it deserves.
4. HCS might be more intentional about providing service-learning opportunities for students via extra-curricular and curricular connections and schedule it on a monthly or bi-monthly basis. In addition, the school must be intentional about giving students an opportunity to process their experiences afterward. Students indicated that they desired to participate in real work that meets a real need for a real audience.
5. HCS might offer time to teachers to meet one-on-one with students in their homeroom. Students seemed frustrated by how homeroom was being utilized, although many saw the potential of the program. If the goals of homeroom are to build relationships and know students, perhaps meeting one-on-one with each student

for 15 minutes a term could build relationships and help students to be more fully known.

6. HCS might consider restructuring the Bible curriculum to include electives. These electives could take into consideration the faith background of students (e.g. a Biblical literacy or Alpha elective for those new to the faith; a formational practices elective for those seeking to explore those ideas further).

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

In trying to schedule interviews with students, I came to understand how busy students are, particularly in their grade 12 year. There would be great value in finding time to meet with students on an individual basis or in small groups. These types of small meetings could build trust and give students a safe place to talk about their spiritual development.

If this study were to be expanded, it would be intriguing to speak to the teachers and parents of these students. After speaking to students, I walked away wondering if teachers knew the significant role they played in the lives of students. In addition, it would be important to widen the study to the student body and ask them about how practices and people influence the school culture. It seems to me that students do not always know the pressure that they can put on each other, and it would be interesting to speak to students about how one would go about creating a culture of freedom so that students could feel truly open about their relationship with God, whether that be negative or positive.

It would also be intriguing to do a longitudinal study where data collection took place at the beginning of secondary school in grade 9 and at the end of the grade 12 year. This type of data collection might be one way a Christian school could measure whether it is being effective in carrying out its mission.

There are a number of faith-based schools in the area of Highlands Christian. A compelling study might be to compare the factors that influence spirituality in students in a secular private school, Catholic school, and a Christian school. This type of study might encourage some inter-faith dialogue as well as create some possible partnerships between schools. Christian schools should not be afraid to look at other schools and their practices, and discern what they can learn and implement that might help their own students in their spirituality.

Another compelling study might be comparing how people, practices, and culture affects spiritual development in Christian schools that have open enrolment policies against those that require families to be active members of a local church. Results from such a study could provide important data for Christian schools that are considering moving towards an open enrolment policy. This type of study could either address or alleviate concerns that those communities might have as they consider that policy shift. In addition, such a study might allow school boards to discover how open enrolment might encourage or discourage students in their faith journey.

The participants in this study offered honest and forthright insights into how various elements within their Christian school have shaped their spiritual development. The participants recognized the high level of care they received from the community. In addition, they appreciated how practices such as prayer and daily devotions have formed their spirituality. The positive school culture has had a significant effect on the lives of students. Conversely, students were able to offer some honest critique that should allow the school to reflect on how it might adjust some of the procedures and practices to enhance the spiritual development of its students. Overall, these participants were sincere in their gratitude for the school and its community and the role it has played in forming them as individuals.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Guide Questions**

An exploration of student perceptions of how people, places, and school culture have positively enhanced personal spiritual development.

1. Please tell me about your “story” – that is, what is your background and can you please share a bit about your spiritual journey.
2. How would you describe spiritual development and/or spirituality?
3. What have been your experiences at your school as it relates to people who have had a positive influence on your spiritual development? How? Why?
4. What have been your experiences at your school as it relates to the spiritual practices that have had a positive influence on your spiritual development? How? Why?
5. What have been your experiences at your school as it relates to the aspects of school cultures that have had a positive influence on your spiritual development? How? Why?
6. What advice would you give to the school about how to help students with their spiritual development?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **Letter of Consent**

Parental and participants informed consents form: Student perceptions of how people, practices, and school culture positively enhance personal spiritual development.

Dear Parent or Guardian:

#### **Purpose:**

My name is Matthew Beimers and I am a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon. I am conducting research on student perceptions of how people, practices, and school positively enhance spiritual development.

#### **Procedure**

I would like to invite your child to engage in a 45-90 minute-long personal interview regarding the factors in their school that has enhanced their spiritual development. The questions relate to their first-hand experiences as a student who attended the school from grade 9-12 (or longer). In addition, my wife Bev will sit in on all interviews to ensure that another adult is in the room at all times. The interviews will be conducted at a setting chosen by your child to ensure they feel comfortable.

#### **Risks and Benefits**

My hope is that the findings provide insight into the experiences of students at a Christian school and how those experiences promote spiritual development.

The risks associated with this research are minimal. The personal interview questions are noninvasive and are intended to offer them the opportunity to reflect upon and share their experiences and perceptions.

#### **Voluntary Participation:**

Please be aware that their participation is completely voluntary and they may decline to continue at any time or decline to answer any question(s) at their discretion.

#### **Anonymity and Confidentiality**

The results of this study will only be used for research purposes, primarily, for the dissertation required for the completion of my doctoral program. Information will be analyzed and presented in an anonymous fashion and no individual will be personally identified. All personal information and identities will be kept confidential.

All research materials (i.e., audio recordings, transcriptions, and signed consent forms) will be locked in separate, secure locations for a period of three years. I will be the only individual who will have access to these materials and after three years, I will personally destroy all relevant materials and delete the audio recordings.



Thank you for considering participation in this study. If you have any questions regarding this research, please contact me at 778-533-7022. If you have any additional questions you may contact my committee chair and Professor of Higher Education and Leadership at George Fox University. Dr. Patrick Allen can be reached at (503) 554-2858.

By signing below, you are indicating that:

- Are informed about the research that is being conducted
- Have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study
- Agree to allow your student's anonymous profile to be included in the research projects

Parental signature \_\_\_\_\_

Participant signature \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher signature \_\_\_\_\_