

INTENTIONAL PRACTICES OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS FOR SPIRITUAL FORMATION  
OF THIRD- AND FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

by

Angela H. Blount

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore and describe intentional spiritual formation practices used with third and fourth grade students enrolled in Association for Christian Schools International (ACSI) member schools. The study took place in four elementary school settings in two different states, using a replication design with each school as or for a unit of analysis. Participants in each case were teachers, administrators, and staff familiar with the teaching practices with third- and fourth-grade students. The central research question guiding the research was “What are the intentional practices of Christian schools for spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?” Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory provided the theoretical framework for the study. Data were collected at each site through observations, focus group interviews, individual interviews, and document reviews. Within-case and cross-case analysis involved open coding, forming categories, and looking for patterns from the data (Yin, 2014), and three major themes emerged, discipleship, boldness, and unity, with prayer underlying each of these themes across all sites.

*Keywords:* spirituality, spiritual formation, faith development theory, Christian education, children

### **Dedication**

This work is dedicated with love to my first grandchild, Kaden Lee Blount, who arrived on this earth to meet us during the time I was working on this doctorate, then he returned to the arms of Jesus. We have seen him since that day, and he is rocking on the porch in Heaven. Our loftiest goals on this earth cannot compare to the goal of joining him there and it is my prayer that anyone reading this study will aspire to reach Heavenly goals, not earthly ones. We can gain all the earthly wisdom there is, but Kaden taught us to keep our eyes firmly fixed on Jesus and he continues to teach others who know his story about the significance of spiritual wisdom. Spiritual formation or becoming Christ-like is lifelong, some of us just get there sooner.

## Acknowledgments

“Remember your word to your servant, for you have given me hope” (Psalm 119:49).

Paul reminded Timothy that God wanted to do something through him, and that he should not lose sight of that. All through this long journey, I kept returning to those words. God promised He would take me through this process because it was to fulfill His purpose, not mine, so first, I am thankful He chose me for this project.

To the four amazing schools who graciously opened your doors to me and my research, thank you all for advancing the knowledge of spiritual formation practices. You have outstanding educators, uplifting chapel times, intimate staff devotionals and prayer, and incredible teaching strategies. Each of you holds a special place in my heart.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

American Educational Research Association (AERA)

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)

Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Reaching for Excellence Through Accreditation and Continuous Improvement for Higher Achievement (REACH)

Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy, Trust (SPIRIT)

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Overview**

God assigns parents the task of training their children and nurturing children in their faith, and this begins early in the home, the church, and the school (Schultz, 2003). Van Brummelen (2009) referred to this as “an educational tripod” (p. 7) which provides a balance that enables a child to grow up prepared for a Christian life. Parents may choose Christian education for their children but God, through Moses, gave parents the responsibility to teach their children about Him (Deuteronomy 6:1-9). Studies have related Christian education to children’s spiritual growth (Bunnell, 2016; Keeler, 2012; Lewis, 2015; McDaniel, 2012; Mitchell, 2015). There is an urgent need to gain information on specific programs implemented in schools and determine whether teachers are “qualified, trained, and committed” (Lewis, 2015, p. 25) for the job. This question is important to families, students, teachers, and school districts as they try to ensure that they are meeting their established missions and goals. To improve our understanding of the potential concerns and responses, this case study will explore school practices in the third and fourth grades at Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) member schools.

Chapter One introduces the study by first examining the historical, social, and theoretical context. Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory provided a theoretical framework for the research, and I presented his stages of faith along with my philosophical assumptions and paradigms. The central research question was “What are the intentional practices of Christian schools for spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?” This research is important to any parents of students currently enrolled in (or considering enrollment to) Christian schools; to Christian school organizations, educators, and policymakers; and to anyone else interested in nurturing a child’s spiritual development.

## **Background**

In the United States, the family unit is the primary institution responsible for a child's development; however, changes driven by society have prompted families to rely more on institutions to help raise their children (Schultz, 2003; Van Brummelen, 2009; Westerhoff, 2004). Schools are agencies of socialization, whereas Christian schools are "agencies of Christian nurture" (Van Brummelen, 2009, p. 6). The need for religious expression initially brought Europeans to the New World. Christian concerns have continued to change America, including its schools (Clark, Johnson, & Sloat, 1991).

## **Historical**

Christian education in the early churches aimed to teach biblical truths for Godly living; however, when the early settlers arrived in America, the goals were not always the same. Puritans brought with them a determination for religious freedom in the New World (Sass, 2017). In the New England colonies, Americans valued education, and they established the first grammar schools in 1635 to educate future church leaders (Education News, 2013; Sass, 2017). Laws were passed in the mid-1600s to ensure that all children would learn to read and write; however, only boys and those girls from wealthy families received a formal education. In 1779, Thomas Jefferson proposed two different tracks of education: one track for grooming leaders and a second track for all others (Sass, 2017). In the late 1700s, with the passing of the 10th Amendment to the Constitution, education became the responsibility of each state. The 1800s brought public high schools, public school funding, compulsory attendance, and students segregated by age into appropriate grades. Conservative Protestants led the way in shaping the common school movement in American schools (Carper & Hunt, 2009). When the Civil War



ended in 1865, however, public schools saw inequality, poverty, and social unrest, and many schools closed (Sass, 2017).

Population growth accompanied by increased secularism in the twentieth century led to dissatisfaction with the public-school belief system, the curriculum, and increasing “centralized control of public education” (Carper & Hunt, 2009, p. 96). Protestant families, both liberal and conservative, continued to support their public schools into the 1960s until rulings in Supreme Court cases (*Abington School District v. Schempp*, 1963; *Engel v. Vitale*, 1962) effectively removed prayer and religious observances from public schools. Families committed to public schooling continued working to incorporate Christian perspectives in their schools, whereas other families sought educational alternatives such as the Christian Day School (Carper & Hunt, 2009).

Growing concerns over the removal of prayer and Bible reading, fear of desegregation, a more liberal American culture, and ongoing secularization contrary to conservative Protestant beliefs fueled the increase in the number of these schools. It was and still is difficult to accurately assess the growth and exact numbers of these faith-based schools, because some have opened and closed quietly and rapidly (Carper & Hunt, 2009). Since the 1970s, enrollments at evangelical Christian schools increased and then decreased as more parents chose to homeschool. Both Christian Day Schools and homeschooling represent a significant departure from the loyalty once shown to public education. Between the 1960s and the 1980s, religious education declined as did attendance in Sunday Schools (Clark et al., 1991). The Christian schools in themselves are diverse in their governing bodies, affiliation with various churches, ages served, programming, and size.

Some organizations exist today to support excellence in Christian education, with the largest Protestant organization being ACSI (ACSI, n.d.). Established in 1978 through the merger of several agencies, the ACSI accredits primary and secondary schools serving more than 5.5 million students worldwide. ACSI has received state and national recognition for the United States Department of Education as well as international recognition (ACSI, n.d.). This certification is a rigorous evaluative process leading to credibility, validation of school programs, assurance of meeting standards, and overall advancement toward school improvement. The REACH 2.1 manual, a standards manual for early education to Grade 12 in North American and international schools, provides the ACSI accreditation protocol currently in use (ACSI, n.d.).

## **Social**

With students spending approximately one-fourth of their waking hours at schools in community with others, schools are “prime agencies of socialization” (Van Brummelen, 2009, p. 22). Students come from a wide variety of cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds with different abilities and family structures, and these interrelated factors are always changing and affecting student outcomes (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017). Schools are challenged to educate all students with equality and fairness regardless of diversity. For example, studies show a link between socioeconomic status and school success (NCES, 2017) and that “[s]chools must confront [changing conditions] in order to be effective” (p. 2). Continued research on the social context of education is needed because of the critical challenges schools face (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2017). Whether schools are public or Christian, achieving social justice is important in education (Marshall & Oliva, 2010).

Because of the powerful influence of schools on America’s youth, there exists a need to examine Christian education curriculum and pedagogy (Reck, 2012). Within the Christian

school spectrum, schools shape children's spiritual growth. Parents, teachers, administrators, and even the school setting work together to shape the education of the child (Hedges & Schneider, 2016). In a comparison of the outcomes of students who attended Christian schools and those who attended public schools, results showed students from a Christian education background were better prepared to defend their faith than those students from a public-school background (LeBlanc & Slaughter, 2012).

### **Theoretical**

Fowler (2001) described faith as a "universal feature of human beings" (p. 162) because all begin life with the capacity to develop faith through trusting relationships. He recognized that how a person makes sense of life through interactions with others is expressed "through symbols, rituals, and ethical patterns" (Fowler, 1981, p. xiii). Because he believed that children are born capable of developing faith, Fowler (1981) used the word faith more often than the term religion, believing faith can be related to religion or not.

I planned to use one or two of Fowler's (1981, 1996) stages of faith to help understand the spiritual thinking processes of third and fourth-grade children, who are of ages eight to 10. I expected students to be approximately in the same stage with some variation and that is what I found. A Stage 0, from birth to about two years, represents the trust-mistrust of infancy. Stage 1, intuitive-projective faith is characterized by developing thought patterns and learning about religion through stories and experiences. Stage 2, the mythic-literal faith stage is evidenced by more logical thought, and literal interpretations of religious stories. Stage 3, synthetic-conventional faith stage includes youth from about age 12 through adulthood, and this is the beginning of conforming to religion. Stage 4 includes 20-30-year old individuals who struggle with the complexities of personal interpretations and beliefs. Stage 5 is conjunctive faith in

middle adulthood when awareness of one's limitations and opposing viewpoints occur. Stage 6, universalizing faith, is an altruistic stage rarely achieved by most adults. Most students in this study were in Stage 2, the mythic-literal faith stage, but several advanced students were moving toward the next stage, synthetic-conventional.

In the literature, researchers (Bunnell, 2016; McDaniel, 2012; Mitchell, 2015; Mohler, 2013; Peterson, 2012; Reck, 2012) examined the processes of teaching children in Christian education, and Keeler (2012) indicated that more research into a child's inner thoughts was needed. Grounding the study in faith development theory, this research delves deeper into the thoughts of children in Stages 1 and 2 because this is a critical period in their developing spiritual lives. The child in the intuitive-projective faith stage, Stage 1, enjoys an unrestrained imagination which diminishes as the child grows and becomes a more logical thinker. Spirituality depends on imagination and going deeper into one's thoughts, and imagination is one of Nye's (2009) six criteria for spiritual foundations in children. Children in Stage 1 need to be encouraged to use their imagination as they develop their spiritual thinking. Children in this age group are grasping stories through images they imagine. In the mythic-literal stage, Stage 2, children understand stories and can also express themselves through writing stories, though simple at first. The child takes on beliefs and a sense of belonging. A teacher or a researcher can examine these expressions of spiritual understanding to gain a greater perspective of how a child views God and the spiritual realm. The child in this stage is becoming less egocentric and can understand another's perspective. The child can also narrate experiences and communicate meanings that are spiritual in nature when encouraged to do so (Fowler, 1981). Understanding more than one faith stage will give greater meaning to what a child in this age group understands.

### **Situation to Self**

While training to become a teacher, I developed a growing interest in early childhood education, how these students thought and reasoned, and their interest in spirituality and spiritual concepts. As a parent, a teacher, and administrator, I have spent years searching Bible curricula and resources to encourage spiritual growth in my child and my students. Teaching in public and private schools, Sunday schools, and children's Bible classes, I have always been passionate about children's spiritual growth and development.

For over 10 years, I operated a private school that grew out of disillusionment with local secularized public schools. This school received its start from like-minded evangelical Christian parents and teachers dedicated to a rigorous academic curriculum and a strong foundation in God's Word, and there was no affiliation with national or state agencies. This school matched Carper and Hunt's (2009) description of Christian Day Schools which sprang up after the 1960s but were difficult to count due to these schools refusing to cooperate in a count. The school reflected the values of the particular community of parents, and there was always an enrollment waiting list. Carper and Hunt recognized that some of these schools disappeared from the landscape whereas others, still uncounted, remain in operation today. These experiences have provided my motivation for this study because I observed spiritual progress when dedicated Christian teachers and parents provided strong academics in a Spirit-filled environment.

I brought some assumptions to this study. From an ontological perspective, I am aware of children's reasoning abilities as they struggle to understand what is and is not real, especially truth in the abstract spiritual realm. Students and adults alike engage in multiple thought processes and offer varying explanations of the same phenomena. Creswell (2013) stated, "Reality is multiple as seen through many views" (p. 21) and I reported on different views and

teaching practices aimed at fostering children's spiritual formation because I believe that it is a strength to understand and appreciate different perspectives.

From an epistemological perspective, I collected firsthand information from study participants. Creswell (2013) described "the subjective experiences of people" (p. 20) as the best way to understand the phenomenon studied. I interviewed and conducted interviews with adults which generated actual information and quotations related to the activity of lesson planning. I examined school documents and student work which gave insight into their thinking about spiritual concepts. I am well-acquainted with the roles of each participant involved in this study, and I was fortunate to be positioned as close to the data as possible to be certain of the knowledge gained at the conclusion of this study (Creswell, 2013).

My axiological assumptions that I bring to the study are my instilled Christian values. I believe in accepting God's grace, enjoying a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, loving others as Christ loved, and serving others. As the researcher, I positioned myself in the study (Creswell, 2013) and recognized these same values in the schools I visited, while being aware that these are my personal beliefs and not necessarily those of others. I have experience with watching children's Christian spiritual growth and development, and I saw these Christian values in each site.

I approached this study through two paradigms. From a constructivist perspective, I believe that new knowledge builds upon prior knowledge and that children construct their own understanding from their experiences (Patton, 2015). When I teach a young child to read, I begin with the alphabet, proceed to letter sounds, followed by combining letters to form words and sentences; each successive step builds on the previous step, with new knowledge emerging. As a subjective researcher, I interacted with the participants to allow themes to emerge. As the human

instrument in this study, I based my interpretations of the findings on past experiences in teaching and my knowledge of how children think and behave (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Regarding the processes involved in this study, I followed rigorous systematic procedures and a postpositivist approach, with a stated problem, research questions, data collection methods, results, and discussion (Yin, 2009).

### **Problem Statement**

Spirituality is a well-researched topic but one that is not easily defined, and there is a debate about how spiritual formation takes place in children (Hay & Nye, 2006). In approximately 3000 ACSI member schools in the United States (ACSI, n.d.), teachers and classroom practices play major roles in the spiritual formation of children (Hemming, 2013; Mata, 2010, 2014; Montoro, 2013; Moore, 2014). Whereas school principals, administrators, curricula, and policymakers all provide structure on what is taught (Banke, Maldonado, & Lacey, 2012; Boerema, 2011; Gibson, 2014; Jeynes, 2010). The frequency of participation in spiritual practices, such as church attendance, can be measured quantitatively, but spiritual formation in children is an under-researched area. There have been studies related to spiritual formation in older students (Horan, 2017; Kanakanui, 2017; Long, 2014; Monzon, 2017) and the influence of teachers in Christian education, including teacher preparedness (Lewis, 2015). Studies exist on spiritual development (Schein, 2012) and prayer with young children (Keeler, 2012). Recent studies on the spiritual development of first and second graders (Keeler, 2012; Mohler, 2013) pointed to the need for further explorations of the experiences of teachers, classes, and children in the elementary grades. The problem is that no studies have provided an in-depth understanding of the specific practices of Christian schools used for spiritual formation with third and fourth graders and I conducted this study to fill this gap.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore and describe intentional spiritual formation practices used with third- and fourth-grade students enrolled in ACSI member schools. For this research, spiritual formation practices were defined as “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” (Willard, 2012, p. 22). The theory guiding this study was Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory, as it identified sequential stages of faith through which children progress in their faith development. The focus of this research was third and fourth graders because children of this age can express themselves as they make meaning through narratives (Fowler, 1981), and have a heightened spiritual awareness that will likely fade as children get a little older (Hay & Nye, 2006).

### **Significance of the Study**

The information gained from this study is of empirical significance and has expanded the existing literature in several areas. First, there is a need to inform adults who work beyond the walls of Christian schools. Pastors in charge of children’s programming cited the need for better strategies for having spiritual conversations and providing an environment with silence for reflecting, praying, spiritual mentoring, and modeling Christ-like behavior (Thomson, 2009). Pastors and lay-persons who work with children in churches will benefit from this study.

A second group who will benefit from this research is parents who homeschool or who are heavily involved in their child’s school education. Research into the practices of evangelical Christian parents who were heavily involved in their child’s religious education found that early-life circumstances influenced levels of motivation. If early-life spiritual experiences of parents were positive, adults wanted their children to have similar involvement; however, if they were



negative, parents wanted to improve their own children's spiritual learning (Bunnell, 2016). A child's innermost thoughts regarding spirituality and prayer are of interest to parents (Durante, 2015; Keeler, 2012; Mohler, 2013; Schein, 2012) and this research, therefore, will be of interest to parents.

Individual administrators and groups who share responsibility for Christian education can learn from this study. Those who govern Christian schools and make policies will see the practices and strategies compiled in this study and hopefully incorporate them into future practices. Critical to the success of a school is overseeing and evaluating the heads of school (Coley, 2015) and mission statements (Zandstra, 2012). This study also addressed hiring, preparing, and encouraging educators who are critical leaders in Christian schools (Alarid, 2015; Lewis, 2015; Peterson, 2012).

Mitchell (2015) recommended studying the teacher's role as a critical influence on a child's spiritual life, and others (Keeler, 2012; Peterson, 2012) suggested studying teachers' intentional training to developing children's faith and spirituality. A need exists to understand what is happening in the classroom to nurture children's spiritual formation, and this study provides substantial information in this regard.

The use of the faith development theory to examine this research will help advance this theory (Fowler, 1981). Examining children's innermost thought processes through their work and the information gained from teacher interviews will involve looking through a psychological lens. Research has shown that when there is intimacy in a classroom and trust and respect between the teacher and the child, spirituality will be nourished and will grow (Nye, 2009). This trusting atmosphere will allow a child in the mythic-literal faith stage to make rich meanings from experiences as they find new ways to understand. Stories and meanings related to a

relationship with God will become more linear and coherent. Looking at the child's world will enhance the understanding of the stages of faith.

The practical significance of this research is to share with others specific spiritual formation practices used in schools to encourage third and fourth graders' spiritual growth and development. Although ACSI schools require compliance with ACSI standards, specific, detailed information relating to ACSI does not exist from schools at these grade levels. This study adds to the conversation on the efficacy of spiritual formation practices in Christian schools.

### **Research Questions**

This research explored specific practices used in ACSI schools for students' spiritual formation. Questions that begin with what and how were answered as the research examined practices "traced over time" (Yin, 2014, p. 10). Sub-questions led to further in-depth inquiry for exploring spiritual formation practices (Creswell, 2013). Answers to these pragmatic sub-questions provided thick, rich descriptions of the routines and activities used in ACSI Christian schools (Patton, 2015). A description of the phenomena must occur "before interpretation" (Patton, 2015, p. 534). The central research question was:

What are the intentional practices of Christian schools for spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?

By using a restatement of the purpose of the study (Creswell, 2013), this question was designed to explore the "shaping of the inner life, the spirit, or the spiritual side of the human being" (Willard, 2000, p. 255) in Christian schools. Furthermore, looking at "practices, overt behavior" (p. 255) is suggested. Christian schools must be intentional in spiritual formation practices (Steibel, 2010; Yount, 2012).

The three sub-questions are as follows:

1. How are school-wide programs and practices used for Christian spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?

Schools are responsible for providing programming and opportunities for spiritual growth (Beckwith, 2013; Pandya, 2016). The atmosphere of the school lets students know they belong to a community (Van Brummelen, 2009). Schools provide the place and the materials as they partner with God in the spiritual formation process by providing planned programs and routines designed for spiritual formation. However, “[a] child’s encounter with God is not in the control of parents or teachers” (Stonehouse, 1998), but it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

2. How are classroom routines and strategies used to encourage Christian spiritual formation in third- and fourth-grade students?

Van Brummelen (2002) suggested that there was “no one right way to organize knowledge in the curriculum” (p. 89) and that teachers, administrators, policies, and parents influence the design of activities. Nye (2009) proposed that the acrostic SPIRIT for “Space, Process, Imagination, Relationship, Intimacy, Trust” (p. 41) will help design the culture of the classroom for spiritual growth. Research revealed the importance of classroom environments (Hemming, 2013) and each of these SPIRIT concepts provided means for supporting the child’s developing spiritual life (Nye, 2009). Stonehouse (1998) posited that young children have deep thoughts about God and they create their own image of God which is constantly being refined and reshaped. Adults must assist children by answering their questions and partnering with children in their spiritual growth. In two separate studies, both Mohler (2013) and Peterson (2012) recommended more research in this area, and this study explored how classrooms were meeting children’s needs.

3. How are teachers and administrators prepared for the task of nurturing Christian spiritual formation in third- and fourth-grade students?

Teachers must reflect on their own spirituality and be personally prepared before they can spiritually mentor children (Banke et al., 2012; Campbell, 2012; Nye, 2009). Teachers need a support network (Jang, 2015) and strategies for coping with stress (LaBarbera & Hetzel, 2015) to be more Christ-like in their teaching (Moore, 2014). Ongoing training and learning from others is essential (Montoro, 2013). Recent studies have emphasized the need to examine teacher qualifications and preparation (McDaniel, 2012; Mitchell, 2015; Peterson, 2012).

### **Definitions**

The following terms are defined for clarity for this study.

1. *Association for Christian Schools International (ACSI)* - ACSI is the world's largest Protestant educational organization, and it serves approximately 24,000 schools worldwide. Its purpose is to strengthen schools and equip educators to teach and inspire students for Christ by providing resources to schools and educators (ACSI, n.d.).
2. *Children's spirituality* – While there are connections between an adult's spirituality and a child's, for the purposes of this study, children's spirituality is simply defined as "God's way of being with children and children's ways of being with God." (Nye, 2009, p 5).  
An evidence-based definition highlights specific features: "Children's spirituality is an initially natural capacity for awareness of the sacred quality to life experiences." (p. 6).  
Also, "In childhood, spirituality is especially about being attracted towards 'being in relation' . . . to God, to creation or to a deeper inner sense of Self." (p. 6).
3. *Faith* - Fowler described faith as "interactive and social; it requires community, language, ritual, and nurture" (Fowler, 1981, p. xiii). Faith is also described as "conscious and

unconscious components system of beliefs and values that give meaning to one's life, provide motivation for actions congruent with such beliefs, link individuals with others and describe the ultimate reality, a deity or eternal truth" (Sifers, Warren, & Jackson, 2012, p. 205).

4. *REACH* - Reaching for Excellence Through Accreditation and Continuous Improvement for Higher Achievement (REACH) is the standards manual for ACSI schools. It provides broad guidelines for performance and practices (ACSI, 2017a).
5. *Religion* - The definition of religion may be broad or narrow depending on the individual or group. Narrowly defined, religion is "belief in a transcendent being, a God, an individual's vertical relationship with a higher order of being" (Waldron, 1996, pp. 1-2), whereas a broader definition is "a personal belief in a higher source and revelation from that source" (pp. 1-2). Religion is often associated with "churches, mosques, Bibles, prayer books, religious officials, weddings, and funerals" (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 19). It involves a systematic way of worshiping one or many gods and it is sometimes considered a negative or outdated term (2006). Religion is a means to express one's faith through a set of practices or customs, "a structure through which many can access spirituality" (Ponds, 2014, p. 59).
6. *Spiritual growth* – Children have the innate tendency to create their own image of God whether they have religious influences or not, a gift from the Creator. Spiritual growth is a lifelong process of becoming like Jesus Christ and it is encouraged through the study of God's Word, through actively seeking God, and by maintaining Godly Relationships. (Stonehouse, 1998).

7. *Spiritual formation* –Dallas Willard (2012) defined spiritual formation as the “Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” (p. 22).
8. *Spirituality* –Spirituality is a multidimensional concept that varies among the deeply religious, the not-so-deeply religious, and the non-religious (Koenig, 2015). It may or may not relate to a God or deity, but it involves being connected to something larger than self (Ponds, 2014). Some associate spirituality with “love, inspiration, wholeness, depth, mystery, and personal devotions like prayer and meditation” (Hay & Nye, 2006). It has also been described as “pertaining to interior life, religious experience, the search for meaning and purpose, expressions of relatedness, transcendence, immanence, ultimate values, integrity, identity, connection to something greater, awareness” (Hyde, 2008, p. 12).

### **Summary**

Examining Christian spiritual formation practices was the focus of this study. Prior studies have addressed faith development and spiritual formation with older students (Horan, 2017; Kanakanui, 2017; Long, 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Monzon, 2017) and studies have examined Christian spiritual development and prayer practices with younger students (Keeler, 2012; Mohler, 2013). There is a scarcity of studies that focus on mid-elementary grades and specific practices designed for spiritual formation in ACSI schools. The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore and describe the intentional practices used in Christian schools for encouraging spiritual formation at the third and fourth-grade level. This study adds to the body of knowledge regarding Christian schools’ practices for nurturing spiritual development, and

findings are important for Christian organizations, Christian educators, parents, and anyone interested in a child's spiritual growth.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Although research interest in children's spirituality is increasing rapidly, recent studies have suggested that further investigation is needed (Keeler, 2012; Mohler, 2013; Moore, Talwar, & Bosacki, 2012). For instance, Keeler (2012) recommended the exploration of children's inner thoughts of and relationship with God. When studying the faith-formation experiences of second graders, Mohler (2013) suggested further research on the "experiences that lead to faith development in students" (p. 126). Previous research has determined teachers to be critical to the learning process (Peterson, 2012), and Mitchell (2015) proposed examining teachers' roles as spiritual nurturers. Furthermore, King (2013) noted the scarcity of empirical research concerning the spiritual development processes of younger children. All these research gaps point to a need to determine current practices used in Christian schools. The purpose of this qualitative multiple-case study was to explore the practices used in ACSI member schools for encouraging spiritual formation in third and fourth-grade students.

During my review of the literature related to spirituality and children, several key themes emerged, which I discuss in turn. The focus of this literature review was not to identify which components of a Christian school program are successful, but to report on the critical influence the Christian school has on a child's spiritual life. The remainder of this chapter sets out the theoretical framework for this study, before moving on to examine research related to (a) children's spirituality; (b) teachers; (c) principals, administrators, and school heads; (d) school programs, climate, and environment; (e) Christian school policies and missions; and (f) curriculum and pedagogy. Grounding this proposed research study in faith development theory



(Fowler, 1981) connected the existing knowledge to the proposed research and added to the literature on the spiritual practices used with children.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Establishing a theoretical framework for this qualitative case study was essential for connecting the research to the existing knowledge and then extending that knowledge. “A theoretical framework is the underlying structure, the scaffolding or frame” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 85) of the study. The theoretical framework that was used to provide a structure for this qualitative study was Fowler’s (1981) faith development theory.

Fowler (1981) first published his research on the stages of faith in 1974 (Brelsford, 2016). He believed faith was an active verb that was “deeper and more personal than religion” (Fowler, 1981, p. 9). He further proposed that faith represents how one makes meaning out of the world, that is, it is a fundamental process, and he considered faith to be a two-way relationship with God that is expressed through symbols and rituals as we give value to our existence (Fowler, 1981). Although he acknowledged the impact of cultural influences on a child’s worldview, Fowler (2001) considered the faith development stages a useful framework for understanding a person’s mindset.

The work of three developmental psychologists, namely, Piaget’s (1969) theory of cognitive development stages, Kohlberg’s (1981) theory of moral development stages, and Erikson’s (1968) theory of psychosocial development serves as the basis for faith development theory (Fowler, 1981). Niebur, who also influenced Fowler (1981), held that faith was a human universal (Fowler, 2001). His research and writing stemmed from a psychologist’s viewpoint, but he was a person of faith, and his work helped illuminate how an individual’s spiritual faith develops.

Fowler (1981) proposed six distinct stages of faith development, with a seventh pre-stage, based on the notion that faith develops as humans attempt to build meaning. The seventh pre-stage occurs during infancy, that is, before the acquisition of formal language, as babies connect with and learn to trust their primary caregivers. Children aged approximately three to seven years are in the first stage of development. Namely, the intuitive-projective faith stage, where there is a mix of reality and fantasy, and family beliefs instill faith. Children have vivid imaginations and lack logical thinking processes at this age. The mythical-literal faith stage lasts from the elementary school years until around the age of 12 years. By this age, concrete operational thinking has begun, and reasoning is developing, so children are able to distinguish between real and make-believe, and they can understand the perspectives of others. The synthetic-conventional faith stage, which lasts from around puberty until the age of 18 years, is characterized by the ability to think abstractly and search for meaning in the world. Authority over one's religion still rests with another person rather than the self, and some individuals never spiritually outgrow this stage. The individuative-reflective faith stage occurs when young adults fully develop their own spiritual belief systems by questioning and, perhaps, even leaving behind earlier religious views. While the fourth stage constructs a system with easily identifiable boundaries, the fifth stage of conjunctive faith is more complex. At this stage, a person adopts universal ideas and accepts the interconnectedness and importance of opposing views. Few people enter the sixth and final stage because it requires a completely altruistic, universalizing faith, and those who do enter it are committed activists. Mother Teresa and Gandhi are examples of people who entered this stage because they both put their faith into action for the greater good of humankind (Fowler, 1981; Parker, 2009).

In this research study, I examined teaching and work centered on thoughts and beliefs of children; therefore, I only concerned myself with Fowler's (1981) earlier stages, that is, children who are in either the mythical-literal faith stage or perhaps the stage above or below this. Several reasons existed for selecting this age range for the study. Scripture tells parents to train their children in the way they want them to proceed in life, and these early years are exactly the time when adults can help children to develop a "thirst for God" (Schultz, 2003, p. 51). Hay and Nye's (2006) seminal study of children's spirituality agreed with William Wordsworth's claim regarding the "fading of the spiritual awareness of childhood" (p. 34). They posited that the world in which children are growing up is damaging to the spiritual simplicity of childhood and the spiritual awareness fades as children age. The process of children aging and assimilating into adult society often has the effect of closing their interest in the spiritual world. This age range, therefore, represents a window of opportunity for spiritual sensitivity, and Fowler's (1981) work provided the perfect framework for studying how children think about and understand spiritual concepts, in stages. Older children begin to lose this spiritual sensitivity or, as Hay and Nye noted, "[t]he social destruction of spirituality" (p. 33) begins to occur as children age. It is arguable that contemporary American culture sees spirituality or religion as an immature way of living (Roth & Thomas, 2013), which is an idea that Christian educators must counter. Finally, children in this age range are still learning through stories and narratives (Morgenthaler, Keiser, & Larson, 2014), and through Fowler's (1981) theoretical framework, I gained a better perspective on children's developing spirituality while simultaneously advancing the understanding of his theory.

Fowler (1981) believed that the use of age to describe a stage in life was merely a guideline, because one individual may pass through a stage more quickly than another and others

may remain in a given stage indefinitely. Fowler's (1981) work has received criticism and, while he stated that all children move through the described stages, he acknowledged that the timing of their movement from stage to stage varies. More recent knowledge about cognitive brain function has broadened the field of study to include neurophysiological development, causing the study of faith development to become even more complex. A person may reach adulthood in age, but factors including cultural or psychosocial influences might influence the faith and progression through the stages of faith (Fowler, 1996).

### **Related Literature**

This literature review began with the observation that the term "spirituality" showed up consistently and repeatedly. This study and the literature search was concerned only with spirituality as it related to the Christian life.

The spiritual journey of a child toward a life of Christian living develops with increasing complexity over time, influenced by factors such as family, educational environment, and the growing ability to reflect (Birkinshaw, 2015). The Christian school needs to know if they are achieving success, but measuring that success occurs differently than how public schools assess it (Scott, 2012). Some instruments measure attendance, note benchmarks of success, and assign data scores to outcomes, but success for Christians to educate for measurable faith is impossible. Christian schools can use Bibles, chapel, outreach, faith declarations, prayer, benchmarks of success, and other measurable data, but regarding a child's spiritual journey, none of these guarantees success. While the Bible does not provide details on Christian education, leaving that responsibility to the church and the family, it is made clear that God judges the heart, and Christian action measures success. Both Job and King David had hearts for God, and they were judged successful because of their actions from the heart, not the outcomes. Jesus was

successful in educating for discipleship and at the core of his success was the quality of His relationships (Scott, 2012). The success of Jesus' teaching was evidenced by the transformed lives of his followers, who left their previous lives to follow Him.

Success in Christian education emanates from the transformation of lives, and we see the fruit of the Spirit described by Paul in Galatians chapter five. The focus of this literature review was on the Christian educational environment and school-related literature in which the following themes emerged. This literature provides the background for the proposed study.

### **Children and Spirituality**

There is no lack of literature on the subject of spirituality, although defining spirituality remains a perplexing and elusive goal (Nye, 2009). It is easier to *describe* spirituality than to *define* it. It holds different meanings for different people (Hyde, 2008). It may or may not be closely related to religion. Spirituality may simply convey one's belief in integrity or values, it might invoke the exploration of one's inner self and the search for meaning, it could be the desire to feel a connectedness to something greater, or it may relate to religious experiences (Hyde, 2008). In Western culture, the term "spirituality" was previously limited to religious practices, but today it is not confined to Christianity or any other religion (Hyde, 2008). Spirituality, in the secular sense, includes deepening or enriching the purpose of one's life, the non-physical thinking and feeling of all human beings, while the sacred connotations of the term involve one's faith journey and relationship with God (Anthony, 2006). For the purposes of this study, any discussion of spirituality refers to the faith journey and relationship with God.

Recent studies concerning children from faith backgrounds and those lacking faith backgrounds have revealed spirituality is common in most, if not all, children (Nye, 2009). Drawing on her research, Nye (2009) defined children's spirituality as simply "God's way of

being with children and children's ways of being with God" (p. 5). There is a frequent discussion of the spiritual beliefs and perceptions of children in the literature (Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye, 2009). Research has shown that children can experience God at a deeper level than first believed (Hyde, 2008; Jonker, 2015; Stonehouse & May, 2010).

Maria Montessori, an Italian educator and physician, studied children and considered them spiritually superior with a natural attraction to God (Jonker, 2015). She understood the insights of young children and their spiritual development or "spiritual sensitivities" (Jonker, 2015, p. 303). The second plane described by Montessori, was a time for children, ages six to 12, to understand their culture and how they fit in, leading to a prime time for spiritual learning and growth (Langdoc, 2013). Later work following Montessori's teaching included helping children understand and love the Good Shepherd. Space for children to have such spiritual experiences is needed for spiritual development to occur (Jonker, 2015; Roth & Thomas, 2013).

To help build and nurture a child's spirituality, Nye (2009) suggested a checklist of criteria that are useful for encouraging spirituality in children using the acronym SPIRIT. Special physical places (i.e., space) often hold particular meaning, and adults need to consider both emotional and auditory spaces. Silence can be a powerful tool for helping a child to process information. The process is more important than the product, and individuals should not place limits on what the outcome is supposed to be, because spirituality is different for each person. Creativity in thinking (i.e., imagination) will help children to develop their spiritual skills, because making meaning requires both thinking and imagination. Relationships and connecting with others are considered key to spirituality. The relationship with God is a private one but sharing and connecting on a spiritual level requires a relationship. Intimacy involves drawing closer and going deeper, because spirituality requires a person to have private thoughts and

times, and children need these times to be provided for them if growth is to occur. The final criterion is trust, and children need to be in a trusting situation. When adults do not take a child seriously, or they are too controlling, the child worries about saying the wrong thing.

Encouragement in each of these six areas can provide an appropriate garden in which the child's spirituality can bloom (Nye, 2009).

In a study to understand children's spiritual perspectives, parents ( $N = 368$ ) were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire rating their family's religiosity, spirituality, and worship frequencies (Moore, Gomez-Garibello, Bosacki, & Talwar, 2016). The researchers then administered the Children's Spiritual Lives measure to children aged 7–11 years. Not surprisingly, parents who scored highly in terms of religiosity and spirituality had children with higher scores in these areas. Similarities among children from diverse faith backgrounds did emerge, showing that they understand a Divine Being to be a helper, listener, and comforter who is always present (Moore et al., 2012). Literature reveals family influences often shape a child's spirituality early in life (Abo-Zena & Mardell, 2015; Lun, 2015).

Relatively few research instruments are available for use with young children and, while instruments can measure forms of participation such as the frequency of attending church programs, it is more difficult to directly measure spirituality because spirituality involves a private relationship and personal actions (Moore et al., 2012). Elementary school children can consider abstract spiritual concepts, but "children's spiritual research is still in its beginnings" (Moore et al., 2012, p. 32). One measure of children's spiritual sensitivity found that each child has his or her unique spirituality in much the same way as each person has unique fingerprints (Stoyles, Stanford, Caputi, Keating, & Hyde, 2012). Children view the world through this

spiritual lens, and those who happen to be highly spiritually sensitive have a greater ability to adapt, especially under adverse circumstances.

Over an extended period of several decades spent on several continents, Coles (1990) examined children's inner spiritual thoughts and found there were clear distinctions between the "spiritual" and "religious" thoughts of a child. While religious thoughts entwined with faith taught in the family, spirituality occurred without religious teaching. By analyzing interviews and artwork produced by the children, Coles found that children were spontaneous in their thoughts about God. When prodded gently, children engaged in conversations explaining these thoughts and Coles likened them to pilgrims or "travelers on a road with some spiritual purpose in mind" (p. 322). Coles believed that religion and strict religious traditions sometimes stifled a child's openness and honest approach to spirituality. Through this perspective, each child interprets the Divine and his or her spiritual world in his or her unique way.

Children have their impressions of God and meanings that they place on their thoughts about God (Baring, 2012). In Baring's (2012) survey, which was designed to explore children's images of God and their parents, 241 fifth-grade children expressed their happiness with life and a positive outlook toward their relationship with God. They felt that they could talk to God at any time and they felt the need to pray often, an idea that was influenced by their parents' prayer lives. Adults who work with children need to understand their level of spirituality and need to set age-appropriate expectations and make use of activities that encourage spiritual growth. As children make use of language and non-verbal communication, they create meaning for their spiritual experiences and they "exhibit significant insights and understanding of faith" (Larson, 2014, p. 90).



Spiritual listening is an approach used to “tap into children’s beliefs and understandings about subjects such as the existence of the soul . . . and the nature of God” (Lipscomb & Gersch, 2011, p. 8), which enables adults to understand better how children construct meaning in their spiritual lives. By listening to children’s views on “philosophical concepts such as happiness” (Lipscomb & Gersch, 2011, p. 5), researchers can explore inner spiritual journeys. Through spiritual listening, children can understand their spiritual nature and link philosophical ideas such as drive and purpose to concrete things they know and understand, for example, television shows. Hyde’s (2008) research found children’s inner lives to be “closely associated with spirituality” (p. 17).

All children’s lives contain a spiritual dimension, and while those with religious training express their spirituality through religious practices, religion is not a requirement for spirituality (Hyde, 2008). Children can have “profound spiritual experiences” (Hyde, 2008, p. 59), particularly when their spiritual nature is recognized, fostered, and encouraged. Educators, church leaders, families, and any others involved in training children in the Christian faith need to be aware that children are spiritual beings who reveal their thoughts through questions, conversations, and everyday life experiences (Coles, 1990; Hyde, 2008). Adults who work with children must be attentive to the cues children exhibit during this ongoing process and be prepared with techniques that intentionally “nurture the inner lives of children” (Hyde, 2008, p. 17). Failure to recognize and nurture the spiritual orientation of a child can result in the tendency for him or her to neglect or suppress this spirituality as the child grows older.

Religious and spiritual beliefs change as an individual’s life progresses, although the extent to which education directly causes these changes remains unclear. Markel (2012) examined the effect of education on changes in spiritual beliefs among young adults. Results

suggested that education was not a major agent for change in the participants' lives; rather, it played a supporting role. Major life events, for example, the death of a parent, were more influential, and the presence of personal faith was a contributing factor in how individuals responded to such events.

### **Children and Spiritual Formation**

Spiritual formation is inescapable; as the soul is always forming (Moon, 2013). Spiritual formation is the process of "being formed into the image of Jesus" (Moles, 2016, p. 8) and growing toward spiritual maturity to "embody Biblical virtues" (Edwards, 2015, p. 228). Songs, pastors, television, conversations, the workplace, and countless others including Christian schools and teachers can influence spiritual formation. Paul encouraged the Romans to not conform to the world's values but to let the Holy Spirit change them by the "renewing of your minds" (Romans 12:2, English Standard Version).

Willard (2012) described spiritual formation as a process of inwardly becoming like Christ. Rather than modeling behavior according to Biblical passages, true transformation is a result of allowing God to change one on the inside so that one's actions align with God. It is a systematic process. Six dimensions that make up all human life include "thought, feeling, choice, body, social context, and soul" (2012, p. 30). Thoughts allow one to extend beyond immediate boundaries to include "past, present, and future . . . reasoning . . . scientific thinking . . . and divine revelation" (p. 32). The dimension of feeling is interdependent with thought and may be positive or negative. The ability for human choice, volition, is the basic core of one's being, the nonphysical inner self, and the heart of the human spirit. The body provides physical strength and is a principal part of the spiritual formation; it must be transformed for spiritual formation to take place effectively. Meanwhile, the social dimension of life cannot be separated

from thoughts and feelings because of the connection to others through personal relationships and structures. The final aspect, soul, integrates all the other dimensions. Likened to a computer that quietly runs the person, the soul is capable of adaptation and change (Willard, 2012).

In older Christians, spiritual formation is measurable through their knowledge obtained, their shifts in worldviews, and their commitment as shown by their actions (Dernlan, 2013). With scant empirical research available relating to spiritual formation or the faith development process in children, Christian school teachings affect spiritual formation outcomes (Dernlan, 2013). Faith journeys occur in communities and through the strong relationships that exist in Christian education.

Growing in one's faith is a scaffolding process from the "known to the almost-known" (Morgenthaler et al., 2014, p. 253). Such spiritual development may take place in the family or church environment or fostered by other believers. The spiritual community that influences a child's development includes individuals of different ages, with different gifts and talents, and different strengths or weaknesses. Morgenthaler et al. (2014) cautioned that outcomes might be unpredictable due to dispositions, the environment, and the internal spiritual world of the child, but the power of God's Spirit is always at work nurturing the child through others.

Conversations about spiritual formation are needed today, especially on how to "grow up young people in the way of Jesus" (Claiborne, 2013, p. 16). Christians have attempted many kinds of strategies for raising new Christians, but these appear to be leading young people away from Jesus rather than toward Him (Claiborne, 2013). The next generation needs to be bold, needs to know how to love their neighbor and needs to have their eyes on the Kingdom of God (Claiborne, 2013) and the Christian community needs to address this immediately due to "seismic shifts" (Kinnaman, 2011, p. 14) in attitudes. Research revealed the next generation

lacks confidence in institutions, education, government, and the church and large numbers of young people are leaving their faith behind when they are old enough to make that choice (Beckwith; 2013; Kinnaman, 2011). Spiritual development of the next generation is in trouble because their education has not prepared them for the issues of the world they face. They are being asked to change the world for God, yet their spiritual strength is lacking (Kinnamon, 2011). The Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion and Public Life (2013) revealed large numbers of young Millennials today are not affiliated with a faith and do not attend religious services. After decades of new and improved children's and youth ministries and programs, the research revealed a major finding that respondents felt God was missing and Christianity was irrelevant to their lives (Beckwith, 2013). The church finds itself in defensive mode as large numbers of young people are leaving (McLaren, 2013). Despite abundant spending on innovative hi-tech programs and curricula designed for young adults, the problem of young people leaving their religion remains (Beckwith, 2013). Beckwith stated,

In the scramble to get the biggest, best, shiniest, hippest, and most fun ministry for children and youth on the block, our churches have utterly failed to offer our children and youth an alternative vision of the world and how to live in it. We have failed to offer them an alternate reality to what they encounter every day. (p. 99)

How to pass on the vision of living for God's kingdom with a new kind of Christian faith remains a problem (Beckwith, 2013; Claiborne, 2013; Csinos & Bray, 2013).

The public sector, the private sector, and the government showcase the selfishness of the American culture (Beckwith, 2013). Christians in the West have failed to show the next generation how to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and demonstrate genuine concern for others' needs and wants. Children need to learn to see beyond themselves but the affluent society in

which Americans have raised their children makes this difficult (Beckwith, 2013; Stonehouse & May, 2010) as the unending message to children is one of wants rather than needs. As Stonehouse and May (2010) suggested, “material affluence can bring poverty of spirit” (p. 122).

In 2012, four hundred fifty participants from seven countries and multiple denominations united together for dialogue and shared ideas, and the organization Faith Forward was born (Csinos & Bray, 2013). Bringing faith formation of children and youth to the forefront was the purpose of the conference as presenters shared the common goal of nurturing the next generation in their faith. Attendees collaborated on practices for encouraging children and youth on their faith journey (Csinos & Bray, 2013). Westerhoff (2013) proposed faith is fundamental, a perception, or how one views the world, and if spiritual formation is the goal, the process should be one of enculturation “similar to an apprenticeship” (p. 267). Children must learn the gospel of peace and how to practice it to understand how to share it with others and respond with Christ-like love (Gingerich & Seiling, 2013).

There exists a great need to address the spiritual formation of children and young people to prepare them for a life in the Christian faith. To do so, adults must convey to children what their Christian faith looks like. Claiborne (2013) suggested to “cultivate holy habits” (p. 17), adults should talk about what faith means to them and then live out their faith. While it is important to help children understand how to love their enemies, how to live unselfishly, and what it means to walk the extra mile, adults must also model these lessons. Helping children imagine what it was like living in Jesus’ world would allow them to discover what following Jesus truly looks like (Beckwith, 2013). Unfortunately, among those who work with children, there is a “lack of imagination” (Beckwith, 2013, p. 99) as children are not given alternatives to

what their worlds look like. Curricula for young adults have improved in the last decade, but few tools exist for teaching faith-related topics to young children (McLaren, 2013).

## **Teachers**

Although the absolute influence of a teacher on a student's life can never be fully known, they guide their students by means of their conduct, by what and how they communicate, and by presenting material content (Schultz, 2003). "Kingdom education cannot take place without teachers" (Shultz, 2003, p. 51). God gave the responsibility for raising children to parents, but teachers have inherited a large amount of that work due to changes in society (Van Brummelen, 2009). Teachers know their work is important in their influence of students' spiritual growth (Jang, 2015). Some have described God giving them the gift of teaching, they consider it their mission field or ministry to teach, and they know they are often problem solvers as they shape the lives of those they teach (Teodori, 2015). Significant adults are critical to a child's spiritual growth in the early years since development is interactive and teachers who are weak in their faith can "deeply impair our children's emerging faith and cripple their spirits" (Fowler, 1996, p. 53). A network for strengthening teachers is therefore needed to prepare them for nurturing children's spirituality (Jang, 2015).

There is a difference between a "teacher who is a Christian" and a "Christian teacher" (Bateman & Parker, 2014, p. 29). Teachers who are Christians may have once been passionate but now exhibit lower levels of participation, engagement, commitment, and dedication. These may include teachers who have come into Christian education accidentally or unintentionally. A Christian teacher, on the other hand, is committed to being involved in the discipleship process of students, "partnering with the Holy Spirit as his servant in this process called spiritual transformation" (Linhart, 2016, p. 34). Christian educators must be dedicated to "biblically

grounded, culturally engaged, and academically rigorous education” (Bateman & Parker, 2014, p. 29). Throughout their careers, teachers must reflect on their calling to ensure that it reflects the school’s vision and mission (Bateman & Parker, 2014). Teachers in Christian schools have acknowledged that working with students in their spiritual development is not a quick process and it must be intentional with the positive aspect being able to share Christ on the spiritual journey (Stouffer, 2016). Research has shown that teachers must examine their spirituality because the self cannot be separated from spirituality when they work with young children (Nye, 2009). Teaching for spiritual growth involves more than simply delivering content and a few conversations about God. Therefore, Nye (2009) suggested “casting the net wide” (p. 35) because of the broad nature of spirituality. A survey of teachers from 50 ACSI schools revealed that teachers must be purposeful when establishing their classrooms; therefore, schools should look for individuals with this intentionality when hiring new teachers (Moore, 2014).

The mission of a Christian school is to teach spiritual understanding and help develop the Christian faith of each student (Banke et al., 2012). All teachers deliver instructional content, but Christian schoolteachers also “embed spiritual principals” into their daily lessons (Moore, 2014, p. 256). They must be alert to the sometimes-subtle appearance of the spiritual dimension in young children, including the way children express themselves. The need for guidelines and strategies that will nurture this spirituality cannot be overemphasized (Hyde, 2008; Willard, 2012). Given that Christian schoolteachers can foster spiritual growth in the classroom, it is essential for teachers in Christian schools to be comfortable with and equipped to mentor students regarding their faith and spirituality. Pazmino (2010) posited that since spiritual formation is the result of the Holy Spirit’s work, “the implicit challenge for the Christian teacher is how to set the metaphorical table for the Holy Spirit in one’s teaching” (p. 358). In the

classroom, teachers must create opportunities to encourage children's natural curiosity and their means of expressing themselves. Teachers need to listen carefully and be aware of how children express spirituality. Research has shown that if teachers respectfully listen and encourage it, children can have "profound spiritual experiences from an early age" (Hyde, 2008, p. 59). Spirituality must be "nurtured and fostered," not "suppressed and damaged" (Hyde, 2008, p. 59). When instructing student teachers, Mata (2014) encouraged them to connect their lessons with nature and promote discussions about spirituality. For example, a nature walk can teach complex scientific concepts and demonstrate how students should interact with God's creation.

Montoro (2013) discussed the seldom mentioned but highly important role played by teachers' faith as they "make connections between life experiences and the curriculum" (p. 54). He found that teachers' personal beliefs played a major role in their professional lives, and therefore, teachers must be self-directed learners after they enter the classroom. Quality training programs for student teachers and better professional development are therefore needed to ensure that teachers are comfortable with using spiritual development practices in the classroom (Montoro, 2013). Those who teach God's will must walk with integrity, dwell in Christ, and be ready to speak God's Word every minute. Linhart (2016) provided a scriptural basis for Christian teachers to follow:

The way to master God's lessons is to abide gladly in Jesus as John did (John 15), to crave and meditate on the Bible day and night as David did (Pss. 67:73; 119; 145), to humbly receive God's correction as Moses did (Deut. 32-33), and to follow Jesus closely enough to be covered in his blood, as Simon the Cyrene did (Luke 23). (pp. 32-33)

Turning students toward Christ cannot happen unless teachers are also committed to God's authority, and they provide a solid example for students (Linhart, 2016).



Christians are called to rest in obedience to the Lord (Campbell, 2012), and the practice of being still before God is critical for teachers in a stress-filled world. Teachers cope with stress in their own ways, one of which is prayer, to improve both their well-being and their job satisfaction (LaBarbara & Hetzel, 2016). Spiritual rest serves to prepare teachers for the task of transforming students through their teaching; furthermore, when teachers model spiritual rest in front of students, the habits of intentional silence and waiting on the Lord promote spiritual transformation (Campbell, 2012).

When researching the degree of discipleship shown by teachers in Christian schools, Alarid (2015) discovered that teachers might not be exerting enough influence on students' spiritual growth. Teachers in 23 Christian schools scored high in attributes describing their inner spiritual strength yet scored much lower in using their spirituality in relationships with others. For example, participants had a strong desire to please God and accept biblical teachings, but they scored low when asked about reading and studying the Bible. They received high scores on attitudes regarding evangelism but low scores on sharing Christ with others. Christian schools learned that, although their teachers might be strong Christians, they did not appear to be living the faith they professed. Schools would need to develop methods to train teachers in discipleship skills so that they would be able to provide the spiritual nurturing their students required (Alarid, 2015).

### **Principals, Administrators, and School Heads**

Few recent studies have examined the role of Christian school leaders (Beckman, Drexler, & Eames, 2012). It is their responsibility to connect the mission of the school to those inside it, and they must have a strong biblical worldview coupled with the ability to handle “layered authority and . . . complex roles” (Beckman et al., 2012, p. 122). While students relate

to teachers as their classroom leaders, school administrators direct the school community. Transformational school leaders encourage their followers to grow, change, and improve in their jobs, and teachers recognize this as a significant benefit for themselves and their students (Kellerman, 2008). Christian school heads encourage and influence the spiritual growth of faculty, students, and community.

Spirituality influenced the behaviors of Christian school leaders (Dockett, 2014; Gibson, 2014; Macon, 2014). Survey results of 81 principals regarding personal spirituality, showed they relied heavily on their spirituality in cultivating relationships, decision-making, and in their day-to-day duties (Macon, 2014). These same school principals revealed they could not separate themselves from their spirituality. Even with low involvement with organized religion, they reported a high degree of spiritual transcendence (Macon, 2014). Christian school administrators must understand the spiritual needs of the school and the wider Christian community as they help staff and students to develop stronger relationships with God (Banke et al., 2012). Parents who shared about factors influencing their selection of a Christian primary school said that the principal was a determining factor in some cases. Families felt influenced by the principals' attention given to a child at the first meeting, leading to parents' confidence in a school's ability to nurture the child (ter Avest, Bertram-Troost, & Miedema, 2015). One sample of Christian school leaders acknowledged that even though they followed their schools' mission statements, they were influenced by past experiences that could either strengthen or weaken their ability to provide positive spiritual leadership (Banke et al., 2012). Schools held high expectations regarding staff, students, and academic rigor, and an administrator who regularly interacted with the faculty strengthened the overall spirituality of the campus. Christian school leaders

acknowledged that when they sought direction from God, He provided divine guidance (Dockett, 2014).

Teachers deeply appreciated administrators who influenced their professional growth (Montoro, 2013). Teachers described strong Christian school leaders as those who prayed for their teachers' personal needs and who genuinely cared about their teachers' personal situations (McMaster, 2013). Teachers have expressed that the spirituality of their principal could not be separated from who the principal was, because it was evidenced by "character, competence, and conduct" (Gibson, 2014, p. 532). Spirituality affected a leader's self-control, moral behavior, and approach to every leadership task, and leaders in some cases even shaped teachers' lives. An overwhelming majority of research participants agreed that spirituality was part of who a person is, and thus, linked to performance and personal relationships. The implication for educators in Christian schools was that they should consider their own spiritual lives to be a critical component of their workplace (Gibson, 2014).

### **School Programs, Climate, and Environment**

Jesus issued the challenge to "[G]o and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19, New International Version). This challenge meant instruction was to be part of the early church and the early disciples were to cultivate learners (Linhart, 2016). Instruction for spiritual transformation then was the same as it is today, empowered by God's Holy Spirit. Even with today's global effort to do just that through churches, schools, and camps, records and statistics can only show the "tiniest tip of the Christian schooling and Christian education iceberg" (Lawson, 2016, p. 368). Christian education incorporates the teachings of Jesus concerning how to live a life worthy of the Gospel. Importantly, Christian education and religious schooling are

not synonymous, because Christian education involves an intentional focus on spiritual formation (Steibel, 2010; Yount, 2012).

Unfortunately, American children receive education as if they are passive participants rather than pilgrims on their unique faith journey (Langdoc, 2013). Sunday Schools and Vacation Bible Schools in North America have become multimedia driven programs that encourage active engagement. While this presents an energetic and attractive package, it does not give children an unhurried, quiet opportunity to experience God's Spirit. Schools and teachers have tried to teach the ways of faith because they lacked awareness of the spiritual potential of children. Spirituality naturally occurs in children and teaching it is not required. Instead, educators and school programs need to be sure the spiritual potential is "awakened, trained, and practiced" (King, 2013, p. 6) just as if the child were taking up a sport or learning a musical instrument. When nurturing a child's spiritual literacy, "not everybody is spiritually equally gifted" (p. 6) so, spiritual growth occurs differently for everyone. There are multiple approaches to spiritual formation in children (May, 2006), all the work of the Holy Spirit.

The manner in which children relate to their environment influences learning and spiritual growth (Hyde, 2008). Adults provide these environments and care should be taken to furnish a trustful, safe atmosphere which will guide children to create meaning and to encourage their spiritual growth. Research has shown "adults cannot weave their own framework together for children" (Hyde, 2008, p. 162). Adults can only function as a guide along the way, providing the right opportunities. Western cultures are uncomfortable with silence and stillness, preferring the noise of television and cell phones. One method for nurturing spiritual awareness described by May (2006) involves quiet, repetitive, serene, and worshipful experiences in which a child can feel the awe and wonder of experiencing God. This method is considered a "contemplative-

reflective” approach to teaching and worship, in which children are recognized as spiritual beings and given time and space to encounter God (Langdoc, 2013; May, 2006). Quiet reflection needs to be built into the school climate, although this can be difficult to do. Priority should be given to children who are searching for ways of understanding self and God and trying to assign meaning to their experiences. This is a process identified as “spiritual questing” (Hyde, 2008, p. 162).

Elementary school students sometimes nurture their spirituality by focusing on the physical spaces within their schools for spiritual moments (Hemming, 2013; Hyde, 2008). Schools provide preselected times and places, such as the chapel, to provide spiritual opportunities for students but students also create confidential moments and locations. Hemming (2013) discovered that students do not always respond at the expected time and in the expected place, instead preferring to seek their own spaces for meaningful spiritual experiences. Students received disposable cameras with which to photograph places they considered special, and then asked to explain the significance of these places. Categories of locations were specified according to what the children did there, who else took part in the children’s activities, and how the locations helped the children to experience spirituality. Some children chose very private places (one even a restroom) to find the solitude necessary for personal prayer. Hemming’s study revealed that children can create spiritual places and act as their own decision-makers and spiritual agents. Ng (2012) also found that the way children thought about their learning, that is, as a process, affected their spiritual development in the classroom. Children need the freedom to have reflective times, because spirituality is personal and individual growth differs among people.

Students require planned, intentional experiences to understand the lives of those who are different from them. Schools, therefore, need to provide opportunities for students to “envision alternatives to their current personal, social, and cultural situations” (Beckwith, 2013, p. 140) and act as good Samaritans. Stonehouse and May (2010) described material affluence, and Beckwith (2013) described the “shiniest ministry” (p. 140) as obstacles to the compassion for others that Jesus’s followers ought to show. Regular and intentional sequences of practice living as Jesus lived, that is, out of concern for others, are needed in the Christian school culture. Programs that provide students with opportunities to engage with personally and love others as Jesus did will serve to expand children’s spirituality (Pandya, 2016). One recent study examined educational programming as it related to spiritual formation in older students and found that planning for classes, chapel, and related programs was not as effective regarding the spiritual formation process as was the forming of relationships (Horan, 2017).

The physical environment of a school contributes to the sense of community, which in turn influences teaching and learning (Van Brummelen, 2009). In smaller school settings, a heightened sense of community exists because all participants realize the importance of their contributions. Extracurricular activities, cross-grade units, regular celebrations, student participation, and an atmosphere of involvement and enthusiasm all contribute to a positive school climate.

### **Curriculum and Pedagogy**

A curriculum is seen as “what we teach,” while pedagogy is the “way we teach” (Dickens, 2015, p. 5). Quality Christian education is not mediocre, but it promotes excellence and challenges students with biblical teaching and “ongoing reformation” (Dickens, 2015, p. 6).

The integration of both into the classroom and school climate should happen in such a way that they shape the hearts and minds of young learners into Christian disciples (Dickens, 2015).

A curriculum is intended to provide the outline, plan, and materials necessary for students to achieve the desired academic outcomes (Van Brummelen, 2009), but curricula have grown beyond mere paper documents. A curriculum includes the teacher, the lessons, related activities, the setting, and the students (Linhart, 2016). Christian educators want quality educational materials; therefore, there is a need to examine and evaluate the curriculum for theological and pedagogical purposes (Reck, 2012). Christian educators are challenged to evaluate the planning and preparation of lessons within Christian religious education curricula. Boys (1989), a well-known leader in the field of Christian education, developed an evaluation instrument that has proven useful for evaluating both religious and secular education curricula (as cited in Reck, 2012).

Using educational curricula to transform lives for Jesus Christ involves multiple elements. Teachers must be strong in their faith with a strong sense of God's presence felt because "incorporating Christ's presence into the teaching process is too important to take for granted" (Johnson-Miller, 2013, p. 387). Teaching for outcomes in secular education is values-based, whereas Kingdom education involves students knowing Christ, becoming like Christ, and serving Christ (Shultz, 2003). Effective Christian curricula will encourage students to explore facts and begin to understand the multiple disciplines that are windows for seeing God's creation (Dickens, 2015).

Research was conducted to compare a classical Christian school with a modern K-12 Christian school, and significant differences in student faith formation between the two methods were found (Dernlan, 2013). This study described the modern Christian school as one in which

instruction included some subjects taught without bringing God into them. Results in Dernlan's (2013) study showed a decline in the integration of faith in the modern Christian school classroom. The classical Christian approach draws from the classical education movement, or Trivium, and emphasizes grammar, logic, and rhetoric, and strengthens students' faith as more elements of Christian faith are brought into the classroom. In Dernlan's (2013) research, the Christian faith formation of fourth, eighth, and 12th-grade students in the classical Christian school was greater than that of the faith formation of students in the modern Christian school, with the classical school exhibiting a stronger integration of faith and academics.

Developing a Christian pedagogy requires more than simply generating practices and behaviors (Smith, 2013). Examining what takes place within a school and what qualifies teaching to be Christian in nature is more important than just "adding Christian information to the curriculum or talking about Christian beliefs" (p. 5). Pedagogy cannot be centered merely on one aspect such as character lessons or chapel, but it should engage multiple factors and use all available resources to achieve growth. A community sustains practice, and it is intentional toward a goal (Smith, 2013). Claims of a biblical worldview remained unconfirmed in one study (Scouller, 2012), leading to the conclusion that the "integration of faith into teaching and learning practices in Christian schools is still a challenging issue" (p. 78). In a quality Christian school, both teachers and students uphold pedagogical rigor. Excellence in teaching means challenging students, teaching with integrity, promoting discipleship, and loving like Christ loved (Dickens, 2015).

Educators planning for 21st-century learners face new challenges, and a paradigm shift is needed if they are going to properly respond to increasingly diverse needs (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011; Jones, 2015; McLaren, 2013). All children are created uniquely and should be



taught to celebrate and develop their gifts for God's work (Dickens, 2015). All students have different needs from gifted and talented to those requiring remedial work and all students in between (Dickens, 2015) and traditional methods fall short (Jones, 2015). Schools are being asked to deliver lessons that will develop students' multiple intelligences, cater to different learning styles, improve their social skills, help them become people of character, and support them as they develop resilience. In their spare time, teachers are to help students identify and practice leadership, involve them in teams, assess their teamwork skills, and support the development of students' emotional intelligence (Jones, 2015, p. 28).

Because students learn in different ways, standardization of methods does not equal customization (Christensen et al., 2011). Different approaches are always being implemented and although curricula have improved, "we're still teaching our children and youth with the same old off-the-shelf curricula that are based on the same old assumptions" (McLaren, 2013, p. 29). Approaches to the ways children learn need innovation (Christensen et al., 2011; Jones, 2015; McLaren, 2013).

### **Christian School Policies and Missions**

School policies should reflect the culture of the community and meet the expectations of that community (Van Brummelen, 2009). Christian schools aim to provide a well-rounded education that includes "skills, knowledge, and understandings but also convictions and commitment to values" (Dickens, 2015, p. 6). The outcome should be a student who operates with a sincere biblical worldview desiring to be more Christ-like (Dickens, 2016).

The faith component is "the core of Christian school uniqueness" (Boerema, 2011, p. 36). When Boerema (2011) surveyed education professionals about which issues related to Christian education require further research, the key concern was the alignment of the school's mission

with actual school practices. One researcher compared the mission statements of some schools in the United States to those of similar schools in the Netherlands that provided state-supported Christian education (Zandstra, 2012). Christian schools in the USA tended to be private and have larger populations of Christians when compared to the schools in the Netherlands, and religious themes occurred more frequently in their mission statements. While Dutch schools emphasized the school environment and atmosphere, using terms such as “care, concern, and respect” in their mission statements (Zandstra, 2012, p. 127), the mission statements of the U.S. schools indicated a commitment to building and transmitting their students’ faith.

When examining the gaps in achievement between groups of students, Jeynes (2010) found that religious faith positively affected achievement outcomes:

The results of three meta-analyses indicated that (a) personal religious faith was one [of] the two largest factors that consistently reduced the achievement gap; (b) personal religious commitment reduc[ed] the achievement gap by 50%; and (c) attending a religious school reduced the achievement gap by 25% (p. 263).

At a time when American society may overlook or even discourage spirituality, Jeynes’ (2010) research shows that faith building is important for academic purposes as well as for students’ spirituality. The implication for educators and policymakers alike is that further policies and programs that help to develop students’ faith are needed. Research revealed that racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps in public schools are greater than those seen in private faith-based schools (Jeynes, 2010). This gap contributes to the argument in support of faith-based education, particularly for these groups. Students enrolled in religious schools perform better academically and behaviorally than those in public or charter schools, but there is no significant difference in outcomes for charter school students versus public school students (Jeynes, 2013).

Research also supports a strong link “between Bible knowledge and achievement” (p. 17), suggesting that studying the Bible in education leads to improved behavior. As Jeynes (2014) noted, “government and public-school educators should value faith-based schools for their unique contribution to American education” (p. 175). While many factors, including family structure and curriculum, may influence outcomes, implications for school policymakers are that religious faith does provide a positive impact both inside the educational sphere and beyond (Jeynes, 2013).

Researchers have explored Christian school practices important to administrators and Boards of Education, and some results showed that evaluations of school leaders were missing or incomplete, or else the Boards did not play a role in evaluating school heads (Coley, 2015). Research revealed that Christian schools’ impact on students’ lives continues long after graduation (Long, 2014; Monzon, 2017) and the Lord has given school leaders a critical role to play. Failure of Boards to hold school leaders accountable for training students in Christian schools will negatively affect Christian schools.

The Christian school community has a separate identity from churches, denominations, businesses, and families (Dickens, 2015; Scott, 2012). Christian schools prepare students for discipleship by educating “from the perspective of the gospel story of the world” (Dickens, 2015, p. 5). A successful outcome of Christian education is the relationships young people form as they follow the ways of Christ in the world. Performance indicators are necessary in education, but the heart is what gets judged. The actions of God’s children should be the focus of the spiritual formation that occurs in Christian education (Dickens, 2015; Scott, 2012).

A definition of Christian spiritual formation proposed by Pazmino (2010) suggested that spiritual formation is a partnership between God and His people. Transformation happens with

renewal and change “outside of the customary processes of formation that influence and shape persons in relation to agreed-upon communal expectations and norms” (p. 360). God’s Holy Spirit accomplishes the work and educators merely oversee the process, recognizing the source is God. Christian spiritual formation involves a relationship with the “Spirit of Truth” (p. 362) who guides all followers in the path God has planned for them. Pazmino points to the example of the Spirit’s presence at the wedding of Cana recorded in John’s Gospel. This first miracle of Jesus illustrates the person of the Holy Spirit at work in an unexpected way when He turned the jars of water used for purification into wine. The challenge for Christian teachers is to be ready for the unannounced moving of God’s Holy Spirit in the spiritual formation process in Christian education. The combination of teaching and learning that takes place in Christian schools is a “platform for spiritual formation” (Pazmino, 2010, p. 364).

### **Summary**

Spirituality has multiple meanings, and it is a concept that may be religious or secular (Anthony, 2006). Research into children’s Christian spirituality represents a rapidly growing area of study, although the concept remains difficult to define and further research is needed (Hay & Nye, 2006; Johnson-Miller, 2013; Nye, 2009; Stonehouse & May, 2010). Recent studies concerning children’s spirituality and faith development have explored the relationship between God and the inner thoughts of children (Keeler, 2012; Mohler, 2013; Mitchell, 2015). Currently, there is little research on the intentional practices used to encourage spiritual formation in children. The problem is that few studies provide an in-depth understanding of the practices used in Christian schools for spiritual formation, and no studies exist that explore those practices in relation to third and fourth-grade students. An examination of spirituality in younger students is needed to determine the influence of spiritual education practices.

Fowler's (1981) faith development theory provides a theoretical framework for this study, with a particular focus on two stages of faith. The intuitive-projective faith stage ranges from about age two or three to about ages seven or eight and precedes the mythical-literal faith stage lasting until about age 12. It is important to investigate spiritual formation in this age group because their spiritual awareness is high, although soon after leaving this age, it fades (Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye, 2009).

The literature discusses spirituality and spiritual formation as they relate to children. One cannot adequately define the term spirituality although one can describe it. Literature confirmed that children are spiritual beings capable of experiencing God (Hyde, 2008; Jonker, 2015; Stonehouse & May, 2010). Nurturing children's spirituality is an intentional process with few instruments that can directly measure it. Children have inner spiritual lives that can be explored and encouraged. (Hyde, 2008; Lipscomb & Gersch, 2011). Spiritual formation is a process of becoming Christ-like, and the Holy Spirit must accomplish this. Teachers and educators can mentor the process, but they cannot teach the work of the Spirit. Spiritual formation in older students and adults is measurable in terms of one's actions (Dernlan, 2013), but with young children, spiritual formation occurs when the Holy Spirit works, and this is difficult to assess.

The following themes emerged while searching the literature for children and spirituality, their early spiritual formation, and the process of Christian education. Teachers must be biblically grounded first, purposeful in modeling in conduct what they are sharing with words, and purposeful in their practices of sharing Christ while encouraging children's spiritual growth (Linhart, 2016; Montoro, 2013; Moore, 2014; Stouffer, 2016). The value of Christian school leaders in spiritual formation is an under-researched area (Beckman et al., 2012) yet they have a significant role in influencing the lives of teachers, students, families, and schools (Montoro,

2013). Research has shown the spiritual lives of leaders is not separate from who they are (Gibson, 2014). The Christian education environment is a critical part of students' spiritual development, and young children need time and the proper space to experience God in the spiritual formation process (Hemming, 2013; Langdoc, 2013; Ng, 2012). Intentional practices to allow children to understand how Jesus engaged with people are also needed (Beckwith, 2013; Pandya, 2016). Curriculum, pedagogy, and the mission of Christian schools all contribute to the efficacy of spiritual formation with children and approaches must continually be revised and strengthened for 21st-century learners (Dickens, 2015; Jones, 2015; McLaren, 2013).

My research examined how schools are creating an atmosphere for spiritual formation among third and fourth-grade students, and by extension, perhaps among other grades as well. This atmosphere for spiritual formation is an issue of importance for Christian educators, families, and anyone else interested in children's spiritual development.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore and describe intentional practices that Christian schools use to guide spiritual formation of students, particularly third and fourth graders. The study took place at four accredited schools of varying sizes and in different cities to examine their practices. Chapter Three presents the case study design and its appropriateness for this study. The primary research question focused on the practices used, sub-questions addressing schoolwide routines, classroom routines, and teacher preparedness. This chapter describes the selection of the setting and participants, and provides a detailed summary of the procedures. I then define my role as the researcher, followed by the data collection methods and analysis procedures I used. The chapter concludes with an explanation of how I established trustworthiness, as well as the ethical considerations of the study, and finally, a chapter summary.

### **Design**

I chose a qualitative, multiple-case study design for this research. Qualitative research examines “how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). In this research, I sought to understand the approaches used by schools for children’s spiritual formation, including how teachers interpreted the phenomenon. Multiple holistic cases were studied, described by Yin (2014) as a Type 3 design following a replication logic. Similar results or the methods used by schools with their students of similar ages, strengthen the findings. Each unit of study or case was one school which characterized this as a case study, and there were four cases.

Yin (2009) describes the case study inquiry as one that explores a contemporary phenomenon, in this case, spiritual formation. Case study seeks an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within its real-life setting, in this case, the school. A second reason this approach was appropriate is that multiple data collection methods were used providing triangulation of data. Popular in the social sciences, case study research has its roots in law, medicine, psychology, and political science (Creswell, 2013) as well as education (Merriam, 1998). Case studies in anthropology and sociology date from the 1920s (Creswell, 2013).

Contemporary practices were explored using how or why questions since I had no control over the events (Yin, 2014). The important elements of this case study research included individual interviews and focus group questions and their connections to the data, units of study or cases, and interpretations (Yin, 2014). A robust study requires spending as much time as possible collecting data with rigorous procedures. With this in mind, I spent one full week at each school collecting data through observations, interviews, and documentation. Each Christian school was a separate unit of analysis bounded by time, one school year, and by place, one campus. Bounding the case is necessary to define the data collection range (Yin, 2014). Qualitative studies contain greater depth and breadth than quantitative studies that ask standardized questions limiting the amount of detail that can be learned (Patton, 2015). Qualitative research explores in detail the practices and strategies used at each site making a qualitative design ideal for this study.

### **Research Questions**

The central research question was:

What are the intentional practices of Christian schools for spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?



The three sub-questions were:

1. How are school-wide programs and practices used for Christian spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?
2. How are classroom routines and strategies used to encourage Christian spiritual formation in third- and fourth-grade students?
3. How are teachers and administrators prepared for the task of nurturing Christian spiritual formation in third- and fourth-grade students?

### **Setting**

I selected four school settings located in two different southern states for this study. Selecting schools with varied sizes of enrollment, various geographic locations, two different accrediting organizations, and varying church affiliations increased variation. Maximum variation is desired to “represent diverse cases and to fully describe multiple perspectives about the cases” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Each elementary school setting had at least one administrator, one section of third grade and one section of fourth grade, and a minimum of 12 students per grade in the 2017-2018 school year.

Specific schools that would potentially provide “information-rich cases” (Patton, 2015, p. 308) were identified using several steps. I first contacted the regional ACSI office familiar with area schools asking for names of accredited schools which they could recommend based on their knowledge of the school’s spiritual formation practices. Accredited schools have verifiable high standards and spiritual integration processes, they promote self-improvement, and accreditation links a school to its foundational statements (ACSI, 2017a). The process of gaining accreditation involves self-study, continual improvement, a peer group review, and the continued ongoing accountability to stakeholders. Many assessment tools are available to schools and these

increase the schools' ability to self-evaluate the effectiveness of their spiritual formation practices (ACSI, 2017a).

Several additional steps helped identify the most appropriate settings. A review of school websites narrowed the list further, and I sent a formal letter to schools of interest which met the necessary criteria. Follow-up phone calls, and in some cases, a personal visit was made to further screen potential cases and identify schools best qualified for the study (Yin, 2014). In each case, I was able to answer questions and discuss the school's possible participation. I selected four schools as sites for this study.

Rosewood Community School (pseudonym) was located in a city of approximately 100,000 and educating students with an eternal focus for over 40 years. This school was a church ministry partnering with Christian families in equipping their children to live with a Christian worldview, so that they would be an influence for Christ. The governing board consisted of church elders plus two additional seats at-large. The school submitted itself to a Spiritual Climate Assessment (ACSI, n.d.) to understand its spiritual climate and determine strategies for strengthening it, a process that many schools do not undergo. Administrators and staff also attended frequent training aimed at continual improvement. Boasting many National Merit Scholars, Rosewood served approximately 700 students in Junior Kindergarten through 12th grade during the 2017-18 school year, with three third-grade classrooms and three fourth-grade classrooms.

Redeemed Christian School (pseudonym) was located on 65 acres, serving approximately 1000 students from Pre3 through 12th grade. Begun as a ministry of Redeemed Baptist Church in the suburb of a large city over 25 years ago, the school had been fully accredited by ACSI for more than 15 years. The school held high national rankings academically, and a Statement of

Faith agreed to by all incoming families governed the site. In contrast to the school Spiritual Climate Assessment, this school administered a year-end student assessment which, among other things, measured students' biblical knowledge. In the 2017-2018 school year, Redeemed Christian School had four sections each of third and fourth grades, with a total of 625 elementary students.

Founded in 1997 as a ministry of Forest Hills Baptist Church (pseudonym), Forest Hills Christian Academy had more than 1600 students enrolled in Pre-K3 – 12. The location of the main campus and a newer north campus was in a large metropolitan city where spiritual development was encouraged through a Kingdom education philosophy. The school offered excellent academic, athletic, and fine arts programs. Given priority in the school program were seven core values including the Bible, Christ-likeness, Christian family, church, excellence in education, service, and stewardship. ACSI fully accredits the school.

Valley Bend Christian Academy (pseudonym) lies within a twin city with a combined population of approximately 180,000. Started by parents in 1980 following months of prayer, core values included identity in Christ, Spirit-filled unity, alignment with God's Word, educational excellence, and service to others. It was a non-denominational school with a college preparatory curriculum including classical elements, serving 443 students the year of this study in Pre-K through 12th grades. Valley Bend was an ACSI member school and accredited by a regional accrediting agency. There were two full sections each of third and fourth grades in the 2017-18 school year.

### **Participants**

In this study, I utilized several levels of participant sampling (Creswell, 2013). One administrator per school participated in an interview, either the elementary principal or assistant-

principal. One teacher teaching third grade and one teaching fourth grade at the time of the study, who had at least 12 students in their respective classrooms, also participated in an interview. Administrators selected teachers I would interview through purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2013) based on the administrator's knowledge of each teacher's ability to encourage students' spiritual growth and articulate that process. Each focus group interview consisted of at least one third-grade teacher, one fourth-grade teacher and three additional teachers identified by an administrator through purposeful and snowball sampling. Stake (1995) stressed that to learn more, researchers planning a study should make choices "hospitable to our inquiry" (p. 4) and administrators know best their teachers' strengths.

### **Procedures**

Approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) was secured before I collected any data. The first step after acquiring IRB approval (see Appendix A) was to conduct a pilot case study to refine the procedures and strengthen the study (Yin, 2014). This study was a less structured visit with prolonged time to focus on data collection procedures and interview questions. Piloting helped check the clarity of questions and allowed for exploration of different approaches to data collection. A pilot study benefits the research in the form of lessons learned regarding "research design and the field procedures" (Yin, 2014, p. 98).

After completing the pilot study, each participating site was contacted to discuss the research plan and data collection procedures, answer questions, and schedule upcoming visits. The administrator was asked to discuss with teachers the nature of the research and the possibility of viewing student work or other documentation that addressed spiritual thoughts or concepts through the child's eyes. I distributed participant Recruitment letters (see Appendix B),

and the Teacher/Administrator Consent Forms (see Appendix C). The Additional Staff Member Consent Forms (see Appendix D) were distributed later following a change in protocol.

Visits to each school lasted for one school week and usually began with one or more days of nonparticipant observation to become acquainted with staff and routines. The school administrator and teachers were interviewed at a time convenient to teachers' schedules using a semi-structured interview guide with probing questions (Patton, 2015). Teacher interviews took place closer to the end of the week when this was possible with documentation collected throughout the week. Data collection from multiple sources for triangulation is a strength of using the case study method (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). In this study, student work samples were important for allowing a view of children's spiritual thinking processes from a distance as their spiritual formation was shaped and reshaped by their school experiences (Nye, 2009). With the collection of multiple data sources, I had to remain adaptive to any changing situations (Yin, 2014) but all sites were accommodating and helpful. All interviews followed the exact format to increase reliability (Yin, 2014). Students were not interviewed or included in the study, but I examined anonymous student work.

During and after data collection, I transcribed interviews and transcriptions were returned to interviewees for member checking to determine accuracy (Creswell, 2013). Data were coded from the ground up through reading and re-reading transcripts and examining all documents. Codes began to emerge which formed categories and then began to develop. A description of each case and its resulting within-case analysis preceded a cross-case analysis and the use of word tables (Yin, 2014). All electronic data were password-protected.

### **The Researcher's Role**

Serving as both a parent and a teacher in a Montessori-based preschool early in my life, I observed many young children and considered how they processed information. This observation fueled my curiosity about how learning takes place and how a child's ability to express inner thoughts changed through different developmental stages, such as Fowler's (1981) faith development stages. I have taught eight years in public schools, and 15 years in a private school. So much of my career has involved planning and delivering lessons and activities that encouraged spiritual growth in children from Christian families.

In conducting this research, I positioned myself as the writer and as the human instrument (Lincoln, & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I was not familiar with any schools or participants and I approached each part of the research with an open mind to see where the data would lead. It was necessary to be responsive to the cues that existed in the schools and adaptive as I collected information in various forms at the same time. A researcher processes and summarizes data instantly while collecting and then tries to make meaning out of information that may seem meaningless at first (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I brought years of experience with spiritual development practices to this research, but it was necessary to put that aside, so I could look at the data as if for the first time in these schools. All data collected was mediated by myself.

Biases I brought to the study could have influenced outcomes especially in analysis, and these had to be disclosed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Practices I have used did not necessarily match practices used in other schools, so I needed to set aside my opinions and be open to what the data said, especially when it was in contrast with my background (Yin, 2014).

Acknowledging bias was successfully accomplished through a process of reflective journaling

(see Appendix E). After spending many years providing spiritually nurturing activities to young children, I knew this came naturally to me, but I had to be open to new techniques or unfamiliar practices, which I observed. My teaching background was in smaller schools, and it was important that I only paid attention to the data and not necessarily the size of a facility. It was necessary for me to be open to all methods and data, and to approach discussions of spirituality in teaching carefully. I tried to limit discussions of my classroom experiences and instead, asked questions and listened as the data unfolded.

### **Data Collection**

Well-constructed questions were essential since “qualitative interviewing can be deepened through thoughtful, focused, and distinct questions” (Patton, 2015, p. 452). Two expert reviewers who held doctorate degrees reviewed interview questions and the observation protocol to ensure face and content validity. One reviewer with experience as a qualitative researcher was Headmaster in a medium-sized accredited Christian school at the time of this study. The other reviewer recently completed case study research with teachers and was also a Head of School. Several questions were re-worded to allow for objective answers and to avoid leading the respondents to answer with preconceived information. The arrangement of some questions changed, and I slightly changed word choices. Another helpful suggestion was to give respondents information about myself early in the interview and to supply definitions of spirituality and spiritual formation that I was using in the study. The Observation Protocol contained two columns for descriptive and reflective notes, but a third column was added for responsive notes, increasing data triangulation.

Once IRB approval was received, and after completing the pilot study, I visited with each school administrator to finalize data collection procedures. I fully explained the research and

asked the administrators to consider the nature of the research and purposefully select the most appropriate participants. Administrators were given recruitment and consent forms for all participants and were asked to discuss the research with teachers and obtain signatures before the researcher returns for data collection. I asked administrators to inform teachers of the possibility that I would want to view student work such as journals that might provide insight into a child's spiritual thought processes or the child's understanding of spiritual concepts.

In addition to the initial visit, I planned five consecutive school days for data collection at each school. Unfortunately, two of these four weeks were interrupted by unavoidable circumstances and had to be resumed later, but no interruption to data collection occurred. Schools were gracious and welcoming when I returned, and no problems arose from it. I conducted nonparticipant observations, one focus group interview per campus, individual interviews, and I reviewed documents to ensure triangulation of data (Creswell, 2013; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). Multiple sources of data strengthened the study by corroborating the evidence and providing "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2009, pp. 120-121). Detailed descriptions of each setting were needed as they formed the "bedrock" of this qualitative study (Patton, 2015, p. 534). As the human instrument, I summarized, processed, and analyzed the data immediately to be responsive to the information (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The goal was to explore the spiritual formation routines and practices of the school. An overview of the data collection process for each school follows.

### **Observation**

Direct answers about a phenomenon are sometimes best found in observations (Stake, 2006). These week-long opportunities to observe were significant in bringing me closer to the data and allowing me an opportunity to study the real-world setting (Yin, 2009). I observed



activities of the entire school where possible and also observed multiple classrooms as scheduled by administrators. I conducted observations as “an outsider of the group under study, watching and taking field notes from a distance” (Creswell, 2013, p. 167). My observations provided depth to the data when I watched and heard classroom conversations, and I saw interpersonal behavior while note-taking that one can only get inside the school setting. For example, I heard student prayers and class discussions from my place in the back of a classroom. Field notes from the day’s handwritten memos (see Appendix F) are critical data which Patton (2015) described as “The Fruit of Qualitative Methods” (p. 36). These notes were typed either during observations or the evening after and comprised an electronic case study database. They included “activities, behaviors, actions, conversations, interpersonal interactions, organizational or community processes, or any other aspect of observable human experience” (Patton, 2015, p. 36) that described processes leading toward spiritual formation. Patton cautioned researchers to include descriptions only and not to confuse these with interpretations when recording field notes. Spending a full week at one school allowed sufficient time to use the senses to look, listen, and be able to characterize spiritual formation practices accurately.

### **Focus Group**

In this study, the purpose of the focus group was to allow participants to share their perceptions collectively as they related to spiritual formation practices used at their school (Patton, 2015). Participants included the two teachers previously selected for interviews if they were available, as well as three others purposefully selected by administrators. Focus group participants varied depending on the size of the faculty and schedules, but the most important requirement was familiarity with this age. Participants were all sensitive to a child’s spiritual development and were capable of providing conditions that nurture a child’s spirituality in the

classroom (Nye, 2009). Group discussions often generated ideas that were explored in greater depth later. I asked for teacher interviews to be scheduled at or near the end of each week to enable me to follow up with questions raised earlier and to give participants time to reflect and then share their perspectives on a deeper level. Teachers were more comfortable with my research by the end of each week, and many brought information to my attention without me asking for it.

Focus groups have enhanced social science research since the first part of the 20th century, and they remain an excellent way to gather rich data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Humans are social creatures, and interactive groups can lead to data not found in individual interviews. Advantages of a focus group included having access to multiple perspectives at once, differences of opinion increasing the depth of information, effective use of time interviewing multiple participants, and data gathering sometimes by what is not said. Disadvantages include lack of confidentiality, limitations on the number of questions asked, and the possibility of difficult group dynamics (Patton, 2015). Focus group participants who are too comfortable can influence each other, causing the data to be less accurate (Yin, 2009). The focus group questions (see Appendix G) were broad and conversational, and they focused more on the first sub-question that related to the practices and routines used school-wide.

#### Focus Group Questions

1. I want to thank each of you for participating. My research is about students' spiritual formation and some people call this faith development. A clear definition of spiritual formation by Dallas Willard is "the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself" (Willard, 2012, p. 22). I have been a teacher where you are, but right now I am

studying what schools and teachers are doing to encourage this spiritual formation process in third and fourth graders. As we begin, I would like each of you tell me your name as if we are just meeting and tell me what you teach.

2. What draws you to teach in a Christian school versus a secular school?
3. Describe your working relationship with one another from an academic perspective.

Do you collaborate in your planning for the students?

4. Tell me about your collaboration from a spiritual perspective.

Prompt: Is there encouragement at a spiritual level?

5. Let's talk about the curriculum you use for a minute. In what ways does it influence students' spiritual formation?

6. Can you describe specific ways the school supports a spiritual climate in your classroom?

Prompt: Are there any outside resources for spiritually-rich activities?

7. How well do you think the curriculum promotes spiritual formation in your students?
8. On that same thread, are there other ideas or practices you *do not have in place* that you believe would be helpful?

9. Think about the school as a whole. What policies, programs, or practices are in place that positively influence students' spiritual formation?

Prompt: This might be policies, administrators, programs

10. This is my last question. You may have relevant thoughts you would like to share that my questions did not address. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

Question 1 was a knowledge question designed to develop rapport within the group (Patton, 2015) and introduce the topic by clarifying terminology to be used in the discussion.

Questions 2 and 9 were experience and behavior questions. I aimed Question 2 toward what teachers have done in the past compared to what they are doing now while question 9 explored practices that influence student behavior, and this could also be an opinion question. Questions 3 through 8 were opinion questions (Patton, 2015). Mohler (2013) recommended interviewing teachers for their perspectives and this group interview sought to gain the opinions of teachers in a comfortable setting.

Questions 2-4 were related to the third sub-question of teachers' preparedness. Teachers need a support network (Jang, 2015) and they must be spiritually well-grounded as they guide students (Bateman & Parker, 2014; Linhart, 2016; Montoro, 2013; Schultz, 2003). Questions 5 through 8 all addressed the second sub-question in exploring the use of curriculum and specific classroom-related strategies. These provided rich opportunities for spiritual growth (Hemming, 2013; Hyde, 2008; May 2006; Ng, 2012). Question 9 explored the school-wide environment and programming and the influence on spiritual formation, addressing the first sub-question.

## **Interviews**

I conducted interviews with one administrator per school (see Appendix H) during the week at the administrator's convenience, and individual teacher interviews (see Appendix I) took place later in the week, in most cases. By waiting until later, teachers were more comfortable with the researcher and the topic, and they had an opportunity to consider the discussion from the focus group. I believe they all answered honestly about the spiritual formation activities that took place in their school. Interviews were conducted at the school according to the teacher's schedules, lasting no more than an hour, and teachers were encouraged to respond to the questions in their own words. Interviews with teachers can be a "two-way observation" (Patton,

2015, p. 427). A standardized open-ended interview format (See Appendices H and I) was used to pose standardized questions across all cases (Patton, 2015).

All responses collected at each school were combined to tell a “coherent story of that case” (Patton, 2015, p. 443). Because I aimed this study at describing practices, there were fewer questions associated with values and feelings and more related to fact and opinion, according to the types of questions described by Patton (2015).

#### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Administrators

1. Please introduce yourself to me and tell me a little about yourself and your background.
2. Can you tell me more about your professional journey before arriving here?
3. How do you describe your leadership role here at the school?
4. Can you give me an idea of the demographics in general terms, not the statistics? Do you have diversity in socio-economic groups, culture groups, race?
5. What about denominations and spiritual diversity?
6. What role have you seen the families of your students play in forming the child’s spirituality?
7. Can you tell me about your statement of faith and position on the Bible?
8. Do you require a statement of faith from families?
9. What do you see as the role of this school in facilitating the spiritual formation of the students?
10. What do you think are factors that contribute to the school’s ability to nurture children’s spiritual lives?

Prompt: What is note-worthy about this school? Teachers? Policies?

11. I'm focusing on the teachers with the next few questions. I have enjoyed looking at your website, the statement of faith, and other parts. Can you describe the "vetting" of potential hires for spiritual leadership in a classroom?
12. As a whole, how would you assess your teachers' effectiveness in guiding students spiritually?
13. What practices do you have in place to train and support teachers in this task?
14. How well do you feel the school website addresses teaching for students' spiritual formation? Prompt: If I as a parent was looking at different schools, would I be drawn to the spiritual climate of yours based on what I read?
15. Can you give your opinion of Christian schools being a ministry of a church versus a stand-alone Christian School? How might this affect spiritual formation practices?

The first five questions and question 8 were background and demographic questions. Questions 1 and 2 were knowledge questions to establish factual information about an administrator's background and the school program (Patton, 2015). Question 3 was also an opinion and values question, and little research has addressed this question (Beckman et al., 2012). Question 7 provided depth into the importance of the Bible and the faith of the family in this school's practices, both opinion and values questions. For providers of a Christian education, this is a critically important question (Boerma, 2011; Dickens, 2015; Pazmino, 2010; Scott, 2012). Questions 9 and 10 are opinion questions (Patton, 2015) which directly related to the central research question and the first and second sub-questions. Questions 11-13 addressed the third sub-question, teachers' abilities to be prepared for the task of spiritual nurturer, which involved relevant teacher training (Keeler, 2012; Mata, 2014; Peterson, 2012) and consideration

of hiring practices (Alarid, 2015; Moore, 2014). Questions 14 and 15 asked for the opinion the administrator, and they are also sensory questions, described by Patton (2015).

#### Standardized Open-Ended Individual Interview Questions for Teachers

1. I am Angie Blount. I have taught in public and private schools, and I have been the director of a private school. I started in PreK, then 8th grade, then worked my way back down through all the grades. Can you introduce yourself and tell me a little about yourself?
2. Please tell me a little about your teaching background, where you were before, and your teaching assignment at this school.
3. How did your upbringing influence your spirituality and religious views?
4. I wanted to give you some terms I use in my study. Spirituality can be related to religion or secular. In this study, I am looking at Christian Spirituality. My definition of “spiritual formation” is from Dallas Willard. It is “the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself” (Willard, 2012, p. 22). So, we know it is the work of the Holy Spirit and we cannot teach it. My study is interested in what schools are doing moving students toward that goal. Do you think your ability to influence the children’s spiritual formation is shaped more by your background or by the spiritual climate here at the school?
5. Are there specific ways you have been trained or prepared for this job of encouraging children’s spiritual formation, either formally or informally?
6. What have you seen in your students that demonstrate they understand spiritual concepts and God?

7. What role have you seen the families of students play in forming the spirituality of children?

Prompt: Their influence versus the school's?

8. Let's talk about your own classroom and your curriculum for a minute. In your opinion, what role does the curriculum play in the process of students' spiritual formation?

9. Can you describe any specific strategies you use in the classroom to facilitate the spiritual growth of students?

Prompt: Examples of student work, lessons?

10. Let us talk about the leadership of the school. Can you give any specific examples of something you have seen an administrator say or do that you believe nurtured a student or students spiritually?

Prompt: Which 'school people' are helpful?

11. In the group interview we talked about the school-wide practices. Can you describe school policies, programs, or practices designed to encourage students' spiritual formation?

12. How would you assess your comfort level in nurturing students spiritually?

13. What additional training or support do you need to feel (even) more competent or confident in guiding students spiritually?

14. Again, I am trying to understand what the note-worthy things are you are doing here at this school to encourage spiritual formation. Is there anything else we have not covered that you would like to tell me?

Prompt: Perhaps things you wish you had or could do, or other suggestions?



Patton (2015) described six question types to ask in an interview. In this individual interview, replicated across multiple sites, questions 1 and 2 were background and demographic questions while question 3 elicited an opinion about the upbringing of the interviewee. Question 4 provided research-related knowledge, then prompted for an opinion that related back to that knowledge. Questions 5, 9, and 11 were experience/behavior questions and questions 6, 7, and 10 were written to determine what the interviewee has seen, using sensory questions. Questions 8 and 13 were opinion questions while question 12 was a feeling question (Patton, 2015). The final question was designed to address any area with one final open-ended question.

I grouped these interview questions in a way to discuss each sub-question in turn. Beginning with the third sub-question, I asked interview questions about teachers' preparedness. Montoro (2013) found that a teacher's faith played a role in self-confidence, and quality training was essential. Peterson (2012) and Alarid (2015) recommended examining a teacher's training. Questions 8 and 9 prompted interviewees to describe curricula, and research indicated the need exists for appropriate practices for the classroom (Dickens, 2015; Johnson-Miller, 2013; Linhart, 2016; Reck, 2012; Smith, 2013) to help encourage a child's spiritual growth. Question 11 related to school-wide practices, addressing the first sub-question. Research confirmed that school programs must be structured to nurture the child in his or her spiritual growth (Beckwith, 2013; Hyde, 2008; King, 2013; Langdoc, 2013).

### **Document Review**

Documentation is readily available and "there is little excuse for omitting a thorough review of documentary evidence" (Yin, 2009, p. 107). In this case study, I obtained most of the documents at the setting itself rather than through Internet searches or outside sources. I will strip archival data of identifying information by school personnel to maintain the confidentiality

of participants. Recognizing that not all these sources would be available in each case, the following represents a complete list of data sources that I could have sought.

Documents I reviewed included school mission statements, vision statements, lesson plans, chapel records, and school memos. If there was relevant information related to sports, special speakers, or activities, outside field trips or service projects, or any other aspect of the school day that holds spiritual meaning, this too was requested and examined. Other documents examined included student prayer request sheets, scripture work, and related notes sent to parents. Helpful student work included students' Bible workbooks or folders, journals, notebooks, and related Bible documents. Yin (2009) described document review as supplemental to other sources of data such as interviews for corroboration, but the documents were significantly important in this case because I did not interview children. Most of the time they ignored my presence, and I tried to examine their work as often as possible when they were out of the room. Viewing students' work gave a better understanding of children's inner thought processes, their understanding of spiritual concepts, and their developing internal relationships to God in addition to helping me achieve the thick descriptions sought in qualitative studies (Creswell, 2013). Any documents collected, including photocopies, were compiled into a physical database.

### **Data Analysis**

Yin (2009) stressed the need for analytic strategy and analysis began on the first day with the data collection process. Data analysis depends on the researcher's style of empirical thinking plus the evidence collected (Yin, 2014). Qualitative analysis is subjective, and researchers attempt to form interpretations by first taking apart and then putting back together the data, looking for meanings, without thought of the expected outcomes. Merriam and Tisdell, (2016)

described analysis as both inductive and deductive, an intuitive process which begins during data collection. I typed observation notes and memos continually, sometimes while observing in the back of a classroom, sometimes the evening following observations. Playing with the data included “arrays, displays, tabulations, memos, or diagrams” (Yin, 2014, p. 136) constructed while in the field and at the conclusion of data collection. I used hand-made charts and tables displayed on the walls. The data was studied from the “ground-up” (Yin, 2014, p. 136) and analyzed by reading, rereading, highlighting and open coding. I examined it for categories, patterns, and relationship pathways (Yin, 2014). Making notes during analysis, underlining, color-coding of transcripts, and frequency counts were also used. Categorical aggregation was helpful when looking at specific school activities, such as journaling and mission projects, which involved students’ work (Creswell, 2013). I used these methods for analyzing each case, which is the first stage of analysis, a within-case analysis. The analysis also involved going back and forth between concrete and abstract concepts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014) and between inductive and deductive modes of thinking as categories developed and themes began to emerge. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described this process as moving between the forest and the trees or going between the big picture and the details.

After I analyzed all the data for each case, a cross-case analysis was used to look for abstractions to build one description across all cases (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Yin, 2014). Creating word tables from the data from each case, merging categories, and arraying whole categories was useful for probing further (Yin, 2014). The meanings that emerged made the study more robust because of the synthesis across several datasets. The responsibility for a quality analysis rested with a solid plan (Yin, 2014).

### **Trustworthiness**

Several constructs described by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were used to establish trustworthiness or ensuring the findings of the study were both rigorous and worth paying attention to. I achieved the qualitative research processes of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in this study as described below.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility “parallel to internal validity” (Patton, 2015, p. 685) relates to how well a researcher can provide accurate descriptions of what the respondent represents to the researcher, in this case, the spiritual formation practices used in schools. Several techniques in this study were used to establish credibility. Persistent observation occurred during a week-long visit to each site to provide salience of the practices used in schools (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I was looking to identify spiritual formation elements of the school day and the classroom, focusing specifically on relevant factors. Triangulation of data was critical to credible findings and achieved in two ways. Methods triangulation involved three methods of investigation, interviews, observations, and document review. Triangulation of sources allowed me to study interview transcripts, observational notes, and documents from four different schools in various locations, examining these for similar themes (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Following interview transcription and preliminary analysis, participants were asked to review the researcher’s transcriptions, and this member checking ensured a thorough understanding of the information gained from study participants, a critical technique used for credibility (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Many participants responded back to me, but few corrections or changes were needed.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Dependability is comparable to reliability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015), referring to how well the study is documented and replicated with the same results. This replication is difficult with qualitative research because human behavior can change, so the research needs a thorough explanation. External audits use a researcher not involved in the study to examine the process and the product to see if data supports conclusions. This process can result in a challenge of the findings which leads to additional data, increasing dependability (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). Confirmability is defined as “linking assertions, findings, and interpretations” (Patton, 2015, p. 685) to corroborate findings and again, external audits strengthen the findings. An audit trail (see Appendix J) was kept to describe the details of each step taken in the research. A researcher’s background, attitude, and beliefs influence the way a researcher approaches the research and interprets the data. Reflexivity is the awareness of this influence and the possibility of bias occurring (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and to avoid this possibility, I kept a reflective journal (see Appendix E) before and during the research process. I carefully recorded decisions and personal reflection about the research. The technique of reflective journaling applied to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of research because of the many decisions made by the researcher as the human instrument (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Transferability**

Transferability relates to ensuring that enough information has been gathered and shared to transfer a particular case to other cases (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A thick description was provided to sufficiently describe the phenomena of spiritual development practices in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A useful strategy for transferability used in this

study was that of maximum variation described by Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2016). Site selection included small to very large campuses, schools which are a church ministry and schools that stand alone, schools in different geographic locations, and schools accredited by two different accrediting agencies. An unplanned type of variation that occurred was the selection of both open-enrollment and closed-enrollment schools. Maximum variation allowed for the “possibility of a greater range of application by readers or consumers of the research” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 257). The study’s findings have variation in a wide range of contexts.

### **Ethical Considerations**

I obtained approval from Liberty University’s IRB and recommendations from ACSI before collecting any data, and I secured informed consents from all the participants. Once I finalized the settings, schools and participants were all given pseudonyms to protect privacy and confidentiality and avoid any resulting harm. In case studies involving humans, every effort must be made to protect and not deceive them. Since this case indirectly involves children who are vulnerable, special care was taken to protect their identities (Yin, 2014). I did not identify student work by name or campus. Interviews did not interfere with teaching time, and cases will remain confidential with pseudonyms indefinitely. I will continue to keep a list of all participant names and their pseudonyms in a locked cabinet or on a password-protected computer. Data is currently stored securely in locked cabinets, electronic data are password-protected, and I am the only one who has access to this information.

The success of a qualitative study is due in part to a researcher’s prior knowledge, but that can be problematic if evidence gained is contrary to the researcher’s orientation. One way to test my ability to accept contrary evidence is to disclose prior thoughts about the topic but also to

discuss findings with a trusted colleague and be open to alternative suggestions. I have avoided bias and conducted this study ethically.

### **Summary**

Chapter Three provided details regarding the methods chosen for this study. In this case study, I examined the contemporary issue of intentional practices that Christian schools use for spiritual formation of third and fourth graders. Research questions explored how routines, programs, and strategies were used in schools to encourage spiritual formation in students. I selected schools from two southern states through a purposeful selection process involving ACSI recommendations. Specific schools and participants were chosen to provide “information rich cases” (Patton, 2015, p. 311). I spent one week collecting data at each site and followed systematic procedures in collecting data from nonparticipant observations, interviews, and documentation such as teacher memos and student work samples. Data analysis consisted of multiple readings and playing with the data to see which patterns, categories, and themes emerged. I conducted a within-case analysis followed by a cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2014). The cross-case analysis provided solid evidence of which spiritual formation practices were used consistently (Creswell, 2013). Careful attention was paid to the issue of trustworthiness to increase the credibility of the findings (Patton, 2015) and all data in the study will remain confidential and stored securely.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore and describe the intentional practices of Christian schools for spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students. This chapter will present results of the data analysis. The chapter begins with a detailed description of the participants in the study, who interviewed individually. Also included is a table of these participants. I requested a change of protocol after data collection began and combined the resulting shorter interviews with focus group participants who contributed relevant information to the study. A description of themes derived from a large number of codes follows next in narrative form. Finally, this chapter concludes with providing answers to the research questions using themes that were generated.

### **Participants**

Administrators at each site were asked to purposefully select participants and submit to an interview themselves. I requested one third-grade teacher and one fourth-grade teacher to interview individually at each campus and I conducted one focus group interview per school. In some cases, the focus group participants interviewed individually, but at other schools, the focus group interviews involved different teachers. Additional participants identified later participated in shorter interviews. Table 1 shows participants interviewed according to the original protocol, grade taught or role in the district, and spiritual background. I did not collect spiritual background information for additional participants, and I combined these data for each school. To maintain confidentiality, I changed the names of schools, participants, and certain organizations.



Table 1

*Participant Demographics and Spiritual Background Influence*

Pseudonym	Grade or Position	Spiritual background Influenced by Parent(s)	Spiritual background Influenced by Mentor(s)
<b>Valley Bend Christian</b>			
Amanda	Principal	X	
Holli	3rd		X
Betsy	4th		X
<b>Redeemed Christian</b>			
Rachel	Principal	X	
Deborah	3rd	X	X
Karla	4th	X	
<b>Rosewood Christian</b>			
Suzanne	Principal	X	
Patricia	3rd		X
McKayla	4th		X
<b>Forest Hills Christian</b>			
Jennifer	Principal	X	
Sheryl	3rd	X	
Frances	4th	X	

**Amanda**

God prepared Amanda for her leadership role years before she arrived at Valley Bend Christian School, where she is the head of the grammar school and chief academic officer. Her family attended church frequently until she was 13, when they abruptly left the church for good,

after which God provided spiritual nurturing through multiple mentors. As a military wife she taught in schools all over the world, and at each location, God provided a network of believers to strengthen her spiritual walk. She learned “to be brave and courageous, to be bold in proclaiming who He is and the gospel” (Amanda, personal communication, January 24, 2018). At the time of this study, she and her husband were active in a local church, teaching and shepherding others, and she believed the Lord provided her this opportunity to be bold and allow others, including non-believers, to hear the Word of God and the gospel from her. The school had a closed-enrollment policy, and one parent must profess faith in Jesus Christ, but many parents who come through her arduous interview process are non-believers. With a major university nearby, families from this school were often highly educated, and the school was culturally diverse.

Amanda emphasized prayer and scripture memory. She believed that starting every day with scripture and prayer and ending every day with prayer was a complete picture of the conversation we were to have with God all the time. Each year, students and teachers from Pre-K through sixth grade memorized a long passage she repeated daily over the intercom. This year they were memorizing 1 Corinthians 13, and in a previous year, they memorized The Beatitudes. Classroom Bible curriculum included additional scripture memory work. Following the recitation, Amanda prayed in appropriate child language during the day, and just before afternoon dismissal, she again prayed on the intercom, seeking God’s protection and blessing on all staff and families. It was evident the students were learning about the power of prayer: when a student received a severe injured at school, other students instinctively surrounded each other and started praying.

Each year the school focused on one of five core values; at the time of this study it was on “humble service” as reflected in 1 Corinthians 13. Age-appropriate mission activities were selected, and humble service was carried out through Operation Christmas Child, Ronald McDonald house, and a local pregnancy crisis center. Instead of a Thanksgiving party, students filled requests for Angel Tree items. The school sponsored a member of the armed services who deployed and each month a different classroom sent a care package and prayed for everyone in her company.

Amanda wanted to partner with her teachers, train them, and help them reflect on their teaching practices. She evaluated them annually using video recordings and both scored the recorded lesson. She met with each grade level once a week for 30 minutes to give her undivided attention to their needs and to pray over them. Amanda believed it was the modeling that teachers provided that poured into the hearts of the students at Valley Bend Christian School. One day Amanda heard a roar from the end of the hall and realized the Pre-K students were coming down the hall chanting, “We love Jesus! We love Jesus!” and she knew “The Spirit of the Lord is just here,” (Amanda, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

## **Holli**

Influenced by an aunt, this young teacher at Valley Bend Christian School came to faith as a child in the fourth grade at the same time as her parents. She and her family learned and grew together spiritually. Holli’s earlier job at a public school required a philosophy that went against her integrity, and she left the classroom to attend graduate school. She came to Valley Bend Christian School with a strong foundation, but the school increased her faith. When asked about her own training and spiritual growth, she credited her principal with being an incredible

mentor who challenged staff to go deeper in their relationship with God. She felt the principal was consistent, firm, knew scripture, and came alongside teachers and families.

Holli said that the leaders at her school were one cohesive unit, putting Jesus in everything they did. This campus provided a visible example of a head of school pouring spiritual strength into administrators as well as teachers, and principals then pouring into teachers. Recently, Holli told the principal she was expecting her first child, and the next staff meeting included time for all teachers to lay their hands on her and pray. The head of school shared what Holli called “sermonettes” about what he read, what the Bible said to him, or what God was showing him. He also gave employees a spiritual book and an academic book to read each summer, and staff development in the fall expanded on those.

Holli knew that most of her students were from practicing Christian families, who prioritized spending time in the Word, attended Bible studies together, and had family devotional times. Holli felt comfortable leading them spiritually. She was a gifted storyteller who recognized students responded well to this method; they also read scripture daily. The answers in their Bible workbooks revealed different levels of understanding and indicated some could make deeper connections beyond simply “God” or “Jesus.” Holli had one student who asked questions indicating greater spiritual understanding, and I was able to view some of those questions. She noted the way students responded to discipline was another indicator of spiritual depth. Some students understood more than the fact that they made a bad choice, indicative of a spiritual understanding of sin. She credited many of her families with teaching their children to communicate with the Lord and respecting others with whom they disagreed.

Holli stated that about half of their textbooks easily lent themselves to spiritual development but that all teachers were proficient at connecting scripture and Godly teaching into

any of their lessons. Student responses in those books showed a clear and growing understanding of who Jesus was and the spiritual formation process taking place. The Bible curriculum included additional scripture that students memorized as well as an application component.

### **Betsy**

Betsy was raised in a difficult family situation and was taken to church by her best friend's mom. School was Betsy's safe haven. Consequently, she attempted to establish a classroom environment of care and acceptance, a place for constant spiritual growth in fourth grade. Prayer was a time every morning for students to know they were loved, and their thoughts were worthy to Christ. She coached them in building relationships and was very comfortable nurturing their spiritual lives.

Betsy said that this fourth-grade class was different from some in previous years in their spiritual formation with many able to put their thoughts into words. I examined some of the class Bible texts, *Building Life Castles*. She noted one recent question about building your own life castle, saying that many students were able to address that. Reading class included works by C.S. Lewis, and that unit of study lent itself to spiritual discussions. Although not classified as Christian works, other books in this grade promoted spiritual thoughts. Teachers were proficient at making connections to previous learning and, although they were not trained to do so, to spiritual concepts. When teachers in this grade read students' writing, they often took a moment to open a Bible and explore and expand those thoughts.

Sometimes we will read a passage that I know is familiar and I will say, "Do you see anything in there that maybe you didn't realize when you were just told at church or got

the little pamphlet that has pictures you know?” . . . So, they will notice and then we talk about it and I let them ask questions. (Betsy, personal communication, January 23, 2018)

The families of her students played a critical role in their spiritual formation. Betsy could tell which families sat down together because of the depth of their answers. Fourth-grade teachers gave students a devotional book for Christmas, and Betsy recently received an email from one parent explaining how much her daughter read and loved it. Parents were encouraging the same thing the teachers were building on, spiritual formation.

Betsy stated the school’s weekly chapel time with speakers who spoke on the school scripture verse, as well as Wednesday morning teachers’ chapel with enlightening speakers and testimonies, were both times for spiritual growth and training. Betsy said she appreciated the school climate, the leadership team, and her principal’s spirit of prayer:

When we meet with her once a week, we are gonna pray. She prays in the morning with the kids, she prays in the evening. She is a prayer warrior-type person. And she is also very consistent, so you, she, how you see her, you don’t see her get her feathers ruffled. She stays like that . . . and I think the kids do well under that, to know . . . it is consistent. (Betsy, personal communication, January 23, 2018)

### **Additional Interviews, Valley Bend Christian School**

Focus group participants included Betsy and Holli as well as Belle, third grade; Brynna, fourth grade; and Randa, fifth grade. I conducted shorter interviews with Brandi and Mona.

Brandi, a doctoral candidate writing a Dissertation related to professional development, was the new Director of Professional Development and Student Development at Valley Bend Christian School. This former classroom teacher at Valley Bend worked closely with teachers to individually determine the best training for them. The school received Title II funds, which

allowed access to training through the local public-school system, and so teacher trainings were readily available. In addition to fall in-service days, Brandi assisted with ongoing training in several ways. On two early-release days, teams of teachers went into the community to serve others through local mission projects. Every other week, she met with each grade level to discuss their needs and pray for them so in turn, they could pour into the students. Brandi described the lead team at her school:

[They are] so hungry to walk with the Lord that we really just know this isn't our school . . . it just trickles down where our teachers know that it's not about who has the best classroom. I really think it's from the top down. (Brandi, personal communication, January 25, 2018)

Mona, Valley Bend's long-time librarian, explained that teaching to the heart was their goal. She said that the frequent mentoring of teachers by Amanda and Brandi enriched the spiritual formation of students and was one of the school's strengths. She believed that the community service days were excellent ways to build a caring team of educators and endorsed the two summer readings given by their head of school. Intense training was conducted in groups but also individually on an as-needed basis. Mona led Bible studies for students in her room at lunch.

## **Rachel**

Rachel, born into a Lutheran family and baptized as an infant, knew the Holy Spirit had always been her constant guide. She never had the desire to be a school principal, but that was her role at Redeemed Elementary School. She was quick to give God credit for her successes. She looked back and realized God was preparing her for this role, but she still felt inadequate, claiming, "That is why I have to pray so hard because I think, Lord Jesus, how did I get here?"

(Rachel, personal communication, February 7, 2018). Rachel helped open a preschool and kindergarten program before moving to the area and applying at Redeemed Christian School.

Rachel's interviewing skills were robust. She viewed the school's open-enrollment policy as an opportunity to grow God's Kingdom because often it was the children who brought parents and grandparents to the Lord. When interviewing each potential family, she explained the high standards in teaching, and families had to agree that the school could teach their child according to the schools' beliefs. The only time she turned away a family was because they wanted the school to excuse their child during Bible lessons. Even when families did not go to church, they were made to feel welcome at Redeemed because the school wanted to see lives changed.

Rachel believed teachers were the most important part of a child's spiritual formation, followed by environment and then curriculum. Hiring was rigorous and more competitive now that their salaries were comparable to state standards, and she thoroughly screened teacher applicants to find those with a heart for both the Lord and for children. She and the head of school wanted to see a Christian worldview throughout the day, not just in Bible class. "We want someone who can live and breathe that, not that they have to have so much Bible knowledge, but they do have to have a love for the Lord and want to share the gospel" (Rachel, personal communication, February 7, 2018). Her administrative team included an assistant principal and a counselor, also with servants' hearts, and she believed they were a big part of why she could be hands-on with students and teachers.

Rachel saw the role of Redeemed School as one that facilitated allowing the Holy Spirit to work in the lives of families and children and to further the Kingdom. The school had two groups of parents who prayed for the school. Principals were contacted each Tuesday regarding



prayer requests and the groups prayed on Wednesday, one at five a.m. and one later in the day. Each year much prayer preceded placement of children in classes, and she knew God guided this process.

We have a God that as we pray and place these children, He is in control. A child finds out he is diabetic; well the teacher says, “My mother is diabetic, I understand.” One little girl lost her mother; it just so happened that the teacher could say, “You know what, honey, when I was around your age, I lost my mommy too.” (Rachel, personal communication, February 7, 2018)

Rachel was a follower of the Lord who skillfully led others with her servant’s heart.

### **Karla**

Karla started Redeemed Christian School in the 1990s. Raised in a strong Christian environment, her parents taught by example and instilled integrity in Karla, her sister, and others. After taking mission trips while in college, she served 10 years as a missionary in Africa, where she contracted tuberculosis. Following Karla’s return to the United States her pastor asked if she was ready to start a Christian school in the church. The school at Redeemed Church implemented an open-enrollment policy to be a light in the world and bring children and non-Christian families to Christ. The church was housed in a new facility at the time of this study, but the enrollment policy remained the same. Karla’s heart for missions took her back to Africa once again, and this time she returned to a fourth-grade classroom where she used her vast experiences to encourage others. Karla believed the teacher’s role was critical to students’ spiritual formation. She reflected on her administrator’s role and the process of hiring teachers and commented that she learned to distinguish between teachers who had received a Christian

education as opposed to those who attended a secular university. “I can see the ones, it is not always a *me* orientation” (Karla, personal communication, February 6, 2018).

Each class chose a mission project every year. Students in third and fourth grades were heavily involved in Operation Christmas Child, an international ministry of Samaritan’s Purse. Karla was a regional coordinator for this program, which allowed even young children to be the hands and feet of Jesus. Each child furnished items, such as toys, school supplies, and hygiene products, for a child of the same age. Redeemed Elementary School served as a collection center receiving boxes from nine different relay centers. The students laid their hands on the boxes and prayed for them to go to the right recipient.

### **Deborah**

Deborah’s father left early in her life, and her mother remarried. She and her three siblings were raised as a Jehovah’s Witness until she was 12. Deborah recalled several relatives who were Nazarene ministers that influenced her life, and at age 15, Deborah asked Jesus into her heart. When she was a sophomore in college and moving further from God, her mother’s guidance helped her restore that relationship. Her mother and several mentors influenced her desire for students to have something that she did not have at that age, a personal experience with Christ. The Holy Spirit was now using her life to reach others. She recently completed her master’s degree with plans to someday move into administration. She was comfortable nurturing children’s spiritual lives, saying, “That’s what I live for” (Deborah, personal communication, February 6, 2018).

Deborah and her co-workers wanted to build each other up, sharing rather than hiding good ideas. In Deborah’s class, six students each day shared a favorite scripture orally and then explained what it meant to them. A co-worker used a similar strategy except students wrote their

thoughts using a Bible station worksheet. In both classes, higher-level thinking skills were used as they thought about and explained scripture to one another. The teacher provided the scripture reference, but the student looked it up and then responded in writing to four questions, showing understanding of the verses. I observed one student sharing a scripture about being watchful. The teacher prompted students to remember a similar verse from several weeks ago, and everyone recited that verse. A girl read Matthew 13:15, about walking away from God, and she explained that people needed to go to their Bible or pray or go to church together so they could stay close to God. Deborah said students were always ready to read and share. Earlier in the year, she felt she was making no progress with this activity, but during free time students began having spontaneous scripture sharing time with one another. A boy who grumbled at the beginning of the year about daily scripture sharing now asked if he could share extra verses with the class, so she was observing spiritual growth in this class. She believed this group of students showed deeper spiritual understanding than students in recent years. They were taking ownership of scriptures and transferring them to other situations, something Deborah called “God Winks.” The students’ Bibles, as in other third and fourth-grade classrooms in this school, showed signs of use and wear (see Photo 1 on Appendix L).

Deborah believed teachers were the most important factor in showing Christ’s light to the students and guiding students’ spiritual formation. She believed anyone could walk into a classroom and teach what was in the books, and she modeled Christ-like behavior while she trained students using God’s Word. She prayed with them and for them every day and said, “We are taking in kids and watching for miracles” (personal communication, February 6, 2018).

### **Additional Interviews, Redeemed Christian School**

Focus group participants included Deborah; Caren, Summer, and Sonya, who all taught third grade with Deborah; and Johna, who taught fourth grade. I conducted shorter interviews at this campus with Olivia and Charlotte.

The assistant principal, Olivia, faithfully sent out emails or text messages to everyone up to the superintendent, adding to the prayer life of the school, the spiritual collaboration, and the total spiritual atmosphere. She was a recent cancer survivor whose office still displayed cards, letters of encouragement, and prayers. Every day her life, and faith, encouraged others' spiritual growth.

Charlotte taught in public and Christian schools before coming to Redeemed School and was passionate about the spiritual formation of her fourth-grade students. At the time of this study, she was teaching them the importance of daily quiet time and strategies for doing that. She told them to think of it as an ongoing conversation they would have with a friend. She gave each student a small tablet and encouraged them to write in it, systematically. Each student was asked to select a book in the Bible and begin with the first chapter, first verse and then sit quietly and think about it. She suggested they write in their notebook anything they felt God was teaching or speaking to them. Finally, students were asked to write something they would like to offer to God that day, a request, or a thought. Charlotte was teaching them to cultivate the habit of interacting with God. In handling prayer requests in the classroom, she used a form that included sections to write the prayer request and the answer, helping students recognize that God heard and answered.

Each year Charlotte tried to gauge where her students were spiritually. Several years ago, during a difficult year with students, teachers began to pray over those situations. Charlotte did

not hesitate to give an invitation when she felt led to do so, and within two or three weeks, nine children had given their hearts to the Lord. She counseled with each to be sure it was not just the popular thing to do, but a sincere decision of the heart. “I don’t want this to be a group thing,” (Charlotte, personal communication, February 6, 2018) she told her students, and they individually told her they did not know Jesus and truly wanted to know Him now. Her classroom door opened out to the playground and children often came inside at recess to talk to her about Jesus and to pray.

Caren walked into Redeemed Elementary School looking for a Christian school for her children and scouting for a job. She had seen some schools with great academic records and a variety of styles, but each was just another building. The moment she walked into this school, she could feel Christ. Although she described the interview process as not for the faint of heart, she recognized God’s Spirit was in every interview involved in her hiring process. Caren recalled the principal once having a conversation with a new parent and Caren heard the parent say she could feel God in this place.

I observed Caren’s Bible lesson one morning and felt the Holy Spirit’s presence in her classroom. With children standing, Caren first prayed with simple words, modeling. Next, a child prayed a short prayer and Caren followed with her agreement prayer, and the process repeated for each child who prayed. Between prayers was a brief quiet, reflective time with kids hearing but not moving, and one could feel God’s Spirit in the room as these little hearts prayed with sincerity. I witnessed many different ways of praying with children and taking prayer requests in this study, but this was the most moving strategy observed.

The principal at Redeemed Elementary School stressed to teachers that Bible time for the kids was the most important part of the day and it was fine if the class did not get to science that

day. This time reinforced the focus on the Bible and Jesus Christ. Teachers freely shared ideas with each other, building each other up, and Caren loved this aspect, comparing it to an oasis.

### **Suzanne**

Suzanne was only the third elementary principal in Rosewood Christian School's 40-plus year history. Her Christian parents always took her to church, Sunday school, and youth programs, but she planned to be a florist. God drew her toward education through Bible studies and a course called "Growing Kids God's Way." When the school hired her, Suzanne underwent a rigorous interview process with approximately 15 different individuals. She conducted teacher interviews with the same process and thoroughness. When she would speak with prospective families, she explained the concept of a three-legged stool with the school, the church, and the family all working together. She asked families to commit to praying for their child to follow the Lord as it was a partnership they were forming.

The school was a ministry of Rosewood Community Church, and the church oversaw the school with classrooms used by both church and school. This school practiced a closed-enrollment policy, but Suzanne saw the climate of the school changing and this policy was a topic of discussion. Suzanne held Bible studies for mothers, and a new Director of Spiritual Formation, hired the year of this study, started hosting a men's Bible study. The school also invited parents to lunches, and breakfasts at the elementary level, a plan designed to reach out to parents. The head of school went to the elementary campus three or four times per week to pray with administrators, and he prayed with secondary administrators and church pastors on scheduled days each week as well. Suzanne met with her teachers every week, alternating Bible study one week with prayer time the next week.

Bible class was the first class of the day, uninterrupted. Suzanne and the assistant principal scheduled times in the fall to go into every elementary teacher's classroom and teach a Bible lesson. This scheduled time served two important purposes. One was to allow the principals to stay in tune with where the students were in their spiritual life. The second was that it allowed the teachers to spend this time observing others teaching Bible lessons. The teachers all loved this concept, viewing it as an opportunity for professional growth and a time to share ideas. Also, teachers were required to give up one planning period each year to observe another class and teacher. Administrators actively supported and promoted teachers leaving campus if there was a lesson or subject they would benefit from observing.

Suzanne believed the teacher has the greatest influence on spiritual formation in the classroom. Teachers were directed to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit working in the children's lives, and they informed parents of this. Suzanne knew it is the Holy Spirit that transferred head knowledge to heart knowledge in students and this was the goal for student spiritual formation. "I'm shepherding a child's heart and educating the whole child, and educating really the role of the teacher, and what that looks like, and nurturing and growing children" (Suzanne, personal communication, February 14, 2018).

### **Patricia**

Patricia, a current fourth-grade teacher at Rosewood Community School, did not grow up in church and remembered reading the Bible and it not making sense. One day she wrote a note to God and placed it in her Bible, asking for help. From that day forward, her life began to change. At a Campus Crusade for Christ meeting, she heard about salvation and knew God picked her up at that meeting and showed her the Truth. In her twenties, she taught Sunday school for years and began to study the Bible in various groups, helping her catch up on what she

had missed as a child. Patricia was comfortable leading a child to Christ and providing spiritual activities for her students, whether it was part of the curriculum or not. She wanted her students to come to a saving knowledge of Christ or at least leave knowing the Truth. Patricia prayed scripture over her students every morning, asking that whatever they do, it would be for the Lord and even whispered in a child's ear that she was praying for him or her. Her school encouraged teachers who sensed the Spirit calling the child to talk to parents first and allow them the privilege of sharing the salvation experience with the child. Patricia made it a practice to always pray with parents at parent conferences, especially when it was evident that their faith was weak. She told students and parents that nothing they learned in school was as important as knowing God.

Other opportunities existed for fourth-grade students to be Christ-like in their behavior. A "Friendship Fixers" curriculum was used with students to teach communication skills and improve relationships, to be more Christ-like. Each fourth-grade class presented a chapel program once each year and during the year of this study, the students presented Friendship Fixers during chapel. Grade levels participated in various missions. Among other things, students in this grade wrote letters and drew pictures for state prisoners, distributed through Kairos Christian Prison Ministry.

She described a strong group of Christ followers at this school and noted several ways the administration poured Christ into the staff and the students. Book discussions with the head of school in the past and a weekly Bible study with teachers both served to deepen her Bible understanding and faith. Patricia explained that her team shared everything; they planned together and prayed together. The fourth-grade teachers started the year with weekly prayer but at the time of the study, they prayed daily in a small closet because it was near their rooms and



private. A new team member with a young baby was unable to join them, but she was praying with them as she drove to school. They asked God to use them one day at a time to accomplish His will, and at the end of each day, they must be satisfied with its events because they asked for His direction.

### **MacKayla**

Raised in an unstable home, MacKayla first went to church on a church bus. Although he struggled in many ways, MacKayla's father knew and loved the Lord, and continued to do so throughout her early years and during her parents' divorce when she was 11. MacKayla first began teaching in a public school where she grew up and studied the Bible with co-workers at lunch. Wanting a different life for her own children than she had experienced, she took every opportunity to know God more, taking the "Growing Kids' God's Way" course, reading widely, and seeking spiritual mentors. The Lord eventually brought her to Rosewood Christian School, where she gained further spiritual strength and learned to teach to the hearts of students.

MacKayla was a seasoned educator and team leader who was comfortable nurturing children's spiritual lives because she wanted them to understand what she did not learn as a child. She saw great spiritual growth happening at this age and provided an example:

One girl, her brother has battled cancer as an infant . . . and she had been mentioning a couple friends that had been in the cancer ward with him. He's in remission right now but they were not. And she came in and one morning her prayer was "Dear Jesus thank you that Hope is well because she is with you. Thank you that Hope is in heaven."

(MacKayla, personal communication, February 15, 2018)

Within her classroom, the academic year began with a survey to parents asking general information about the child and whether the child received Jesus as his or her savior. Responses

guided MacKayla in the way she encouraged the students' spiritual development. The school played a huge role in students' spiritual formation, but MacKayla believed it could also become a crutch when parents depended on the school to talk about salvation and teach to the child's spiritual life. She believed she would give the same questionnaire at the beginning of the next year and at the end, possibly asking if the child could explain how they knew if Jesus was living in their heart, or something similar, to see if there had been growth.

MacKayla described the content of Bible classes in third and fourth grades at Rosewood. MacKayla believed the ABeka picture cards were beneficial to her telling stories from the Bible. Examining Bible notebooks, I found students' spiritual thoughts were highly descriptive and expressive (see Photo 2 on appendix L). Their notebooks included a hymn for each month of the school year, doctrinal drills, and character qualities. Each folder also contained the Nicene Creed, that students recited. The principal explained to students that this was not scripture but that it helped explain what the school believed.

Several schoolwide practices helped encourage teachers to plan for spiritual the formation of students. Teachers were required to visit other teachers' rooms, something MacKayla considered a blessing, and she always took away knowledge of the Word plus classroom management tips. She felt that having time with co-workers to plan and support one another was imperative. A spiritual growth book was required reading in the summer, and the staff discussed it in the fall, enriching the teachers. Administrators encouraged the teachers to stop and follow the Spirit's leading because content would come later, but the Spirit might be gone. MacKayla explained the school's philosophy:

There's more of Jesus and less "stuff" here. It's less about the facilities, less about the blingy things we can give our students and it's more about how much Jesus we can teach

them. As a matter of fact, that is our, kind of our anthem school-wide, is teaching Jesus.

That's what it is. (MacKayla, personal communication, February 15, 2018)

### **Additional Interviews, Rosewood Christian School**

Focus group participants included MacKayla and Patricia; Gail, taught third grade; and Bailey and LeeAnn, taught fourth grade. I conducted additional interviews with the school librarian, Gretchen and the Assistant Principal, Leslie.

Gretchen, a librarian, knew every child and teacher. Through her observations, she believed all Rosewood staff members brought Christ into everything taught. Because expectations were high, children rose to them. Teachers constantly talked with students about having the right kind of heart. When Gretchen saw teachers discipline students, they were always on their knee, eye-level with the child, asking what Jesus would say and discussing what sin is. They prayed together and followed each discussion with a hug. She loved that the child was being trained to ask for forgiveness in a Godly way. Gretchen mentioned that every teacher taught Bible class in the morning; the time fiercely protected, showing children the importance of spending the first 30 minutes of each day with God. They modeled Christ-likeness through this practice. Teachers could sometimes see a child's spiritual growth during the year, but sometimes it was much slower and expressed in other ways:

I was at a water aerobics class and someone asked me if I taught at Rosewood School. I answered that I did and she told me about a football game and our team had beat their team pretty soundly, but she said that every time one of our players knocked down another player from her team, they always helped them up and said something like "great play" and stuff, you know, they were Godly young men . . . you want to see what you

taught in elementary school, [see them] act how you want them to in high school.

(Gretchen, personal communication, February 22, 2018)

Gretchen mentioned that the new Director of Spiritual Formation hosted parents for breakfast or lunch, with the discussion centered on a theme. The most recent mothers' topic was children's anxiety, and a professional counselor, a spouse of a staff member, came to speak about signs of anxiety. Through those get-togethers, the staff hoped to reach parents and keep communication flowing, modeling Jesus.

Rosewood's assistant principal oversaw scheduling. The school released early on Fridays and one Friday each month was dedicated to grade level planning. Several participants agreed with the practice of planning together and working together, as unity in the body of Christ. The assistant principal previously brought substitutes in for teachers to have extended planning times periodically but at the time of this study, enrichment class times were arranged so that each grade level had planning time together.

Several other practices advocate Christ-likeness. The principal encouraged community among the parents through social networking. The school coordinated a parent prayer group through the school website, and parents were all invited to volunteer as an ambassador for the school. Young students reached out to others by making placemats at Thanksgiving for the local prison ministry. At the end of each school year, teachers asked parents if they wanted to donate their child's unused school supplies to groups traveling on mission trips to other countries. Fourth graders wrote prayer requests and placed them in a basket. At prayer time the teacher read them and asked for a volunteer who would pray over that need; children willingly did so. If the request was personal, the child placed a "P" in the upper corner, and it was not read aloud. Several participants noted that they did not have the most beautiful building or a fancy facility,

but in God's eyes, they had the things that were most important. Walking into this building, one could sense a peace and warmth that only comes from God's presence.

### **Jennifer**

At the time of this study, Jennifer was in her first year as the lower school assistant principal at Forest Hills Christian Academy. Jennifer previously worked in the corporate world as a recruiter but volunteered at her girls' school where she developed an interest in teaching. At age 40 she sought a teaching degree, taught third grade at this school for several years, and was finishing her master's degree. Jennifer expressed strong faith in God who equipped her for the role He had chosen for her. She remained involved in church, youth groups, choir, and mission trips, and she believed her foundation was critical to successfully nurturing children's, and teachers', spiritual lives.

At the time of this study, the school had a closed-enrollment policy with mostly white children; she estimated the population was 99% Protestant, mostly Baptist, and two-thirds did not receive financial aid. The application process for teachers and administrators was rigorous and difficult, with high standards set by the school for every new hire. Jennifer believed teachers were the most important component of spiritual formation in a Christian school. When she interviewed, she always asked how teachers differentiate in a classroom and about past teaching experiences, but a teacher's faith journey told her if that teacher would fit at this school. The school was only 20 years old, and Jennifer believed other area Christian schools that have been in operation for 50–60 years did not focus as strongly Kingdom education as this school. Her staff and her teachers were often called upon to speak at summer training sessions for Christian educators. She considered her administration team and school board visionaries and noted the school offered outstanding spiritual formation practices.

Forest Hills was a ministry of Forest Hills Baptist Church and located on the same property, with shared classrooms. It was a mission-minded school that was purposeful about discipling students' spiritual lives, equipping them to share the gospel, and providing opportunities for mission work. Teachers were equipped to lead a child to Christ through scripture and each year third graders studied the scriptures known as the "Romans Road." Three times each year, teachers completed a subjective assessment of each child's spiritual progress. Each year secondary students took mission trips while elementary students partnered by bringing supplies and praying regularly. The week before students embarked on their mission trips, the entire school held a ceremony to pray for those who would go. Younger students kept itineraries in the classroom, so that they could offer specific prayers during the week students were away. One teacher, who was also a parent, felt it was necessary to be intentional about discipling in these ways if she wanted the teaching to take hold, whether it was her students or her own children.

Several additional positive practices were noteworthy about this school. I asked all participants which was more important to the spiritual formation process, curriculum, or teachers; interestingly, teachers said the curriculum, while administrators believed teachers to be the more crucial element. They were deliberate in teaching service to others with a strong emphasis on missions. Students were taught to welcome others into their room properly, with an attitude of humility. In each classroom I visited at this site, a student appeared in front of me almost immediately, extended a hand, introduced himself or herself, and either thanked me for coming or welcomed me into their classroom, all following the same pattern of reaching out to others. In every classroom, I saw independent workers and thinkers, some with iPads, some with folders and job contracts. Teachers worked with small groups or listened to readers. The climate

was always orderly, structured, and productive with constant reminders that everything they did was for the Lord. One class chose tasks from a paperwork contract containing two sections, what they must do and what they may do. On the bottom of this contract was printed Colossians 3:23, about intently focusing on everything as if working for the Lord. The school conducted weekly chapel, and the church staff generated a follow-up lesson for extension and application activities in the classroom. After chapel, students prayed with their prayer partners and then completed the activity. The teachers were intimately involved in students' lives, praying with them and over them, and the students who graduated were solid in apologetics and fully prepared upon graduation to defend their beliefs.

### **Sheryl**

This veteran teacher at Forest Hills Christian Academy was raised by a Godly, tithing mother who was also a teacher, and her father, who was not such a strong believer. However, uncles serving as ministers influenced her from an early age, so faith in God was always part of her background. She continued to mature spiritually in college, married a Christian and began teaching in a public school. Sheryl now teaches fourth grade with a team of three others and credits her ability to nourish children's spiritual lives to both her upbringing and her current job environment. Of her 21 students, she estimated approximately one-third did not live in "practicing" Christian homes but felt confident in her ability to nurture their spiritual lives. Her school provided intense biblical worldview training as well as instruction in how to incorporate biblical principles in lesson planning, ensuring teachers were well-equipped to emphasize Godly truths in their classroom. Weekly chapel included a focus verse further developed in the classroom according to a Bible study method provided by the school. The school remained dedicated to teaching the steps of salvation and most students in fourth grade already professed

faith in Christ. Sheryl described the spiritual understanding of students who had been in this school for multiple years as greater than those who had not been in the school as long.

### **Frances**

Frances and four siblings grew up with a strong Christian background, attending Christian schools. She mentioned “different standards in different faiths” (Frances, personal communication, January 16, 2018) of which she was a part, but she thought her varied background gave her the perspective needed to understand differences in students’ religious backgrounds. She stayed at home with her only child for many years but began teaching fourth grade at Forest Hills when he was 14. When her son was a senior in college, her husband passed away suddenly. She described how the faculty completely enveloped her with love and support during this life-altering event.

Her team planned together and collaborated well, dividing all responsibilities. One teacher planned a core subject and provided all materials that each teacher would need. Frances cited how critically important their planning time was to successful teaching. She and her co-workers knew that parents visited and compared classrooms and they tried to have identical lessons with the best possible strategies and practices. They made every effort to present Christ often in a kid-friendly way, and she even planned to give a test that week that would conclude by asking if the student had accepted Christ. She described this part of her job, talking about salvation, as something she was not only comfortable with but something she loved. Her school provides training on how to integrate the Bible into various subjects; teachers received credit toward continuing to develop their teaching skills through outside learning such as reading miscellaneous articles and summarizing. Teachers appreciated the “Positive Action Bible” curriculum, which included workbooks that presented multiple opportunities for students to share



their spiritual knowledge and understanding. The material could be challenging, but students would take away a thorough understanding of Bible content each week.

### **Additional Interviews, Forest Hills Christian School**

Focus group participants included kindergarten teacher Pam, first-grade teacher Tami, second-grade teacher Nadia, third-grade teacher Andrea, and fourth-grade teacher Lydia. I conducted one additional interview with Robert, the physical education teacher.

Robert described how a game of “Pin Guard” provided third- and fourth-grade students an awareness of guarding the heart against evil. Using scripture to reinforce the idea that evil surrounded everyone, the students explored ways the senses increased knowledge of evil coming, represented by throwing the dodge ball at the pin. The team concept compared to asking for help in guarding one’s heart, represented by the pin.

A strong spirit of cooperation existed at Forest Hills. Teachers planned together vertically, to ensure alignment of content. Grade levels planned horizontally during their 45-minute common planning period and during early release days, and they loaded lesson information to a network X Drive which facilitates sharing information. The head of school delivered a State of the School address annually but met with teachers monthly to worship with them, talked through issues, encouraged, and helped them support one another. He would cast a vision, and the staff all worked toward developing students’ spiritual lives. He compared them to Nehemiah’s workers building a wall, each responsible for one section.

There were active prayer groups at this school. Every grade level had a parent group that gathered monthly to pray for students by name and send cards to class members. A weekly scripture card was provided to teachers and posted in the classroom. Students in third and fourth grade each had a prayer partner, and they prayed that scripture over their partner each week after

chapel. Teachers had many ways of promoting prayer in their classrooms. Andrea and several others used a prayer and praise board like a bulletin board. Students wrote prayer requests on post-it notes, sticking them under the “prayer” label. When that prayer was answered, students moved it beneath “praise;” these were discussed weekly (see Photo 3 in Appendix L). Frances supplied long strips of colored paper and encouraged students to write their prayer request and leave them alone in a basket, unread. To celebrate God’s answer later, the student looped the paper and added it to the paper prayer chain hanging in the room. Lydia posted a vertical list of ABCs, and students were invited to write something they were thankful for that began with one of the letters. At the end of each week, those were reviewed as students practiced thanking God. She said that many times the thankful prayers were requests the week before.

### **Results**

Analysis and data collection were simultaneous and although there was a data collection plan it soon became obvious the process was “recursive and dynamic” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 195). After completing data collection at two sites, categories began to emerge as I compared one campus to another looking for commonalities. Following transcription and typing of my observation memos and observer comments, I worked inductively through open coding, reading, and re-reading each piece. I continued transcribing, reading, and playing with the data throughout each site visit, but after I collected all data, intensive data analysis began.

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated, “[A] tolerance for ambiguity is most critical” (p. 201). As such, when I looked at the data, I considered there could be multiple ways of interpreting it. The transcripts, observation memos, and documents allowed for triangulation of data. I produced a large number of codes from the raw data; these were coded manually and placed in categories corresponding to the literature review. Additional categories emerged from this

process when data did not fit neatly into one of those sections. I created a table of all codes, case by case, and finally, a table listing major codes across all data sets with frequencies of codes and resulting themes (see Appendix K).

### Theme Development

Three themes resulted from combining the major codes of data, and I identified a fourth theme unexpectedly. Individuals demonstrated discipleship through training and missions at all schools. All schools deliberately planned for both. An equally strong theme was the boldness with which these educators lived their lives for Christ, even beyond the school day. The school atmosphere was prepared for student spiritual formation and students were boldly bathed in prayer and scripture constantly. A theme of unity developed from numerous ways educators poured themselves into each other and students to keep Christ the main idea. A smaller, unexpected, theme was the open/closed-enrollment policy and how that affected practices of teaching for spiritual formation (see Figure 1). Data from all four sites in this study revealed schools with their eyes firmly fixed on Christ, and the codes fit perfectly into one of these themes.



Figure 1. Major Themes and Codes

**Discipleship.** These schools devoted much of their time to training children for Christ-likeness, and the overarching purpose of this study was to provide details of how this occurs.

The three closed-enrollment schools, Forest Hills, Rosewood, and Valley Bend, provided various training for parents, students, and teachers. Forest Hills teachers were trained to use a specific Bible study method that involved observing, interpreting, and applying scripture. Teachers received detailed training to ensure integrating the Bible into their lesson plans.

Training at the open-enrollment school, Redeemed, was focused on students. Strong teacher-generated strategies were used to train elementary school children through scripture reading and discussions, various prayer activities, the instructional climate, and spiritually-rich activities inside classrooms. Charlotte trained students how to have a daily quiet time; Deborah trained students to recognize God's Hand at work by challenging them to find "God Winks". Two teachers trained students to dissect scripture for a better understanding of it, and all elementary-aged students kept a classroom Bible which they read frequently. Students were encouraged to "just write down something that you feel like God is teaching you or speaking to you on that Bible verse . . . so they're slowly learning how to have a conversation with God" (Charlotte, personal communication, February 6, 2018).

I observed students at all campuses learning scripture and praying. Betsy prayed over her class, for individuals affected by mudslides, and for those in authority making important decisions, a great teaching moment about reaching out to others as Jesus would. Deborah had six students home with flu the day I visited, and she offered prayers for each of those families with simple words the students could understand. It was obvious that the frequency of scripture use, discussions, and prayer have all contributed to student's spiritual thoughts (see Photo 2 in Appendix L). They have a real understanding of God's presence, which previous research also suggested (Fowler, 1981, 2001; Keeler 2012; Nye, 2009; Stonehouse & May, 2010). I observed many ways of handling prayer requests and praying with children, but this research brought new

meaning to Jesus' words when He said, "Unless you change and become like little children. . . ." (Matthew 18:3, New International Version).

At each site, third and fourth graders used their own Bibles, but the Bibles at Redeemed Christian School were worth mentioning. Students kept their Bibles in their desks and their versions varied. Classes read and discussed scripture daily, or sometimes several times a day. I saw student Bibles that were worn, marked in, and well-used (see Photo 1 on Appendix L). Karla stated she wants students to see it, touch it, and hear their own voices say the words, even when the words are difficult. She considers the journey through scripture and teaching from God's Word to be "guided practice." Teachers at Redeemed want students to remain focused on God's Word and His plan for their lives. She explained, "Children have become desensitized, and they have to be entertained . . . so much that we almost entertain the Holy Spirit out of them" (Karla, personal communication, February 6, 2018). I observed several different classes finding scripture passages quickly; because teachers do not teach Bible drills, this skill develops through constant practice. I also observed students at Valley Bend reading and similarly discussing scripture.

This research revealed that the discipleship practices of training and missions looked different in the three closed-enrollment schools from those in the one open-enrollment school. Overall, the three closed-enrollment schools revealed a slightly more missions/outreach/service-to-others approach, while the open-enrollment school intensely focused on training their own students to be followers of Christ, but all employed exceptional practices.

**Boldness.** Leaders at all sites exhibited boldness in their spiritual walk as they led students. Teachers at Valley Bend pointed to their principal, and the principal pointed to teachers as integrating the Bible and Jesus in everything they do. The principal herself admitted

to being involved in teachers' business, both classroom and personal because she loved them and wanted to mentor them. Teachers and principal were at the carpool line morning and afternoon, opening car doors, greeting, and giving hugs every day.

If [teachers] are teaching them and the Holy Spirit resides in them, [students] are having an interaction with Jesus Christ. So, I think they should know from the moment that they get out of the car and we love on them, that they are interacting and seeing the life of someone who loves the Lord. Through the Bible lessons and curriculum, through integrating . . . a lot of schools, you have to be, it is scripted . . . you cannot have the freedom to do that. (Amanda, personal communication, January 24, 2018)

Several teachers in the focus group mentioned the music teacher as one who honored God in all she did, teaching students the music they would sing in chapel and play "Amazing Grace" on the recorder. Teachers stated that more than anything she wants students to have a heart for worship and "she just oozes Jesus" (Betsy, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

Redeemed School faculty and Forest Hills faculty prayed for their students constantly to accept Jesus and gave an invitation when the Spirit led them. Students from atheist and Buddhist families attended Redeemed, and teachers were committed to bringing them to Christ. The Forest Hills principal stated, "We don't just hope it happens, we are intentional" (Jennifer, personal communication, January 16, 2018). Staff at Rosewood School considered their morning Bible time sacred, and teachers were told by the administration to present the gospel whenever possible to parents and to always pray at parent conferences.

**Unity.** Teachers from two schools discussed deliberate practices that unified their teachers. Both Forest Hills and Rosewood scheduled times for teachers to have grade-level meetings and plan together. Both schools wanted to see identical lessons and practices across the

grade level. Teachers stated that planning together helped them develop strong friendships and desire success for one another. There was never competition but only an attitude of love and encouragement. The Forest Hills elementary staff met each Wednesday afternoon for devotional time guided by a teacher, and then prayer time was led by a principal. One teacher said that when they heard a prayer need, that need stayed on the hearts of teachers, like in a family. Prayer requests ranged from short to very complex, and the principal prayed over them all on the day I observed. One teacher described how her school family affected her life:

I had a family who I was at their tire place . . . getting two new tires . . . the kid was in my classroom and I just lost my husband a year ago . . . and I said “Here’s my credit card,” and he said, “No, ma’am, your tires have been paid for,” and I bawled, but that is this school, that is this environment.” (Frances, personal communication, January 16, 2018)

Two of the four sites described almost identical discipline and reconciliation processes.

Students showed a high level of spiritual understanding and wanting to connect with God’s Word at Valley Bend in Betsy’s classroom, asking deeper questions, wanting to learn more and do more with the Bible:

For example, one of my little boys came up with his Bible and he said, “Could you show me in the Bible where it talks about Jesus coming back because I would like to read about that and understand that more.” (Betsy, personal communication, January 23, 2018)

Character development was a core value taught, practiced, and modeled at Redeemed School. Each teacher watched for opportunities to reward positive character traits like reaching out to others and exhibiting Christ-like attributes and teachers used character coins.

Case in point, I had a little boy that was helping another student in class, and I am going, “What are you doing out of your seat?” Well, we were working with colors that day and

we were underlining sentences. Well, the teacher that I am, I have forgotten that this one student was colorblind. The other child got up out of his seat without drawing attention to anybody except himself, and he was helping him. (Karla, personal communication, February 6, 2018)

This student received two coins with instructions to give one to another person when observing Christ-like behavior. In addition to receiving a reward, a student looked for someone else to acknowledge. They practiced it, they received acknowledgement, and they looked for positive character traits in others, thereby learning to see beyond themselves. With this approach, students are pouring themselves into others' growth toward Christlikeness.

Rosewood school organized opportunities for children and families to touch others in the city. Examples included serving as Salvation Army bell ringers at Christmas and contributing cards, letters, and handmade placemats to a prison ministry. These activities reminded students what Jesus' ministry was about, giving children a chance to practice and serve as an example of that quality.

**Enrollment policies.** Three schools followed closed-enrollment policies, requiring that at least one parent had to profess faith in Christ before a child was accepted, while one school maintained an open-enrollment policy. I had not anticipated finding differences in enrollment policies, but the data revealed there were different teaching strategies in the school with open enrollment. In the open-enrollment school, parents did not have to be Christians to enroll a child, but they were encouraged in their church involvement, and the school was unapologetic about Christ being the center of all subjects. A loving invitation is extended to families to attend church, and staff may present parents with the plan of salvation during this initial meeting or at any time. They presented this same message through programs at Christmas and Easter in the



hope of reaching whole families in attendance. Families at the latter had to agree that the school could teach their child with Christian teachings. At this open-enrollment school, teachers realized they were the only connection to Christ that some of their students would have, and they constantly prayed for their students to come to know Jesus.

All schools worked toward the same goal of reaching children and families for Christ, but they used different approaches. The three closed-enrollment schools stressed the parent-school-church partnership with the primary responsibility belonging to parents. One closed-enrollment school was most intentional in the way they always presented salvation scriptures in third grade. Another closed-enrollment school added the Sinner's Prayer on the back of the administrator's newsletter because, "I realized that we have parents that don't know how to pray a prayer of salvation with their child" (Suzanne, personal communication, February 14, 2018). This principal, Suzanne, worked deliberately to involve the parents in their child accepting Christ. At the third closed-enrollment school, one teacher noted at the beginning of the year which children have accepted Christ.

### **Research Question Responses**

A cross-case synthesis resulted in several major codes and the merging of some minor codes (see Appendix K). I used the three themes that emerged in this research—discipleship, boldness, and unity—to answer the research questions. Discipleship occurred through training and missions. School atmosphere, prayer, and use of scripture represented boldness. Unity was characterized by nurturing, pouring spiritual concepts into others, and remaining centered on Jesus.

**Central research question: What are the purposeful practices of Christian schools for spiritual formation of third-and fourth-grade students?** Sub-questions 1–3 were

developed following the review of the literature to explore the central research question. I answered the three sub-questions through the major themes that resulted from the cross-case analysis of the data.

**SQ1 – How are school-wide programs and practices used for Christian spiritual formation of third-and fourth-grade students?** Christian schools want their students to *be disciples* but also to learn to *make disciples* of others. Discipleship was taught and modeled in these schools, and opportunities overflowed for students to grow in their relationship with God and to follow the Great Commission. Jesus told His followers: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” (Matthew 28:19, English Standard Version).

***Discipleship.*** I asked a parent-teacher-participant in this study whether her daughter existed enclosed in a bubble because of attending a Christian school. The teacher explained that there was a bubble but that the training the girl received had served her well. A first-year university student, Emma, was well versed in apologetics and took any opportunity to present the gospel to the world. Emma is the product every Christian school hopes to produce.

***Training.*** Making disciples does not happen by accident. This research uncovered multiple ways that students, teachers, and parents were trained to follow Christ. The schools all provided regular in-service training and professional development, presented by staff and outside sources, to enhance teachers’ skills. At least two of the sites I visited gave teachers one or two books each summer to read, and later incorporated these materials into the fall training sessions. One school employed a professional development specialist who arranged training for teachers. She worked closely with the teachers to individualize their training as much as possible.

Parents are encouraged in their faith as well, with some schools holding regular sessions with parents, and others providing occasional small and large group gatherings. One school held

monthly, breakfast-for-moms and lunch-for-dads sessions. Occasionally, special speakers were brought in to these sessions, with topics such as looking for signs of stress in your child. The website for Forest Hills school challenged parents to demonstrate Christ-like character and parents were invited to this school several times each year to an all-school worship service. Chapel at Rosewood Community School included parents. Schultz (2003) paraphrased Psalm 127:3-5 as follows: “Behold, children are God’s homework assignment to parents” (p. 61). The closed-enrollment schools all described active partnerships with parents to raise Christ-like children. Two sites specifically described the partnership as a three-legged stool comprised of parents, church, and then school—all sharing responsibility for the students’ spiritual lives.

One type of training was noteworthy. Teachers in at least one school commented on the value of watching other teachers in the classroom. They said this was very helpful, especially in Bible classes.

I think watching other people, maybe teach Bible, how they . . . Present the Word. I have taught Children’s church and formation classes and catechism classes, and I know how I do it, but sometimes I don’t know if that is the best way to do it, or if there are other ways that are more effective. (Karla, personal interview, February 6, 2018)

Two other schools participating in the research allowed teachers to observe their peers. The teachers all stated this was valuable training. Teachers always learned something applicable when they went into other classrooms. Despite the scheduling challenge, one campus used substitutes while the teachers were away at another campus. The principal and the vice principal stepped into the classroom to teach Bible class, allowing that teacher to observe another Bible class. This school required two classroom observations each year.

Teachers were asked specifically about the Bible curriculum and its value in teaching for spiritual formation. The Curriculum Action Bible Curriculum and Positive Action Bible Curriculum both provided a place for students' written responses to application questions such as how they handled the temptation to do wrong, how they found the patience to deal with real-life situations, and how the Holy Spirit had provided help in daily life. Reflections by students written in their Bible workbooks confirmed what research has shown: children are spiritual beings capable of spiritual thoughts (Hyde, 2008; Jonker, 2015; Stonehouse & May, 2010). This capability supported Fowler's (1981) mythic-literal faith stage in which students learn through stories and are capable of spiritual reflections and reacting to stories of Bible characters, for example, Joseph.

Valley Bend Christian School employed some elements of a classical approach to learning in its grammar school. Students acquired basic knowledge through recitation, repetition, and memorization. I observed singing, chanting, and clapping as third graders memorized verses and practiced language lessons. The benefit to the students' spiritual formation was shown in their excitement as they learned new scripture, unaware that it was a training. They just thought they were having fun.

Perhaps the two strongest areas of training revealed by this research were school discipline plans and teaming—teachers planning together. Teachers at three of the four campuses planned everything together. School staff arranged schedules so that a block of time was allowed for planning, and teachers were mandated to have the same lessons. Some schools had one lead teacher for each grade-level team. Planning together was considered critical.

If everybody does what is right in their own eyes, then you're going to have multiple children with gaps that don't fit somebody else's gaps, and when they go to the next

grade level you're going to have a checkerboard of gaps. No one goes rogue. The other thing it does is when you have families with twins, everybody is doing the same thing. So, there is no favoritism . . . not "oh I need to get a cuter idea than hers." Staying together and planning together squelches that. (Leslie, personal communication, February 15, 2018)

Proverbs 22:6 reminds educators and parents to "train up a child in the way he should go; and when he is old, he will not depart from it." Training in schools occurs for approximately half of a child's waking hours, and it is more than learning facts: it is developing a spiritual life as a follower of Christ.

Procedures for discipline and conflict management were similar at two schools, and the administrators explained the process. I observed one child being corrected in the hall one day. The teacher was on her knees at the child's eye level. They discussed the behavior, prayed, and then hugged. Christian educators recognize that human nature is sinful. These two schools purposefully taught students how to overcome that.

We want to teach them what the relationship with Christ looks like. Acknowledgment first, and then confession. And then to ask forgiveness, and then how to give forgiveness. And then restoration and prayer. We want to model what it is when we acknowledge our sin to the Lord. We confess it. We ask him to forgive, and then we receive it. And then we have that conversation with him. That's what we want. It takes a lot longer but it's so important. (Suzanne, personal communication, January 24, 2018)

At another campus, the administrator described their tiered approach. The administrator instructed teachers the steps to use in the classroom before notifying the office.

They will use biblical integration because at that point, we want, and this is what I have talked with all the teachers . . . we don't want to change the behavior, we want to change the heart that is behind the behavior. We don't just want them to be compliant on the outside, [sic] we want them [in] their heart to really want to obey the commands of God and the statutes of God. (Leslie, personal communication, February 15, 2018)

One of her teachers commented about training the students.

Why do you need to listen? Why do you need to be diligent? Not just to get a sticker or to get a piece of candy, or you know. Why? It's because God says, and we want to please Him and become like Him. (LeeAnn, personal communication, February 13, 2018)

Another teacher summed up teaching discipline at her school. She said they wanted students to know that anyone could come to God when they messed up and that He does not say that we are not worthy. Teachers and administrators poured themselves into training their students for self-discipline.

***Missions.*** The Christian schools in this study all provided opportunities for missions. Schools participated in projects mentioned earlier, such as the Salvation Army Angel Tree and bell ringers, Operation Christmas Child, local food pantries, and the sponsorship of military personnel. One mission project for younger students took a more advanced approach in the third grade. Students “earned” products at home (e.g., paper towels and cleaning products), which they brought to school to donate to a local food pantry. A note was attached to the item explaining how the child earned it, for example, vacuuming or cleaning a bedroom without being asked. The shelves at the food pantry were stocked annually by these donations. As third

graders that year, students worked at the food pantry—stocking shelves and serving those who came.

Students from one school prepared for missions all year long. Each spring, secondary students had the opportunity to take week-long mission trips, both within the United States and abroad. Students in the lower classes partnered with the students taking those trips, and the younger students provided material and prayer support before and during the trip. This partnership was a highlight for the entire school because everyone was involved in taking the gospel into the world. The school held a commissioning ceremony. Students and families prayed for the missions, the school worshipped together, and the entire school was served rice and beans for lunch that day to draw attention to the fact that it was a meal for people in other parts of the world.

I think that above all, is our focus on missions and serving others. And that is done from the lowest level all the way to where it really peaks at those high school years . . . and then the kids go off and then when they come back, [sic] in April they come back to Chapel and they tell us all about it. (Jennifer, personal communication, January 16, 2018)

Missions at the one open-enrollment school took a different approach. The staff did not want to merely teach about Jesus; they wanted to look like Jesus to everyone because the school might be the only link to Christ that some families would ever see. One family of professed atheists had a child in that elementary school. The teachers in her grade had an active Bible study group. The student was hungry for knowledge, and the teachers wanted to satisfy that hunger at every opportunity.

Training for serving God and serving others through missions was a high priority for all the schools in this study. Jesus had a heart for all mankind, reaching out to touch lives one person at a time. Discipleship at these schools looked very much like what Jesus would do.

***Boldness.*** All campuses were bold in their approach to following Christ and educating for Christ. My initial impressions at each school were that each campus had a secure atmosphere where students were loved and valued. Before getting out of the car on the first day, I could hear the strains of “Great is Thy Faithfulness.” A security guard and a crossing guard were ensuring high safety and low stress levels. The children and the cars were orderly, even those arriving late who had to be checked in at the office. One of God’s sweetest staff members greeted the late arrivals with a smile that said she loved them unconditionally. They practiced efficient time-management skills. One teacher told me that she felt that they were held to a higher standard because they all taught for the Lord.

In all four schools, teachers and administrators stated that strong leaders advanced their programs. Heads of the schools and school boards were considered visionaries because they could see the direction for the school while others could not. One school leader was approached at his previous job and asked to come to this school because of his exemplary leadership skills, and he was able to lead the school in a new direction. One principal explained their current goal of changing the school image because they wanted to reflect the culture of the surrounding community better. Chapel leadership varied across all sites but sharing Christ with students occurred in creative and engaging ways. One campus had a family life pastor from the church in charge of chapel each week. He was loud, engaging, musically talented, and knowledgeable about scripture. Students brought Bibles to chapel, and he challenged them to see who could find the reference first. Chapel music at one campus was provided by a professional singer who



also led worship for a large church; her presence inspired others. Although it looked different at each campus, chapel always inspired the spiritual growth of the third and fourth graders.

Hiring practices for administrators and teachers were bold across all campuses. All four principals described their hiring as being rigorous, and when they interview applicants, they do so with the same boldness. Administrators told me they always wanted to know that applicants had the background to address the spiritual formation of children.

The most important thing to me is their heart, that they love Jesus, that it is apparent. I need to know that they are solid in their faith, if they are active in their faith, if they have community where they're in the Word, that they can share Christ, and that they don't have any hesitation with bringing somebody to Christ. (Jennifer, personal communication, January 26, 2018)

Amanda said applicants had to “know it. . . prove it. . . stand on it.” (Personal communication, January 24, 2018). Participants in focus group interviews at two different schools Two different focus groups laughed when I asked about hiring practices. One of the participants said it was not for anyone who was faint-hearted, and another person referred to their application packet as a book. Of the applicants wanting a teaching position at Forest Hills, the principal said only about 40% returned the application packet. Standards were high, and the schools were bold in their expectations of Christian teachers: “There is a kind of a signing-off page [sic] to where you are signing off that your personal conduct outside of school would be honoring to the Lord and there are specifics about that” (Jennifer, personal communication, January 16, 2018).

**Unity.** Every educator who participated even in a small way in this research claimed the same confidence in guiding a child's spiritual formation. Some participants received a firm foundation in their faith from parents while they were growing up, while others who had not

grown up in a Christian home recalled spiritual mentors. The teachers who lacked strong family faith backgrounds were quite vocal in their determination to do whatever was necessary to ensure that the children received what they had missed growing up. Deborah was comfortable with nurturing children's spiritual lives. She said, "That's what I live for" (Personal communication, February 6, 2018). Betsy established her prayer time each morning so that every child could feel loved and valued in a safe environment. She said that some teachers might not allot as much time as she did, but she wanted to be sure that her classroom was "a really special time that they get to share what is going on with them and build that relationship," (Betsy, personal communication, January 26, 2018). Two of the four campuses allowed high school students to go into elementary classrooms on scheduled days to partner with students. One school used the term "interns" for this peer mentoring, which benefitted the elementary school and the high school students. Suzanne stated that, as the principal, she so much wanted to be involved in the students' spiritual formation that she attended any student's baptism when she received an invitation. She had already been to several baptisms that school year.

A strong example of unity in Christ was prominent in this research. Several years ago, donors and staff at Redeemed Christian School collaborated to build a beautiful new school. The teachers described the joy of providing their input. Every elementary teacher wanted a window, so every teacher got a large window. Families wanted safety, which was provided by multiple fenced areas, yet the design was open and inviting. Afternoon pick-up involved a state-of-the-art notification system. The school was one unit—a team that reached out with its open-enrollment policy to draw in the unbeliever—a perfect picture of the body of Christ.

**SQ2 – How are classroom routines and strategies used to encourage Christian spiritual formation in third-and fourth-grade students?** The teachers in this research showed intentional strategies that were not a result of training, but of who they were.

***Discipleship.*** Upon entering the classrooms in this study, I observed calm and well-organized teachers who used their time wisely to make disciples of the students. Soft music was often playing, and teachers spoke with soothing, joyful voices.

You're held at a higher standard because you are held at God's standard. You know, we aren't working for ourselves, we are working for Him and so, that is a lot of pressure, because you want to do, like, your [sic] very best and lead these kids. (Holli, personal communication, January 23, 2018)

A number of classroom discipleship activities observed. Fourth-grade students at Rosewood examined a small bicycle tire at the beginning of the year. The students were asked to name each subject they would study that year, represented by the spokes, and the teacher then helped the class to make the connection to God, the central hub. Teachers explained that God created numbers and everything about math and that God designed man to name, to categorize, and to classify. They helped students see that everything always tied back to God: Christ was in everything. In another school, third- and fourth-grade teachers used a matrix to assess the students' spiritual lives subjectively and to track growth three times during the school year, with a follow-up form used for contacting parents. At another school, general information collected at the beginning of the year asked questions about the children's spiritual knowledge and whether they had made a profession of faith. During the current study, the teacher was working on a form to document this. The school provided opportunities to discuss what Christians believed through field trips such as examining fossils; making pottery and then making connections

between Jesus the Potter and man, the clay; visiting a Roman market; and helping at a local food bank. Teaching the children how to have a daily quiet time with the Lord was a practice in one classroom. Holli used an organization tool of counting down from five to four, and so on. The students were ready every time to move on to something else

It is just transition. We just talk a lot about, you know, how much time is wasted if we are spending five minutes per subject, well that is 35 minutes a day that we have lost, and so, we try to get them transitioned. (Holli, personal communication, January 23, 2018)

**Boldness.** The teachers I met during data collection were bold in their commitment to the students' spiritual formation. Two of the schools were church ministries with classrooms that were used by the church on the weekends. Every Friday afternoon, teachers at Forest Hills broke down and put away much of their classrooms. Bulletin boards with school information were removed or reversed to show Sunday school bulletin boards, but scripture and Bible-themed information stayed in place. Teachers placed all personal items or names of students in locked cabinets, and in some rooms, emptied the desks. Each Sunday afternoon or night, those same teachers returned to their classrooms to set them up again. Their willingness to re-establish their learning atmosphere week after week, and sometimes on Wednesdays as well, showed high levels of commitment to Christ and their students.

I was amazed by the many ways schools used prayer and scripture during this research. One teacher used a transition time to ask students to say their memory verses three times silently. At several sites, the teachers had a favorite method for having students record their prayer requests (see Photo 4 on Appendix L). A spiral-bound notebook on a counter in the classroom was used by students at Redeemed School to write their prayer requests. Sometimes the teacher read these aloud to the class before prayer time. Students in one room used chalk to write

requests on the side of a file cabinet painted with chalkboard paint. Some students at Rosewood School wrote a prayer request on a slip of white paper and the teacher then read the requests aloud and asked for students to volunteer to pray for one of the requests, handing them that request. Another teacher used a simple form with a fill-in-the-blank format for writing the request and, later, the answered prayer. In yet another school, prayer needs were written on colored strips and left unread in a basket. When the prayer received an answer, the child looped the paper and added it to the paper chain hanging in the classroom. Another teacher said that she used different colors for each month (orange for October, brown for November, etc.) so that everyone could see the month with the most answers at the end of the year. Students at one location were each assigned a prayer partner at the beginning of the year. The partners prayed together every week, using a scripture the school provided. All schools read from God's Word, but this was handled differently at each site. Three schools required all students to have the same version, but the open-enrollment school, at which they read the Bible quite often, allowed multiple versions, and students were often allowed to compare texts. Prayer walls were popular in one school, with requests written on Post-it® notes. The students placed the requests on one part of a bulletin board, but when they had an answered prayer, they moved the note to a praise column. Parent prayer groups watched the boards and used the requests in their prayers. In one room, the student praying before lunch chose two requests from their board to include in the lunch prayer. ABC Thankful lists were popular with some teachers. The teachers posted letters of the alphabet vertically, and students were free to write corresponding words or phrases. Sometimes this was used for prayer requests; at other times, it was a thankful list.

***Unity.*** The teachers observed in this research shared their desire to see the children develop into spiritual beings who had a relationship with Jesus. At every site, staff shared that

the school was like a family with the teachers all giving of themselves to the children and one another. The teachers were proactive because they felt accountable to one another. The Rosewood elementary staff met each Thursday. One week they would have prayer, and the next week would be a devotional Bible study led by the teachers. They were genuine friends who prayed together with Christ as the cornerstone, but as a faculty, they were also attuned to the needs of each child, teaching to the children's hearts. All schools exhibited unity, but I observed it when I attended prayer time within two of the schools' prayer time with teachers. A fourth-grade teacher stated that she often whispered into the students' ears that she was praying for them.

The unity that we have in Christ causes this to be a much different place than the public schools where I've worked. And that's the ingredient that's missing. They don't have that kind of unity. There's a competition there . . . I need to rise above everyone else or look better than everyone else instead of the sharing. We share everything. I don't ever feel like we're competing with each other. It's always let me help you if you need something, or you help me if I need something. And we share everything. Ideas.

Materials. Everything. (Patricia, personal communication, February 12, 2018)

The benefit of this unity was that all the teachers were working toward the spiritual formation of each child on their respective campuses.

**SQ3 – How are teachers and administrators prepared for the task of nurturing Christian spiritual formation in third-and fourth-grade students?** This research shows that the spiritual backgrounds of the Christian educators made them who they are. Most arrived on the job with a strong relationship with Jesus Christ. The teachers stated that either they had an early life with strong Christian parents or God had brought spiritual mentors into their lives

exactly when they needed that. All participants pointed to the time when their own spiritual formation was taking place. Karla said her parents modeled a life of integrity. Suzanne said her father's goal was to live long enough to see all his children come to faith. Each Christian educator reported a background of faith, one way or another. A purposeful question asked participants whether they thought their backgrounds or the school climate was more important for their job of nurturing the children's spiritual growth. All wrestled with this question, but in the end, *background* was the answer for every participant except one.

If the teacher is not walking with the Lord, then it doesn't matter what kind of curriculum it is. You can have the best curriculum in the world, and yet if you don't have a teacher that is adequately prepared, who wants to be there? The curriculum gives a platform on which to build, but a teacher can go in different directions with it. (Karla, personal interview, February 6, 2018)

***Discipleship.*** Again, the theme of discipleship evolved from the two major codes of missions and training. The data revealed that structure and routines were prerequisites for training to take place in a classroom. The previously mentioned discipline plans at each school were designed for staff members to know exactly how to address situations. Staff members received on-the-job training through professional development, and three of the four sites mentioned books selected by principals or heads of school for training purposes. Leslie at Rosewood mentioned two resources: *Teach like a Champion* (Lemov & Atkins, 2010) and *Parenting with Scripture* (Durbin, 2012). Brandi at Valley Bend recommended *Teach with Your Strengths* (Liesveld, 2006). When I visited, Valley Bend staff were studying together the names of God in Hebrew. In sum, planning together and observing one another provides opportunities for teachers to train one another.

**Boldness.** The data in this study revealed that the Christian educators were bold and confident but sought constant guidance as they nurtured the children's spiritual lives. Each teacher mentioned obedience to the Holy Spirit, and most teachers mentioned starting every day with God. Several teachers shared Bible integration strategies taught at their campus that went beyond adding a scripture or telling a Bible story. The teachers at Forest Hills were taught to show in their lesson plans how their lessons related to God, creation, mankind, moral order, or purpose. Two schools mentioned a plan for the staff to complete continuing education training on their own and recorded it for accreditation purposes as well as local recognition. The trainings took several forms, including the use of online sources such as [www.Lynda.com](http://www.Lynda.com), article critiques, and presentations or attendance at educational conferences.

Administrators were constantly helping the staff to prepare. Through regular staff meetings and prayer, heads of schools mentored principals, and principals mentored teachers. Teachers then provided spiritual nurturing to the students. One head of school produced a weekly blog. Another head of school was observed directing carpool lines. Teachers reported that they knew that each of their administrators fully supported their efforts. After observing Deborah earlier in the year, her principal sent a personal note of thanks for Deborah's sharing her heart with her students. One teacher's bulletin board displayed a small handwritten Post-it® note from the head of school encouraging her at the beginning of the year. The administrators' presence throughout the campus, even in carpool lines, indicated to the teachers that their work was important.

Brandi at Valley Bend said that the lead team at her school was



so hungry to walk with the Lord that we really just know this isn't our school . . . it just trickles down where our teachers know that it's not about who has the best classroom. I really think it's from the top down. (Brandi, personal interview, January 25, 2018).

Pam said her head of school at Forest Hills provided a vision, and the staff all worked toward that vision: "He kind of, he starts it at the top, and he just sets the stage, and then it all trickles down" (Pam, personal interview, February 28, 2018).

The teachers observed in this study appreciated the time built into the school schedules for training, preparation, and team building. One school dismissed classes early twice each year, and the teachers served others in the community on school time at a pregnancy center, through social service agencies such as Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) and by rebuilding condemned homes. Teachers reported that studying or learning together built strength as a team. One school had early dismissal every Wednesday afternoon for extended devotional and prayer time for teachers. Observing in other classrooms was a favorite strategy for training teachers, as was individualized professional development. Teachers appreciated structure—knowing when they were scheduled to oversee chapel or the workroom or to attend to other duties. Several teachers at one campus said their assistant principal was the organizer, and that was a strength of the school.

School climate was essential for preparing teachers and administrators, and schools recognized parents for their contribution. Parents provided support through regular prayer times, furnished meals and snacks to staff during the school year, and appointed a spa day at one school featuring 15-minute massages. These were all ways of assuring teachers that they were treasured. Showing love to and assisting the educators who will train young minds to be Christ followers is valuable preparation for the job.

**Unity.** One focus group discussed the value placed on teachers' working together—the camaraderie. Unity within an individual family makes that family group stronger and compares to the unity in a Christian school body—useful for instructing and strengthening. Willingness to learn from one another, to submit to one another, to be humble when someone else was providing support were all aspects of teamwork. A teacher described her experiences working in public schools as being “an island as unto myself, just trying to figure it out on my own” (Patricia, personal communication, February 12, 2018). Teachers felt that asking for help was a weakness, as if the teacher did not know what he or she was doing. LeeAnn, who was new to the Christian school environment, summed it up well:

Being in a Christian school means you're surrounded by Christian co-workers who can uplift and encourage you, and God speaks through them truth into you, and that makes you more prepared to then give it to the kids. And so, it's just the environment is just incredible, and different in the best of ways. (LeeAnn, personal communication, February 13, 2018)

### **Summary**

I presented the findings in Chapter Four based on the data collected in this multiple-case study. Table 1 presented the demographics for all original study participants, followed by a detailed description of those participants. I identified additional participants to interview at each site, and a change in protocol was requested and received. I conducted several additional shorter interviews and combined them in one section for each site. Data were collected through observation periods of one week per site, individual interviews and focus group interviews, and document reviews. From the data collected, eleven codes arose for three of the schools. Seven codes originated for one school, and through cross-case synthesis, those codes developed into

three major themes and one minor theme. One unexpected smaller theme of open/closed-enrollment also emerged from the data. Small differences in practices were seen based on whether the school followed open- or closed-enrollment policies.

I answered research questions through each of the themes. I addressed school-wide programs and practices and classroom routines and strategies. I discussed and described how teachers were prepared for intentionally providing practices for children's spiritual growth. Chapter Five will summarize and discuss findings and will address implications of this study.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this multiple-case study was to explore the spiritual formation practices used with children. Little research was available related to children's spiritual formation (Dernlan, 2013; Keeler, 2012; Lewis, 2015; Mohler, 2013). This study answers the central research question: "What are the intentional practices of Christian schools for the spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?" This chapter begins with a summary of the findings by answering the three sub-questions regarding school-wide programs, classroom practices, and teacher preparedness. The discussion section follows, extending the theoretical and empirical literature. The results of the current study support Fowler's (1981) stages of faith theory and previous empirical research related to children's spiritual development. I offer practical implications of the research for administrators and teachers as well as for teacher training and prayer in Christian schools. A discussion of the delimitations that were part of the study design and the limitations that were unavoidable ensues. Finally, recommendations for future research completes this chapter.

### **Summary of Findings**

Four sites were selected for exploring the central research question: "What are the intentional practices of Christian schools for the spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students?" Interviews, observations, and document reviews facilitated the triangulation of the data, allowing "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2014, p. 120). Several spiritual formation practices were a part of these findings. I provided a summary here.

SQ1: How are school-wide programs and practices used for the Christian spiritual formation of third- and fourth-grade students? Many school-wide practices and programs at

these four schools taught discipleship, a major theme derived from the data. A Spirit-filled atmosphere greeted me at each campus, and music could be heard outside one school, announcing God's presence. Other organized programs or practices included school-wide worship, physical education games with a heart message, horizontal and vertical planning by teachers, and field trips. Parent groups prayed regularly at each campus, and programs were brought in to train the young minds. School-wide practices that took place inside the classrooms included reciting scripture together with the principal on the intercom and a Bible curriculum with life application questions.

Chapel services at all campuses engaged the students. Two of the schools with church affiliations had a regular individual or team who provided chapel programs. In a third school, teachers and some outside speakers provided the message, while in the fourth school, different elementary classrooms provided the weekly program. I attended an outstanding student-run chapel service on Valentine's Day, which addressed the students' heart orientation toward God.

Two additional school-wide practices affected all the schools. The hiring process was comprehensive, systematic, and thorough in every school to ensure the spiritual life of the teacher or administrator would turn students' eyes toward Christ. Mission opportunities, both small and large, were available at each school. These included sending high school students to foreign countries each spring. At each of the four sites I visited, administrators shared how they planned and prayed for the activities that would allow students to commune with Jesus Christ.

The school-wide programs and practices observed in this study were all designed to help students focus on Christ. Educators knew their role each day was to establish an atmosphere that was pleasing to the Holy Spirit—praying over everything and inviting Christ in.

SQ2: How are classroom routines and strategies used to encourage Christian spiritual formation in third- and fourth-grade students? At the beginning of the school year, teachers showed fourth graders a bicycle tire with spokes representing the subjects that they would study. All year, they referred to the center—Jesus Christ. All the schools frequently used scripture and prayer in their classrooms, but the teachers who prayed together every morning and with the entire staff every week were the ones who most often expressed sensing the presence of the Holy Spirit. They described the Bible as their plumb line. At a different school, I saw Bibles used often for looking up passages, and I saw students comparing different translations. I observed many prayer request strategies; students understood that God hears and answers prayer. Third and fourth graders at one school had prayer partners and were taught to use scripture to pray with their partners. All teachers used calm, soothing voices and maintained organized, structured, controlled classrooms in keeping with one of the fruits of the Spirit—self-control. The traits that create a good character were part of each school’s focus. At one campus, students were given character coins when they exhibited an attribute of good character. Technology was used extensively to give life to Bible story characters.

At each site, I observed amazing classroom routines and practices—all connecting to the meaning of being Christlike. In every practice and strategy that I recorded during this study, the focus remained on presenting Christ to the students by using scripture and prayer and promoting the qualities of good character. The lessons I observed at all sites related to the fruits of the Spirit. Twice on one campus, I walked into a classroom to find the class singing along with a YouTube video on the fruits of the Spirit. Christ-like character qualities were promoted and practiced, and students recognized this.

SQ3: How are teachers and administrators prepared for the task of nurturing Christian spiritual formation in third- and fourth-grade students? This study revealed that the educators prepared for nurturing children's spiritual growth through ongoing professional development, but they prepared in other ways also. A staff development specialist at one campus helped teachers to find training suited to their individual needs, while another campus used a point system to reward teachers who advanced their teaching skills on their own. Teachers could attend or make presentations at conferences, attend Bible studies, or choose any number of training courses available online. At least two schools had early release times for scheduled staff development. Teachers at two campuses mentioned books given by administrators to be read during the summer for professional development in the fall. Grade-level planning allowed teachers to share ideas. Most schools scheduled common planning times for each grade level. The staff at one school planned vertically as well as horizontally in each subject to ensure there were no gaps in content. This school had developed its own Bible curriculum several years previously to maximize the students' opportunities to learn God's Word and stories in the Bible. All four campuses experienced staff devotional and prayer times differently. The staff received prayer requests and updates regularly by text message at one elementary campus. The staff at the campus with weekly staff prayer time and study of God's Word together stated that this strengthened their spiritual lives, making them equipped to guide the students' spiritual formation.

Most importantly, all the teachers gave details about their personal time with the Lord and listed this as the top prerequisite for nurturing the spiritual formation in their students. Campus training sessions gave them the tools to pour Jesus into their students' lives continually, but they also stated that the camaraderie that resulted from planning and praying together was

critical. Stonehouse and May (2010) described what these teachers said about being personally prepared for the task.

When our nurturing practices flow from our being as followers of Jesus . . . adults and children together will grow as disciples of Jesus. If we adults are growing as disciples, as followers then we are being equipped to guide and support the children. (p. 106)

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this case study was to explore the practices used for the spiritual formation of children, an under-researched area. Some meaningful practices, routines, and programs were observed, explored, and described in this study. I purposely chose the third and fourth grades because children at this age have a heightened spiritual sensitivity that often fades as they get older (Hay & Nye, 2006). I was interested in the children's changing development, so I chose to view this research through the lens of Fowler's (1981) faith development theory. A major theme of the results was discipleship. Research revealed that teaching for discipleship looks like "intentional, planned conversations about God and life and the growth of spiritual developments" (Linhart, 2016, p. 161). This section will discuss the findings as they related to the theoretical and empirical literature.

### **Empirical Literature**

The seminal work of child Psychiatrist Robert Coles (1990), whose long-term research in multiple countries investigated how children process their spiritual lives, influenced the research of Hay and Nye (2006). In Coles' research, children expressed spiritual concepts through language. In more recent research, Hyde (2008) studied children's awareness of spiritual concepts by observing children in their everyday lives. The study of spirituality and the spiritual



world of a child is a growing field, but there seem to be few studies related to the spiritual formation of Christian school students, especially younger students.

Children's spiritual lives are formed early in the development of their personalities, sometimes even before birth, through communication and a sense of trust and security (Stonehouse, 1998). Children are deeply spiritual before sufficiently developing language for self-expression, but research revealed how they experience God (Stonehouse & May, 2010). The ways that babies learn trust, the ways that toddlers learn independence, and the patience that parents exhibit in responding to their children form a foundation for a relationship with God. Research on the prayer lives of first graders has revealed that they are spiritual beings, and it provided insights into how they process their faith (Keeler, 2012). It is impossible to transfer large amounts of information about God in a short period, but through stories and practices, children learn and grow and construct their understanding of God over time (Stonehouse & May, 2010). Christian school classrooms today provide not only the environment for spiritual formation but also information about who God is.

General criteria exist for assisting children in their spiritual growth process (Nye, 2009), and I observed these principles in all the sites visited. Children need an intentional space in which to grow spiritually—an environment that says God is here. Scripture was on the walls and desks of all the classrooms in this study, and teachers displayed smaller framed versions at the children's eye level. The teachers used scripture as morning seatwork. The children were asked not just to illustrate a verse but, on a deeper cognitive level, also to dissect a verse and to describe with words or drawings what it meant to them. Prayer and worship are iterative processes, and an emphasis is not on the product. Several teachers whom I observed coached the children gently in their praying and told them it was like talking to a friend. When the children

prayed for a specific outcome, such as Super Bowl winners, teachers redirected them to a more God-centered prayer.

Imagination is necessary for a child's spiritual growth because it helps "give priority to the children's own spiritual exploration and creativity" (Nye, 2009, p. 50). Although children in the mythic-literal faith stage can distinguish between fantasy and reality, their imaginations allow them to understand other's perspectives (Fowler, 1981). Concluding a Medieval study, fourth-grade students at Valley Bend used their imaginations to convert two classrooms into castles constructed from bulletin board paper. The life-sized rooms included a library, blacksmith shop, and dungeon that other students toured. With this activity children could explore through their imaginations, building a faith foundation for understanding abstractions such as the communion of saints, which they will encounter later.

A healthy relationship built on trust is also necessary for nurturing children's spiritual formation. Rather than controlling the entire lesson, teachers at each of two different schools gave their iPads to a student and asked the child to complete the lesson and displayed it on the Smartboard. These teachers waited for the Spirit to guide their teaching, letting the students explore success in an atmosphere of mutual trust. If educators listen to children instead of doing all the talking, the children receive affirmation of their ability to explore their own thoughts—a necessary part of spiritual exploration (Nye, 2009).

Adults reflecting on their faith experience described it as both a specific decision and a gradual process of learning, understanding, and loving God more each day (Stonehouse & May, 2010). Participants in this study were asked to describe their early backgrounds as noted in Table 1. All the educators I interviewed were solidly committed to Jesus Christ and desired to see their students follow Christ, but their backgrounds were quite different. Slightly more gave

credit to their parents for a strong spiritual background, but there were several participants whose spiritual formation came from spiritual mentors. Author and theologian John Westerhoff (1976) related his early spiritual history, which sounded similar to the backgrounds of some of the participants, as a gradual process “responding to various relationships, experiences, and influences along the way” (p. xviii). This described what I saw during this study: God uses every experience to draw His children closer. It is with that conviction that the teachers in this study worked deliberately and purposefully for their students. Westerhoff (2013) admitted that the process of becoming Christ-like is a lengthy one—a pilgrimage. My participants echoed this idea. Spiritual formation for adults and children is a lifelong quest, and the teachers in this study were continuing their own journeys even as they nurtured their students.

Westerhoff (1976) posited: “It is not so much the words we hear spoken that matter most but the experiences we have which are connected with those words . . . trust, love and acceptance” (p. 92). Every aspect of this study pointed to positive experiences that inform a child’s spiritual formation and the prepared teachers who deliver them. This study expanded the literature by advancing our knowledge of spiritual formation in children and the practices that facilitate their spiritual growth.

### **Theoretical Literature**

Fowler’s (1981, 1996) faith development theory provided the theoretical framework for this research. The teaching practices for this age group, in a Christian school setting, correlate mostly to Fowler’s (1981) second stage, mythic-literal faith. These students understand the world in more logical ways, and they make sense of their experiences using stories. Students in this study attentively listened as teachers told them stories and read stories in the Bible. At this age, children are separating reality and make-believe, so discussions of Joseph in prison, for

example, were thoughtful, almost using a Socratic method that encouraged the children to discuss the story and to ask questions. Students in this stage are becoming more logical thinkers, and their source of authority now includes teachers. In a physical education class, a team of students was guarding a cone at one end of a court. They quickly made the connection of guarding their hearts against the enemy. They also decided what senses God had given them to guard their hearts, and they recalled putting on the armor of God. Faith was being learned through the ritual of a game as students listened to the teacher; at the same time, reinforcing the concept they were learning.

I expected that I might see practices for children in Fowler's (1981) intuitive-projective faith stage, but what I found was children moving toward the third stage, synthetic-conventional faith, and teachers helping them to extend their knowledge. At two different campuses, a few students showed greater spiritual understanding through their questions and answers. One student had a father who was a minister, who was raising him in an intellectual family. A second student had recently moved from another state, and his teacher was just beginning to see his spiritual depth. During a story of Solomon's temple, the new boy explained to his new friends that God said David was a man of war, so his son would be the one to build the temple. That explanation was above the comprehension of the rest of the class, but the teacher went on to discuss Babylon in more detail than she had planned. Both students were developing their own sense of identity. They indicated awareness of others, and they showed hunger for truth and knowledge.

Fowler's (1981) stages "provide generalizable, formal descriptions of integrated sets of operations of knowing and valuing" (p. 99). Moral rules, beliefs, and understandings are absolute in this second stage, and this allowed the students to understand and to benefit from the

specific discipline plans seen in two schools in this research. The teachers received step-by-step training for handling disciplinary issues if they arose in the classroom, if they needed to speak to the child needed in the hallway, and finally, if the child had to go to the office. Students knew that the teacher, as the authority, had rules for everyone to follow. Students followed appropriate school behavior, but more important, the reconciliation process with Christ was understood.

### **Implications**

The results of this study have theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for Christian schools and future research. The data revealed that these Christian schools were engaging in many meaningful practices for the spiritual formation of young students with dedicated teachers and administrators in all the schools. Regardless of their individual backgrounds, all were committed to modeling Christ-like attributes and teaching them to young students. The practical implications in this section are focused on efficacy.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

The results of this study supported Fowler's (1981, 1996) stages of faith theory. Students go through different stages, and teachers generally know the relationship between the stages and the students' grade levels, but there can be variations. In the third and fourth grades, students are typically in the mythic-literal faith stage, but I observed two students beginning to move to the next stage. Children in this stage of faith development are anthropomorphic, believing God is literally in the sky. Concepts for these children are "black and white," so teachers must be firm in their knowledge and understanding of the Bible because the students will ask questions. Concrete thinkers are beginning to think logically and are losing the egocentrism of their earlier years. When a child's conversation in Bible class about the temple went beyond what the teacher had planned, she realized that the level of spiritual development was not the same for

everyone in this discussion, but she nevertheless facilitated this child's learning. She addressed what he knew and answered his questions without involving the other children in a conversation for which they were not ready. A child's capacity for faith develops from birth (Fowler, 1981; Westerhoff, 1976), and positive experiences like this one, as well as the children playing a physical education game described earlier, can serve to incubate the child's faith through "community, language, ritual and nurture" (Fowler, 1981, p. xiii).

### **Empirical Implications**

A review of the literature suggested there was little research on this topic, but the practices observed in these schools appeared to contribute significantly to the faith journey of each young student, in agreement with Dernlan's (2013) findings. Every classroom teacher involved in this study provided scaffolding for their students' spiritual formation (Morgenthaler et al., 2014). Each school was a faith community with rich experiences for third and fourth graders provided by the teachers, other students, and the school administration. The staff included references to Jesus in almost every conversation. One site declared that the teachers were all pouring Jesus into the students, ensuring that the children moved toward, and not away from, Christ (Claiborne, 2013). Their strategies for achieving this included classroom prayer in a variety of formats, Bible reading, and team building for students and staff through missions. In Merkel's (2012) study with young adults, education only played a minor role in how they responded to life events, but the results of this study showed children learning and growing in Christ-like ways at an early age, and Christian schools who emphasized spiritual formation practices can be a major change agent.

It was the aim of the schools in this study to provide greater spiritual understanding for the students' faith journeys (Banke et al., 2012), and the schools reported many ongoing

classroom practices (Moore, 2014), including various approaches to providing more time for prayer and scripture reading. Students in the third- and fourth-grade classrooms were taught to show appreciation for people such as cafeteria workers in their schools and to engage with others outside the school through opportunities like being Salvation Army bell ringers. Both practices modeled Jesus' involvement with people everywhere that children need to be taught (Beckwith, 2013; Pandya, 2016).

I asked each teacher about his or her comfort level with nurturing a child's spiritual life (Hyde, 2008; Pazmino, 2010). Some teachers had been raised by strong Christian parents, while others had received spiritual guidance from mentors. Regardless of their backgrounds, all the teachers said that they were very comfortable watching for signs of growth, inspiring students, and bringing children to Christ. Teachers who did not grow up with strong Christian parents were especially deliberate and intentional in the ways they structured their classrooms for spiritual formation. Betsy's past experiences resulted in her allowing a great deal of time for conversations about Jesus with the children in her fourth-grade classroom. She wanted them to grow up knowing Jesus' ways, and every part of her teaching reflected who Christ desires us to be. Betsy's daughter was a senior at the same school, and both valued the peer tutoring opportunities for the older students to mentor the elementary students spiritually. Both Betsy and her daughter wanted the third and fourth graders to grow up to be bold, with their eyes fixed firmly on God's Kingdom (Claiborne, 2013). Students at each school in this study were developing spiritual strength so that they would be equipped to change the world for Christ—a capability that many young people lack (Beckwith, 2013; Kinnaman, 2011). One teacher said that her college daughter's faith formation after a Christian school education made her daughter very determined to see Christ change others.

## **Practical Implications**

I observed variations in school practices at each site, but all the educators in this study wanted to improve their efficiency and effectiveness. While I acknowledge that there were many beneficial practices that I did not see, this section addresses routines and programs that I witnessed at one or more sites, and it incorporates frequently heard teacher comments. Teachers are their own community, and in each of these communities, I found an amazing group of qualified, Godly educators.

**Administrators and heads of schools.** To help students work toward becoming Christ-like, administrators need to ask daily for the Holy Spirit to abide in every classroom and to be a part of all school practices, recognizing that God's presence is more important than the building they occupy. Together, the administrators and the teachers established a family atmosphere in these Christian schools, and the teachers appreciated the time administrators devoted to school climate.

Administrators should provide volunteer opportunities for the staff to serve others in their local communities. This opportunity could be groups or families in service to others. Some smaller schools have left this to the individual teachers to organize, but administrative teams might generate a list of opportunities for mission projects. Parent volunteer prayer groups are essential for Christian schools. Administrators and teachers need to be encouraging these groups.

Forest Hills teachers recorded subjective notes regarding students' spiritual progress, three times each year, and a teacher at another school was working toward such a system. The spiritual progress, sometimes bringing a child to Christ, was often discussed with parents as children showed an interest, sometimes at parent-teacher conferences. Given that student



progress report records academic growth, anecdotal comments from teachers could supply information about spiritual growth as well.

Other campus-wide suggestions emerged from this study. Schools seeking individualized plans for improvement can submit to a Spiritual Climate Assessment offered by ACSI. School administrators could arrange schedules in such a way that the Bible is taught first, without interruption to emphasize the importance of scripture and Bible teaching. Teachers were serious about training one another, so they need increased time together because “iron sharpens iron” (Proverbs 27:17, New International Version). When I asked several teachers in two different grades about the Bible curriculum in the grade above or below, the teachers could not tell me the textbook used in the next grade. There was limited knowledge of what others were doing. Both vertical and horizontal planning improve consistency, eliminate gaps, and teachers should consider this type of planning. Teachers at one campus explained using an X Drive for sharing information, and they were given whole days for vertical planning with an administrator.

**Teachers.** The Christian school classroom should aim for students to gain a deeper knowledge of scripture through daily Bible reading and discussion. Students read and discussed scripture passages with purpose and understanding at two campuses, but they need practice interacting with God’s Word, even if it challenges them. Drawing a picture and answering questions are how children in the mythic-literal stage of faith development expressed spiritual thoughts, but there is no substitute for reading God’s Word.

To become like Christ, students should have multiple opportunities every day to communicate with Him through prayer. Teaching them to talk with God begins with the teachers talking to Him. Given the right scripture, students can learn to insert names and to use scripture to pray for a person or situation. The steps involved in creating a daily quiet time can be taught

and practiced. The simple methods for recording prayer requests and answered prayers, that I highlighted in this research, could be easily integrated into any classroom.

Third and fourth graders are helpers who need to participate in missions. Students need opportunities to be the hands and feet of Christ, helping others as Jesus taught his followers to do. Students can take items their school has collected to food banks or participate in other outreach programs. They can practice being Christ-like in the simplest of ways, such as making cards and letters for custodial staff, crossing guards, or others who serve them.

**Training.** Teachers wanted to improve their skills and many variations on training were seen in this study. One campus administrator worked with teachers to find individualized training. Two campuses offered incentives for teachers to complete training, workshops, conferences, and so forth on their own, in addition to professional development opportunities offered at the schools. The training most appreciated or requested in this research was teachers watching other teachers, so administrators need to create time in the schedule for such opportunities.

**Prayer.** In all schools, prayer was a priority. Rosewood's head of school came to the elementary campus two or three times each week to pray with elementary principals, and he prayed regularly with secondary administrators and church pastors. Elementary staff met at 7:15 each Thursday morning, one week for prayer and one week for Bible study and while it was not mandatory, attendance was high. These teachers prayed together on their own, two of them in a closet, bringing their students before God and committing their work to Him. One teacher with a new baby who could not arrive early prayed in one accord with them as she was coming to school. From the administration all the way down, the focus was seeking God's will and purpose, calling on Him and bringing their needs before Him. Forest Hills dismissed early each

Wednesday and staff alternated sharing a devotional thought, followed by a principals' heartfelt prayer for the school. This large school district worshipped together corporately several times each year, and I was privileged to attend one service and feel the unmistakable presence of the Holy Spirit. Teachers at Valley Bend stated emphatically that their principal was a prayer warrior. She met each morning of the week with a different grade level to shepherd them and pray over them, and she prayed on the intercom each morning and afternoon an appropriate prayer of blessing over the entire lower school. The principal told me she intended to stay involved in their lives. At Redeemed Christian School, staff had three different opportunities each week for meeting with principals for a devotional and prayer time. They knew both principals prayed for them and stayed in touch by text and email regarding prayer needs. Jesus often got up early to pray (Mark 1:35), and he habitually offered up prayers (Hebrews 5:7) for others. Jesus made this a priority and schools should examine schedules to see if they can find more time for prayer.

Based on the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications set out in this study, individuals interested in the spiritual formation of elementary-aged students should continue to be intentional in their routines and practices with a strong prayer foundation. This study highlighted a plethora of examples for that purpose, and analysis showed the four schools in this study were very intentional about their purpose of moving children toward Christ-likeness.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

The delimitations of this study are decisions I purposefully made. I chose a multiple-case study design which allowed for multiple methods of data collection. The study involved teachers of third- and fourth-grade students because young children at this age are spiritually sensitive and are often not yet subject to outside influences. At the same, they are old enough to express

spiritual thoughts. Also, I wanted to observe teaching practices for spiritual formation.

Geographic location was a limitation of the study because all sites were in the same area of the country—the Bible belt. Other areas might have yielded very different results. I tried to find sites in four different states located near my home, but the availability of schools willing to participate in the study was limited.

Limitations to the study are those details I could not control. One limitation was the selection of teacher participants, most of them women. I felt it best to rely on the administrators to decide which teachers I should interview because they knew the teachers' strengths and weaknesses, including the ability of each to nurture the children's spiritual formation. The ability of teachers to verbalize the practices in existence at their schools could have been a limitation, but after a few minutes in every interview, teachers were relaxed and shared freely. All participants shared valuable data in the interviews. There were additional willing participants at the first site. This willingness prompted a change in the protocol so that I could interview them also. I believe that the increased participation increased trustworthiness in the study (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). One additional limitation inherent in this case study design was that I alone collected and analyzed all the data; nevertheless, the data was the basis for the analysis.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings from this multiple-case study could be the basis for future studies using qualitative and quantitative research methods. First, researchers could conduct several similar case studies. One possibility would be to replicate this case study in a different geographic location in the United States besides the South. Southern states have a high number of Protestant Christian church denominations; research in Protestant northern states might yield different

results. Another case study might compare open-enrollment with closed-enrollment schools. The enrollment policy was not part of the planning in this research, but data and codes from the one open-enrollment school broadened the scope of the findings by revealing different practices, and I am very grateful for their outreach and their participation. Second, adding participants would increase the validity of the study. Several teachers in the study were parents of children in the school in which they taught, and I considered adding parents to the interview process to gain another perspective as that would have added depth to the results.

Other qualitative studies are recommended. A phenomenological study could look at the concept of the spiritual formation process in adults using Fowler's (1981) faith development theory for a theoretical framework. I found a small number of studies related to spiritual formation with older students (Horan, 2017; Kanakanui, 2017; Long, 2014; Mitchell, 2015; Monzon, 2017). Other terms found in some studies that are similar to spiritual formation are spiritual growth and faith formation. A study to understand the process and perceived outcomes of prayer in Christian schools would be a complex study, but the perspectives of parents, educators, and even students who believe strongly in prayer practices are needed. The Moms in Prayer International group has a strong presence among Christian parents of public, private, and home-schooled students. Individuals mentioned this group at more than one site during this study.

A future longitudinal study looking at the same third and fourth graders as high school students is recommended to determine if the intentional spiritual development practices at the elementary level made a difference for the high school student. Additionally, I recommend future research to see if the intentional strategies for spiritual development look different for each level student. This research could examine elementary, middle school, and high school strategies

and possibly interview teachers and others. Finally, quantitative studies would be appropriate for studying teacher training—either the training teachers receive or the training they desire.

### **Summary**

Only a few studies have addressed the spiritual lives of elementary-aged children, and this research fills a gap in the literature. The study was not designed to be evaluative or comparative but to explore existing practices for the spiritual formation of third and fourth graders. Fowler's (1981) stages of faith provided a theoretical framework to examine teaching processes for students in one age group, selected for their honest self-expression of their spiritual understanding (Coles, 1990).

I was looking for any positive practices they would share with me, and after staff members became comfortable with my presence and purpose, information came from many sources with ease. I am indebted to the four participating schools that were willing to allow a stranger to follow teachers around and essentially “look under the hood.” After a change in the interview protocol, snowball sampling led to more interviews and the collection of even more in-depth data. Teachers and administrators graciously answered question after question, and other staff, although not interviewed, provided additional valuable information for this study. It was touching and inspiring for me, an educator, to observe professionals teaching to the hearts of young children.

Ten major codes and three major themes (see Appendix K) with one smaller theme emerged from the data analysis, but a common thread was the presence of prayer. Discipleship resulted from prayerful training and mission activities. Boldness was evident in the school atmospheres, as well as the words and actions of educators and parents, again bathed in prayer, and unity was the outcome of educators centered on Christ. The foundation underlying each

code, theme, and action on these campuses was frequency and intentionality of prayer. It began with the heads of each school committed to praying, followed by the principals who prayed over their staff and families, the teachers and parents prayed, and, finally, the students learned to pray and received prayer. Pazmino (2010) discussed prayer as the Holy Spirit's work of spiritual formation.

The implicit challenge for the Christian teacher is how to set the metaphorical table for the Holy Spirit in one's teaching . . . One response is to recognize the mystery of the Spirit's work and to allow room or space for that covert ministry in each phase of teaching itself as part of the implicit curriculum . . . This requires the conscious dependence upon prayer in each teaching phase and willingness along with careful planning to allow for flexibility in teaching practice to allow for the Spirit's promptings. (p. 358)

On the final day of data collection, I heard a speaker describe the word impact as a collision, where two or more things bump into each other, and a reaction occurs. The speaker reiterated to students that Christ working through them should create this collision, and they should then impact the world for Him. In the same way, I pray this research will inspire Christian schools to continue setting the metaphorical table to allow spiritual formation to take place.

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**APPENDICES****Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 28, 2017

Angela Blount

IRB Approval 3052.112817: Intentional Practices of Christian Schools for Spiritual Formation of Third- and Fourth-Grade Students: A Multiple Case Study

Dear Angela Blount,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,



**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**The Graduate School**

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.

*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## Appendix B: Teacher/Administrator Recruitment Letter

[Date]

[Recipient]

[Title]

[School Address]

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. The purpose of my research is to explore practices used in Christian schools for the purpose of spiritual formation of young students. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are familiar with teaching practices for third- or fourth-grade students and are willing to participate, you may be interviewed individually or in a focus group, or both, each lasting no more than an hour. I will be observing students and routines at your school for one week and you may also be asked to provide documents relevant to the topic. Your participation is voluntary and will be completely anonymous. Your name and other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, complete and return the consent document to your principal or myself which will enable us to establish a schedule for the week I will be on your campus. The focus group interview will be held earlier in the week with individual interviews to follow later in the week at a time that is convenient for you.

The consent document is attached to this letter and it contains additional information about my research. Please read and sign the consent document and return it to your principal or me prior to my arriving on your campus for the research. Your signature indicates you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Sincerely,

Angie Blount  
Liberty University doctoral candidate



## Appendix C: Teacher/Administrator Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
11/28/2017 to 11/27/2018  
Protocol # 3052.112817

Intentional Practices of Christian Schools for Spiritual Formation of Third and Fourth Grade  
Students: A Multiple Case Study  
Angie Blount  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of spiritual formation practices in Christian schools. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an administrator or teacher in a Christian school and you are knowledgeable of students in grades three and four. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Angie Blount, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the intentional practices used in Christian schools for encouraging spiritual formation at the third- and fourth-grade level.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

1. Agree to periods of non-participant observation by the researcher of typical school activities during the week she is on campus.
2. If selected, participate in one focus group interview with several teachers or other faculty from your campus, also during the school day. This focus group will be audio-recorded, lasting approximately one hour.
3. Participate in one audio-recorded individual interview with the researcher lasting no longer than one hour during the school day.
4. If requested, furnish classroom or school documentation related to the topic of this study during the week when the researcher is on campus. These documents will first be stripped of identifying information.

**Risks and Benefits of Participation:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter at school during everyday life. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include advancing the knowledge of spiritual nurturing procedures in Christian education.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject.

Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation. Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings. I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Angie Blount. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [ablount3@liberty.edu](mailto:ablount3@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins, at [glcollins2@liberty.edu](mailto:glcollins2@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

***Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant

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Date

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Signature of Investigator

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Date

## Appendix D: Additional Staff Member Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
11/28/2017 to 11/27/2018  
Protocol # 3052.112817

Intentional Practices of Christian Schools for Spiritual Formation of Third- and Fourth-Grade  
Students: A Multiple Case Study  
Angie Blount  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of spiritual formation practices in Christian schools. You were selected as a possible participant because you serve in a support role in a Christian School. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Angie Blount, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

**Background Information:** The purpose of this study is explore and describe the intentional practices used in Christian schools for encouraging spiritual formation at the third- and fourth-grade level.

**Procedures:** If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do one or more of the following things:

1. Agree to periods of non-participant observation by the researcher of typical school activities during the week she is on campus.
2. Participate in one audio-recorded individual interview with the researcher lasting no longer than 30 minutes during the school day.
3. Furnish documentation related to the topic of this study. If these documents are children's work, they will first be stripped of identifying information.

**Risks and Benefits of Participation:** The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter at school during everyday life. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. Benefits to society include advancing the knowledge of spiritual nurturing procedures in Christian education.

**Compensation:** Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews in a location where

others will not easily overhear the conversation. Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
11/28/2017 to 11/27/2018  
Protocol # 3052.112817

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How to Withdraw from the Study:** If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Angie Blount. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [ablount3@liberty.edu](mailto:ablount3@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins, at [glcollins2@liberty.edu](mailto:glcollins2@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.*

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

---

Signature of Participant

---

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

---

Date

### **Appendix E: Reflective Journal**

November, 2016- Initial contact with ACSI to discuss spiritual formation topic and seek recommendations in names of schools.

Winter-Spring, 2017 – Found practices which should encourage spiritual growth in ACSI's REACH 2.1 manual and I wondered if classroom teachers see these suggestions and are they aware of ACSI resources that might be available to them.

May 25, 2017 – Phone call to ACSI, discussed site recommendations from ACSI. Contacted the recommended schools via formal letter. Possible bias formed immediately that ACSI schools would be the best for this study because this is the largest accrediting agency.

June, 2017 - Made phone calls to follow up on these sites. ACSI research department addresses spiritual formation in schools and I tried contacting the regional office, but they did not return my phone calls or emails. I created a physical notebook for organizing each school. I was especially interested in teacher information from websites regarding tenure, etc.

July 13, 2017 – Met with one headmaster to discuss his school's possible participation. He remarked that his school would be a "gold mine" of information with one teacher having 30 years' experience. Is the best teacher the one with the most experience? Not necessarily. I have seen many excellent younger teachers, although when hiring I always looked for seasoned teachers.

July 30, 2017 – Met with Headmaster at Valley Bend regarding his school participating in the study. This school is accredited, not through ACSI, but he described great teachers. Does every accrediting agency assist with a child's spiritual growth to the same degree? It seems the larger agency, ACSI, probably would have more to offer.

September 15, 2017 – My contact with ACSI no longer works there, but I did finally receive additional information from ACSI regarding additional schools. Some schools have submitted to ACSI Spiritual Climate Assessment for improving their practices. I think that if a school accepts a thorough examination and follows through with recommendations, it would have superior practices. I needed at least one school with this background.

October 9, 2017 All four sites were finalized, including one with the experience described above. Schools had more variation than I had originally planned, so I expected to see varied data. There will probably be diversity in practices.

December, 2017 – Schools were eager to participate but they preferred after the first of the year.

January 12,16; February 28-Mar 2 – The first day of collecting data at Forest Hills, the atmosphere was amazing outside before I entered the building. Music and a very welcoming crossing guard greeted me. The second day was inviting, they gave me another warm welcome, but unfortunately they also gave me the flu, ending this week for now. This campus was my first school to visit, and my last, but reviewing data at the end showed no interruptions. The school was quite large and systematized. Hall bulletin boards are changed with the same precision

observed in classrooms, very regimented, training seemed abundant. From top to bottom, the school was ordered and efficient. I expected automation in their interview answers, but instead I found genuine spiritual giants with warmth, variety, compassion and serious dedication for their task of spiritual mentoring, and I left with appreciation for the organization of their school.

January 22-26, 2018 – Data Collection at Valley Bend. Unfamiliar with the school at first, I left enriched and inspired after watching them. The presence of the Holy Spirit was immediately felt through substantial prayers, scripture, and teachers loving like Jesus loved. I kept asking and wondering, “Do all schools have this atmosphere?” but by the end of the week I decided that the Presence I felt was a direct connection to two administrators, strong prayer warriors who believed it was their role to mentor everyone in the school. In their portable buildings and small facility, everyone, especially the principal, was infused with the Holy Spirit.

This school employed a number of teachers who graduated from the same conservative university that my two children graduated from. I found myself happily agreeing with them and understanding their thought processes. It was important for me to keep an open mind and only see and hear data, not personalities of these teachers. Another connection happened with a teacher who shared a personal experience with me, and I knew it was important to put that aside each day that I continued to collect data.

January 29-31, February 6-7, 2018- Arriving at a sprawling campus I sensed prosperity which sometimes equates with inefficiency. Given a substitute’s badge, a key to every room, but no schedule, I prayed for God to direct this data collection. From modest beginnings in a church, this group shares Christ with students and parents who are unbelievers and they bring Christlikeness to the others. A highlight was interviewing the teacher who actually started the school, receiving insight into their spiritual history. All shared efficient, compassionate servant’s hearts, good stewards of what God was doing.

February 12-16, 2018 – Rosewood campus was small and I underestimated the powerful presence of God as I walked to the crowded basement with fourth graders. A lower school and pre-school were housed together, with the upper grades and administrative offices located elsewhere. The principal interview, mid-week, explained what I could not grasp, that the spiritual success here began with their top administrator coming to pray 2-3 times each week. In turn, principals prayed and shepherded teachers and parents like I had not seen before.

March, 2018 - I approached this study from the perspective of a teacher/administrator in a small school teacher and I expected the two smaller schools would be more relatable to my experiences. I was able to keep an open mind to the practices in larger schools such a huge assembly of worshipers at one school and an oversized modern teacher work room at another school and I was able to openly look at the data. I was careful to bracket my experiences regarding school finances and facilities, and hopefully, leave each campus unbiased, with a clear understanding of the data I collected.

### Appendix F: Observation Protocol

Date:	Location:	Time:
(Group size) _____ Sm-classroom	(Group size) _____ Med- multiple classes	(Group size) _____ Lg,- school
<b>DESCRIPTIVE NOTES</b> (factual description, what I see and hear) <i>“what I see”</i>	<b>RESPONSIVE NOTES</b> (Shared with teacher; their response) <i>“what the teacher thinks</i>	<b>REFLECTIVE NOTES</b> (personal reflection, thoughts on what I observe) <i>“what I think”</i>

## Appendix G: Focus Group Questions

### Focus Group Questions

1. I want to thank each of you for participating. My research is about students' spiritual formation; some people call it faith development. A clear definition of spiritual formation by Dallas Willard is "the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself" (Willard, 2012, p. 22). I have been a teacher where you are, but right now I am studying what schools and teachers are doing to help this spiritual formation process in third and fourth graders. As we start, I would like each of you tell me your name as if we are just meeting and tell me what you teach.
2. What draws you to teach in a Christian school versus a secular school?
3. Describe your working relationship with one another from an academic perspective. Do you collaborate in your planning for the students?
4. Tell me about your collaboration from a spiritual perspective.
  - a. Prompt: Is there encouragement at a spiritual level?
5. Let's talk about the curriculum you use for a minute. In what ways does it influence students' spiritual formation?
6. Can you describe specific ways the school supports a spiritual climate in your classroom?
  - a. Prompt: Are there any outside resources for spiritually-rich activities?
7. How well do you think the curriculum promotes spiritual formation in your students?
8. On that same thread, are there other ideas or practices you *do not have in place* that you believe would be helpful?



9. Think about the school as a whole. What policies, programs, or practices are in place that positively influence students' spiritual formation?
  - a. Prompt: This might be policies, administrators, programs
10. This is my last question. You may have relevant thoughts you would like to share that my questions did not address. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

## **Appendix H: Interview Questions for Administrators**

### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions for Administrators

1. Please introduce yourself to me and tell me a little about yourself and your background.
2. Can you tell me more about your professional journey before arriving here.
3. How do you describe your leadership role here at the school?
4. Can you give me an idea of the demographics in general terms, not the statistics. Do you have diversity in socio-economic groups, culture groups, race?
5. What about denominations and spiritual diversity?
6. What role have you seen the families of your students play in forming the child's spirituality?
7. Can you tell me about your statement of faith and position on the Bible?
8. Do you require a statement of faith from families?
9. What do you see as the role of this school in facilitating the spiritual formation of the students?
10. What do you think are factors that contribute to the school's ability to nurture children's spiritual lives?
  - a. Prompt: What is note-worthy about this school? Teachers? Policies?
11. I'm focusing on the teachers with the next few questions. I have enjoyed looking at your website, the statement of faith, and other parts. Can you describe the "vetting" of potential hires for spiritual leadership in a classroom?
12. As a whole, how would you assess your teachers' effectiveness in guiding students spiritually?
13. What practices do you have in place to train and support teachers in this task?

14. How well do you feel the school website addresses teaching for students' spiritual formation? Prompt: If I as a parent was looking at different schools, would I be drawn to the spiritual climate of yours based on what I read?
15. Can you give your opinion of Christian schools being a ministry of a church versus a stand-alone Christian School? How might this affect spiritual formation practices?

## **Appendix I: Interview Questions for Teachers**

### Standardized Open-Ended Individual Interview Questions for Teachers

1. I am Angie Blount. I have taught in public and private schools, and I have been the director of a private school. I started in PreK, then 8<sup>th</sup> grade, then worked my way back down through all the grades. I'm deeply interested in children's spiritual growth. Can you introduce yourself and tell me a little about yourself.
2. Please tell me a little about your teaching background, where you were before, and your teaching assignment at this school.
3. How did your upbringing influence your spirituality and religious views?
4. I wanted to give you some terms I use in my study. Spirituality can be related to religion or secular. In this study, I am looking at Christian Spirituality. My definition of "spiritual formation" is from Dallas Willard. It is "the Spirit-driven process of forming the inner world of the human self in such a way that it becomes like the inner being of Christ himself" (Willard, 2012, p. 22). So, we know it is the work of the Holy Spirit and we cannot teach it. My study is interested in what schools are doing moving students toward that goal. Do you think your ability to influence the children's spiritual formation is shaped more by your background or by the spiritual climate here at the school?
5. Are there specific ways you have been trained or prepared for this job of encouraging children's spiritual formation, either formally or informally?
6. What have you seen in your students that demonstrate they understand spiritual concepts and God?
7. What role have you seen the families of students play in forming the spirituality of children?

a. Prompt: Their influence versus the school's?

8. Let's talk about your own classroom and your curriculum for a minute. In your opinion, what role does the curriculum play in the process of students' spiritual formation?
9. Can you describe any specific strategies you use in the classroom to facilitate the spiritual growth of students?

a. Prompt: Examples of student work, lessons?

10. Let's talk about the leadership of the school. Can you give any specific examples of something you have seen an administrator say or do that you believe nurtured a student or students spiritually?

a. Prompt: Which 'school people' are helpful?

11. In the group interview we talked about the school-wide practices. Can you describe school policies, programs, or practices designed to encourage students' spiritual formation?
12. How would you assess your comfort level in nurturing students spiritually?
13. What additional training or support do you need to feel (even) more competent or confident in guiding students spiritually?
14. Again, I am trying to understand what are the note-worthy things you are doing here at this school to encourage spiritual formation. Is there anything else we have not covered that you would like to tell me?

a. Prompt: Perhaps things you wish you had or could do, or other suggestions?

### Appendix J: Audit Trail

Date	Task Completed
November, 2016	Initial email to ACSI regarding the study and site selection
June 19, 2017	Formal letters emailed to six schools requesting their consideration of the study. Five were recommended by ACSI, one was recommended by a Liberty University professor
July 5, 2017	Began making follow-up phone calls.
July 13, 2017	Brief visit with head of school, River View Christian School, recommended by a Liberty professor. Good possibility.
July 28, 2017	Brief visit with head of school, Brazos Christian School, Bryan, Texas.
August 1, 2017	Brief visit with elementary school principal, Grace Community schools. Good possibility.
August 3, 2017	Brief visit with Superintendent at Plainview Christian, regarding serving on the dissertation committee and his schools' possible participation. This site does not meet the criteria.
August 7, 2017	Brief visit with elementary school principal, Redeemed Christian School. Great possibility.
August 10, 2017	Sent documents to expert reviewers for comments and suggestions regarding data collection instruments.
Sept. 21, 2017	Phone call to visit with assistant principal at Forest Hills Christian Academy, school is interested in participating
Oct. 9, 2017	All four schools finalized
Oct. 19, 2017	Dissertation Proposal Successfully Defended
Oct. 22, 2017	IRB application sent by Committee Chair
Nov. 28, 2017	IRB approval received
Dec. 1, 2017	Notified schools, asked for dates
Jan. 12 2017	Forest Hills, Data Collection
Jan. 16, 2017	Forest Hills, Data Collection
Jan. 22-26, 2017	Valley Bend, Data Collection
Jan. 29-31, 2017	Redeemed Christian School, Data Collection

Feb. 6-7, 2018	Redeemed Christian School, Data Collection
Feb. 12-16, 2018	Rosewood Christian School, Data Collection
Feb. 28-Mar 2, 2018	Forest Hills, Data Collection
End of Feb-Mar 12, 2018	Transcripts sent; member checking
March, 2018	Data Analysis completed

### Appendix K: Enumeration Table

Open-Codes	Open-Code Appearance Across Data Sets	Themes
Training	53	Discipleship
Training - Teachers	16	
Training – Students	27	
Training - Parents	10	
Missions	37	
Atmosphere	29	Boldness
Boldness	26	
Prayer	24	
Scripture	13	
Pouring into others	16	
Holy Spirit involvement	14	Unity
Jesus is the Hub	11	
Nurturing	10	



## Appendix L: Photos

Photo 1: Classroom Bibles

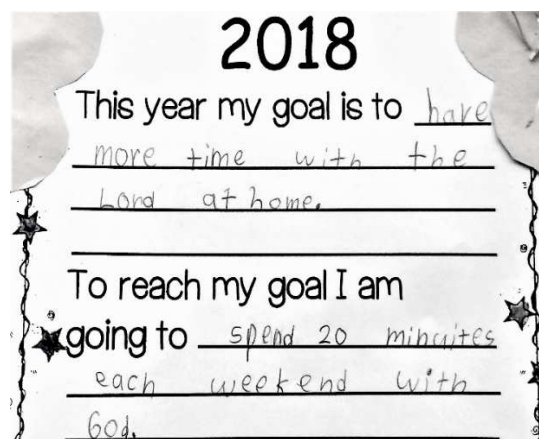
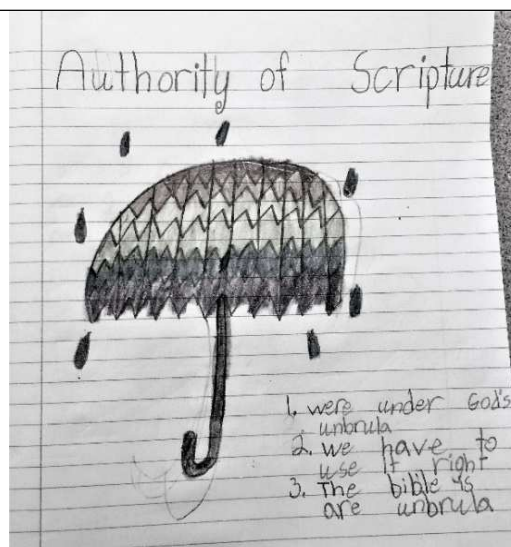
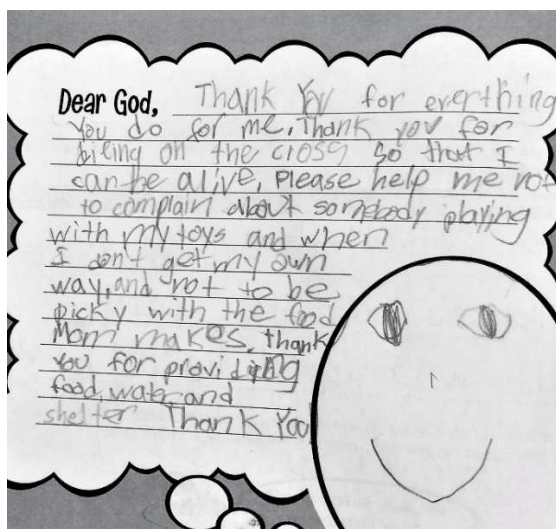


Photo 2: Spiritual thoughts of children



What can you learn from studying about Jacob's life? I learned that even though your mad, it doesn't give you the right to do something wrong.

If you are saved, tell how the Holy Spirit has been your Helper, Counselor, or Comforter. He has helped me not react to when someone makes me mad, and comforts me when I'm sad.

Photo 3: Prayer and Praise Boards

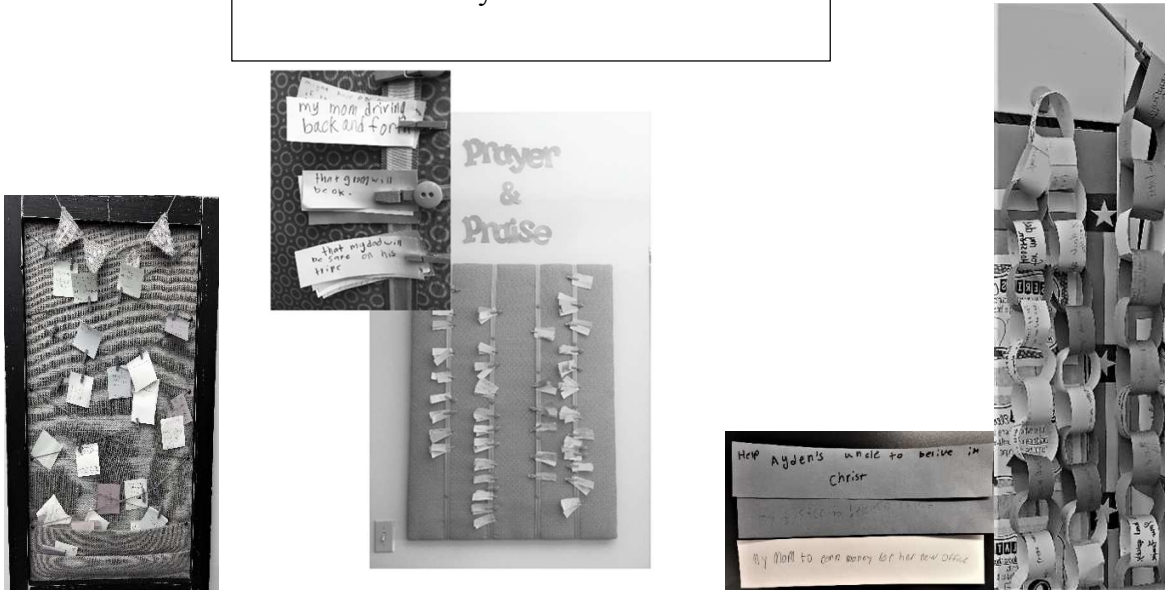


Photo 4: Recording Prayer Requests

