An Exploration of Children and Culture
in the United Church of Canada

by

David Michael Csinos

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emmanuel College
and the Pastoral Department of the Toronto School of Theology
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Theology
awarded by the University of St. Michael’s College

Copyright © by David Michael Csinos 2017
Abstract

This project explores the theological meaning-making of nineteen children in four culturally-distinct United Church of Canada congregations. Using participant observation, focus groups with congregational leaders, and interviews with children, this research demonstrates that children make theological meaning in ways that significantly reflect the broader culture of their congregation, even as they put their own fingerprints on the process of creating theology. Based on knowledge generated through this study, I engage in a comparative interpretation of children’s theology relying on Emmanuel Lartey’s “Trinitarian” model of human personhood to show that the content, sources, and methods of children’s theological meaning-making contain characteristics that are shared among all children, held in common with other children within their congregations, and unique to each child. These findings provide a means of critiquing the United Church’s vision for becoming an intercultural church as well as research within the multifaceted field of children’s spirituality and theology.
In memory of my grandparents,

George and Elizabeth Csinos
and
Allan and Marceline Masson,

and my great aunt,

Laurette Delorme.

Immigrant and Canadian-born,
Anglophone and Francophone,
Catholic and Protestant,
Hungarian, British, and French-Canadian,
you have infused my life
with an intercultural spirit.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For the better part of the last decade, I have been working toward writing this dissertation in some shape and form, from foundational coursework and formative life experiences to ethnographic fieldwork and hours and hours of writing. I could not have accomplished this goal without the assistance, guidance, and support of more people than I can name here, and my gratitude extends to every one.

I’m particularly grateful for the people of Parkdale United Church, Messiah Methodist United Church, Burke Street United Church, and Colkirk United Church. Their willingness to welcome me into their lives and open themselves to me has left me humbled. I’m especially appreciative of the children in these congregations, whose thoughts and practices have left lasting marks on my own. My thanks also extends to the research assistants who gave of their time to help me with this project.

It has been a tremendous privilege to make this journey under the guidance of Pamela Couture, who throughout the past six years has served as my instructor, advocate, interrogator, mentor, and supporter. It is with great appreciation that I now call her a colleague. When Pam was on sabbatical during my fieldwork, Natalie Wigg-Stevenson graciously stepped in as my interim advisor, offering feedback that challenged me to think deeply and consider from many angles the research process in which I was engaged. During the first year of my doctoral studies, Nam Soon Song and Michael Stoeber joined Pam on my advisory committee, and I’m grateful that they have continued to help guide me nearly every
step of the way, including serving as readers of this dissertation. I also am thankful for Pamela McCarroll and Élaine Champagne for their willingness to be readers. Finally, my gratitude expends to Wenh-In Ng, Marilyn Legge, Johanna Selles, and Phyllis Airhart for enlivening my imagination about topics at the heart of this dissertation through courses in the first year of my program.

Over two decades ago, when I first watched *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, I asked my father why people called Indy “Dr. Jones.” It was then that I learned what it means to be a doctor of philosophy, and I told myself that I would be that kind of doctor one day. Since then, my parents and sister have been cheering me on toward the finish line. For letting me get out of washing dishes to get some writing done and being an ever-present sounding board to bounce ideas off of, for proofreading drafts and giving me permission to take breaks, and for holding my arms up when the weight of the task was too much to bear, thank you.
CONTENTS

Introduction
From Burning Questions to Bustling Congregations............................ 1

1 “Thank You for Making Church”:
Parkdale United Church and a Theology of Community....................... 35

2 “We Put Our Tradition In It”:
Messiah Methodist United Church and a Theology of Interconnectedness... 59

3 “Engaging the Stories of the Faith”:
Burke Street United Church and a Theology of Speculation.................... 88

4 “Healing that Colonial Wound”:
Colkirk United Church and a Theology of Acceptance........................ 115

5 Kaleidoscopic Theology:
A Comparative Interpretation of Children’s Theologies....................... 141

6 Toward Transformation:
Critiquing the United Church’s Vision for Becoming Intercultural.......... 178

7 Renegotiating a Field of Study:
Critiquing Scholarship in Children’s Spirituality and Theology.............. 209

8 A Theological Pregnancy:
Limitations, Questions, and Implications for Practice....................... 239

Appendices....................................................................................... 259

Bibliography..................................................................................... 298
LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix 1
University of Toronto Ethics Review Protocol Submission Form…………… 259

Appendix 2
University of Toronto Ethics Review Protocol Approval Letter…………… 294

Appendix 3
University of Toronto Ethics Review Protocol
Annual Renewal Form (2014)……………………………………………… 295

Appendix 4
University of Toronto Ethics Review Protocol
Annual Renewal Form (2015)……………………………………………… 296

Appendix 5
University of Toronto Ethics Review Protocol
Annual Renewal Form (2016)……………………………………………… 297
INTRODUCTION

FROM BURNING QUESTIONS TO BUSTLING CONGREGATIONS

Children are not simply passive consumers of theology; they actively generate theological meaning for themselves. As they do so, they take in information and experiences from their contexts as tools and raw material for building theology. For children who participate in the lives of faith communities, their congregations have a hand in providing them with sources and methods used in theological meaning-making. But in what ways is this so? In what ways do children generate theology in line with the particularities of their congregation’s culture? How do children make theology their own as they draw from other experiences and ideas?

This dissertation is a search for a response to these questions. For approximately one year, I studied children within four congregations—each of which ascribes to a cultural self-identification distinct from the other three—in order to better understand children’s theological meaning in light of cultural contexts. My interpretation of the data generated through this research demonstrates that culture matters to children’s theology; that is, the theological meaning that young people make is significantly related to the culture of the congregation in which they participate. Not only is the content of children’s theology consistent with that of their congregation, but the ways that they come to create their theological meaning and the sources they draw from often parallel those upheld and used by their broader faith community—yet not without their own nuances and particularities.
Furthermore, the theological meaning-making of children within these diverse congregations offers critiques to the way the United Church of Canada constructs its vision for becoming intercultural as well as the way scholarship is conducted within the academic field of children’s spirituality and theology.

**Some Introductory Remarks**

For four decades, Canada has prided itself on being a multicultural society, one that celebrates diversity in the form of a metaphorical “cultural mosaic.”¹ Since 1971, when Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau put forward a federal policy of multiculturalism, this country has moved from tolerating diversity to holding it up as one of the core features of what it means to be Canadian.

But despite this national self-identity ingrained in our common psyche through everything from multicultural festivals to beer commercials, multiculturalism in Canada has been criticized, critiqued, and challenged by many individuals and organizations. For some, it is too lenient, for it opens our borders too widely and threatens the historical identity of Canada that many hold dear. For others, it is too strict, as it maintains power among those cultural groups that have historically held power, marginalizing the very people it claims to accept and celebrate. Whatever one might say about multiculturalism, it is clear that its implications are far-reaching. Conversations surrounding cultural diversity have made their

---

¹ The use of the mosaic as a metaphor for Canadian diversity is often first credited as the idea of Victoria Hayward in her 1922 book *Romantic Canada*. Victoria Hayward, *Romantic Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1922), 187.
way into seemingly every node of Canadian life. Yet, in some arenas, it took time for multiculturalism to be seriously discussed.

It was not until 2006—a full thirty-five years after the advent of Trudeau’s policy—that the United Church put forward its own position on cultural diversity. At its thirty-ninth General Council, following decades of various initiatives surrounding “Ethnic Ministries,” it approved a vision for becoming an intercultural church. In so doing, this denomination challenged views of multiculturalism held up by federal policies as well as mainstream congregational practice, urging clergy and laypeople to move toward a new, more just vision of cultural diversity. In the years following the adoption of this policy, the United Church promoted this “Transformative Vision” through publications, national and regional conferences, and courses at its theological colleges.

One such course was “Becoming Intercultural Communities,” which was offered during the winter of 2011 at Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. Led by Dr. Marilyn Legge and Dr. Wenh-In Ng, this course introduced students to the United Church’s intercultural vision and helped them uncover and explore complexities surrounding ministry that arise when one gives serious consideration to cultural diversity in Canada. Having been introduced to some of these ideas in a previous course, I enrolled in this master’s level class and, as a doctoral student, I worked with Dr. Ng to design and write a number of additional requirements. One such requirement was aimed at helping me marry

---

my passion for children’s spirituality and theology with discourses surrounding multiculturalism in Canada and the United Church’s vision for becoming intercultural.

At about the same time that the United Church was moving toward its “Transformative Vision,” my area of expertise—children’s spirituality and theology—was growing into a distinct yet fluid academic field, establishing new scholarly conferences and setting up working groups within existing guilds like the American Academy of Religion. Studies surrounding children’s spirituality and child theology were being published in several periodicals and by some of the best publishers of academic theology in North America, Continental Europe, Britain, and, to a lesser extent, other parts of the world.

Following Dr. Ng’s direction, I took up the task of placing some important texts within the field of children’s spirituality and theology in conversation with those in multicultural and intercultural studies. And in the process I learned that there are relatively few studies of children’s spirituality and theology that give particular attention to issues of culture. Yet even those that set their sights on culture do so from perspectives that offer either theoretical breadth (that is, describing the importance of cultural difference without grounding it in qualitative research that reflects such contexts) or contextual depth (that is, conducting research with children in particular cultural contexts without paying attention to broader issues of diversity and difference). Yet if, as some scholars argue, culture and context matter to the spiritual formation of children, then they must make a difference in young people’s quests to make sense of and engage with theological matters.

My dissertation research seeks to address this gap in scholarship into the spiritual and theological lives of children by exploring how children make theological meaning in
different cultural contexts, and then using this meaning to critique the United Church’s “Transformative Vision” and the field of children’s spirituality and theology. By designing and conducting an ethnographic study to shed light on these topics, this research makes a distinct contribution to the bourgeoning field of children’s spirituality and theology.

Methods

To answer my research questions, I designed a multi-method study in which I visited four congregations to participate in their worship services and children’s ministry programs, speak with children about their theological views, and interview adults about their congregation, its culture, and its ministry with children.³

Over the course of a year, I spent time at each congregation, first by observing, participating in, and assisting with its children’s programs (such as Sunday school, vacation Bible school, intergenerational congregational worship, etc.). I then spent a number of weeks meeting with children one-on-one or in small groups, aided, when and as deemed appropriate by the congregational leader, by a research assistant who took notes and assisted with asking questions.

My use of research assistants varied widely from congregation to congregation. At each community, I sought the advice of its leaders about the appropriate use of research assistants. At Parkdale United Church, my assistant was Eva, an older adolescent from the congregation who the minister assigned to me, as she was accustomed to being in leadership with the children. My assistants at Messiah Methodist United Church varied from interview

³ For additional details about the research methods I employed, see Appendix 1.
to interview. At times Jemina, a Sunday school teacher, stayed in interviews unless she needed to leave to attend to her infant child or another matter required her attention. But in some interviews at Messiah, an administrator of the congregation was present, yet acted more as a point person for the congregation rather than an assistant. The leaders of Burke Street United Church felt it was appropriate for me to bring a research assistant of my own choosing. The only congregation where I interviewed all the children without the presence of an assistant was Colkirk United Church. The members of this Aboriginal congregation and I spent eighteen months building a relationship together, and I had come to know the children I interviewed quite well through helping with three week-long vacation Bible school programs during 2014. Because of the trust I had built among these children and the distrust this congregation has toward research, the formality of a research assistant would have undermined the relationship we had formed with one another over the previous 18 months.

I began each interview by building rapport with the children by talking with them about their hobbies, school, and family, and then I asked them if they would mind drawing a picture of God. The practice of drawing these pictures springboarded us into conversations about God, church, heaven, and many other theological matters as directed by the ideas and issues the children raised as they created and explained their pictures. Through our discussions, I learned about what mattered to the children, what experiences were foundational to their spiritual and religious lives, and the sources and methods through which they generated theological ideas.

After meeting with five children from each congregation (with the exception of Colkirk, where I met with four children), I held a small focus group interview in each
community, where I met with ministers, Sunday school teachers, parents, and other adults who offer leadership to and have a stake in the lives of the children in their congregation. These conversations further immersed me in the lives of these four faith communities by helping me hear the stories that make up these congregations and see the dynamics of culture and context in action as these adults communicated with one another and with me. Finally, when all these conversations and interviews had taken place, I once again visited each congregation to participate in its worship and ministry with children.

Once I had completed this fieldwork, I transcribed all interviews with children, adult focus groups, and field notes. I then analyzed these conversations and notes—as well as other documents I’d collected such as bulletins and photographs—by coding them and then grouping codes under significant topics or themes. I identified a total of 129 codes and over fifteen major themes ranging from sources of theological insight and the ability to articulate theology to the children's views of God. Following this, I began describing the congregations and their cultures—especially their theological ethos—based on my experiences of participant observation and focus groups with congregational leaders. Out of such descriptive and analytical processes, I interpreted what I had learned about children’s theologies, paying close attention to how their theological meaning-making reflected, and did not reflect, their broader congregational cultures.

Common methods of verifiability, while important for qualitative research, are problematic for the study I have undertaken. Although at certain points I considered sending my analyses of each congregation to its respective minister to verify its accuracy, there are two important reasons that I decided that this was inappropriate. First, when I interviewed the
children, I clearly informed them that I would use pseudonyms and that their comments would be kept confidential (although they were aware I would write about them and people with whom I study and work with would see what they say). If I were to send my analyses to the congregational ministers, who were often aware of which children participated and would likely be able to make educated guesses about which child made certain comments, I would be violating the agreements I made with the children. Second, throughout this research I have been cognizant not to take advantage of the hospitality these communities have extended to me. To go back to these ministers and ask them to offer feedback to my analyses would be inappropriate for different reasons at each congregation—it was not part of my original proposal nor our initial agreements; I would be imposing on their already busy schedules; and I am no longer able to reciprocate further assistance. For these reasons, using these sorts of verifiability methods seemed to violate the agreements I made with each congregation and their children, making them less of an enhancement to my work and more of an ethical violation of the relationships I had built with these communities and individuals.

During my involvement in these four congregations—and, in fact, throughout the entire research process, from conception and into the writing phase—I have kept a research journal in order to track, reflect on, and process my thoughts, feelings, and biases. While all ethnographic research is shaped by the biases of the researcher, studying issues of culture and theology have made this journey incredibly personal, forcing me to uncover my own prejudices, proclivities, and presuppositions and allow them to be shaped by the individuals and communities who joined me along the way. In this journal, I have written about everything from necessary shifts in my research methods to frustrations in working with particular research partners, images of hope for an intercultural future and challenges
involved in getting there. It includes scribbled notes and lengthy treatises. But whether I wrote a few lines or ranted for a few pages, journaling was a necessary practice of reflexivity that helped me to keep track of and write myself into this project every step of the way, holding me accountable to the ways that my experiences and assumptions were intertwined with the research I was conducting.

Triangulating this Research

This dissertation is an exercise in practical theology and the methodology I utilize in this research is firmly grounded within this broad and interdisciplinary field of theology. Furthermore, it is not simply a theological study, but one that is also ethnographic. In this section, I locate my research within the field of practical theology and as a work of ethnographic theology.

Practical Theology

Practical theology is an umbrella term that covers a range of theological methods, all of which seek to hold practice and theory together in some sort of tension. For practical theologians, theology is not something that is only theoretical, nor is it merely concerned with Christian practice; rather, it is the mutual, dialogical relationship of these two spheres that is the hallmark of this diverse field.

There are a wide range of methods that practical theologians utilize in their efforts to conceive of and maintain a relationship between practice and theory. Don Browning, for instance, outlines a fourfold method for practical theology focused on understanding that
develops as dialogues and conversations. This critical or revised correlational approach begins with descriptive theology, the goal of which is to draw from social science research to create a multidimensional “thick description” of an incident or situation as well as a theological assessment or interpretation of the situation. Next, the practical theologian moves into the realms of historical theology, studies in scripture, and church history in order to explore with a degree of abstraction what light normative texts and tradition can shed on the situation under investigation. The third movement fuses the two prior movements together in order to build a comprehensive understanding of the situation that is at once focused on the contemporary situation and normative Christian texts and traditions. Finally, one moves to strategic practical theology, which seeks to offer particular calls for action that give rise to practices that are validated through the dialogue between contemporary circumstances and Christian norms that occurred in the previous movements.

Browning’s revised correlational method is simply one example of how practical theologians keep practice and theory in mutual conversation with one another. Johannes van der Ven, while seeing the value of such an approach, offers a different method, one that relies on original empirical research. Believing that theology must “expand its traditional range of

---

5 Browning, *Fundamental*, 44, 46.
6 Browning, *Fundamental*, 16-7, 72.
instruments, consisting of literary-historical and systematic methods and techniques, in the
direction of an empirical methodology,”¹² he offers a five-stage *intradisciplinary* method that
has practical theologians performing empirical research.¹³ In the first stage, the theologian
develops the theological problem as well as a goal, the object of which is people’s faith in
God.¹⁴ Second, one engages in observation through three sub-phases that explore the
presuppositions of the research and those being studied, the “dialectic interplay”¹⁵ of this first
sub-phase and one’s reflection on it, and the design of empirical-theological research to be
undertaken.¹⁶ The third phase draws from the previous ones to conceive of theories and
hypotheses that are tested for their logic and sufficiency, that will further the design of and
validate the analysis of one’s empirical research, and that define concepts to ensure accuracy
of language in the connection of theory and practice.¹⁷ In the fourth stage, the research is
conducted and data collected through quantitative or qualitative methods—or a mixed-
method study that relies on both.¹⁸ van der Ven names a number of steps through which one
must proceed, including describing research subjects, creating scales that measure their
theological views and attitudes, understanding variables, determining contexts for
participants’ attitudes, and understanding cause-and-effect among variables.¹⁹ The final phase

---

¹² van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 101.
¹⁴ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 119.
¹⁵ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 123.
¹⁸ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 140-43.
¹⁹ van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 140-51.
is that of theological evaluation, which begins with an interpretive summation of research
data in order to answer the theological question one proposed in stage two. Following this,
one theologically reflects on the results by engaging them in conversation with theological
tradition. Finally, the research moves into theological-methodological reflection, which
considers the use of practical-theological paradigms and the methodological effects of one’s
research.

These are just two of several methodologies of practical theology, and they
demonstrate the sheer breadth of the field. Some, such as Browning, offer an approach with
stages that leave room for a variety of research methods to be utilized while ensuring the
interplay of theory and practice in the research process. On the other hand, van der Ven’s
rigid methodology provides a distinct approach that requires the use of specific (empirical)
methods carried out in prescribed manners, for this ensures that practical-theological research
is grounded in concrete reality. Yet these approaches are not mutually-exclusive. These
examples demonstrate that the various methodologies of practical theology are related to one
another in their quests to put practice and theory into mutual dialogue. For instance, while
Browning’s approach does not necessitate the original empirical research that van der Ven’s
requires, it certainly leaves room for it, especially in the building of thick descriptions.

This dissertation is an exercise in practical theology, yet it does not make use of the
two methods outlined above. For one thing, both are too formal and structured—and the
latter is far too rigidly prescribed—to be adequate for a work of practical theology that

---

20 van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 152.

21 van der Ven, *Practical Theology*, 152-4.

engages in research within multiple cultural contexts. My research requires a methodology that is more flexible so it can be adapted to suit the particularities of research questions I pose and the diverse communities and individuals who participate in it. Thus, it is more closely aligned with, although certainly not completely consistent with, another practical theologian’s methodology.

In his 2008 book *Practical Theology*, Richard Osmer outlines a fourfold approach to practical theology that, while similar to Browning’s methodology, better lends itself to adaptation and is intended specifically for use among leaders of faith communities. The first of Osmer’s four “tasks” is the descriptive-empirical task, which involves collecting information about what is going on in a given circumstance, situation, or context; to do so one can use informal, formal, or semiformal means, yet qualitative and quantitative methods are especially helpful. The second task is interpretative in that it draws from theories—especially relevant social science research—in order to better make sense of and analyze the situation or context one is studying. The next stage, which he names as the normative task, involves putting data gleaned in the previous task in conversation with theology in order to assess what ought to be happening in the situation. Finally, one moves to the pragmatic task to respond to the present circumstance or context in light of the knowledge generated in all

---

25 Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 37-9, 47-64.
preceding tasks. In his words, the goal of this final stage is “forming and enacting strategies of action that influence events in ways that are desirable.”

As mentioned, Osmer intends his methodology for use within faith communities, and it is more flexible and open to adaptation than those that I outlined earlier. In this dissertation, I attend to each one of his four tasks of practical theology, albeit in ways that are better suited to my research questions and the congregations and persons who participated in my study. I attend to the descriptive-empirical task in the first four chapters as I describe each congregation and analyze the ways that children’s theological meaning-making reflects, and does not reflect, their broader congregation. The interpretive task is evident in my exploration of discourses surrounding of multiculturalism in Canada and the attention scholars of children’s theology and spirituality give to culture and cultural diversity. One can see the normative task as I place the knowledge generated from my research in conversation with these two discourses, allowing it to critique the United Church’s vision for becoming intercultural as well as research in children’s spirituality and theology. Finally, the pragmatic task is evident not only in the critiques I offer, but also the recommendations I make for the practice of ministry with children in congregations.

Clearly, my methodology does not fully align with that which Osmer proposes; but it comes close to it in its attention to all four of his tasks of practical theology. In drawing on his broad approach, I am better able to engage in the sort of relationship between theory and practice of practical theology that, as Robert Mager imagines, allows practice to actually

---

have an impact on theory and, going further, sees the interplay of this relationship itself as an active practice in the world.\textsuperscript{29}

**Ethnographic Theology**

This dissertation is the result of a year-long ethnographic study. Ethnography, according to Mary Clark Moschella, “is a way of immersing yourself in the life of a people in order to learn something about and from them.”\textsuperscript{30} Scholars in many social scientific fields rely on ethnography as a primary research method. Theologians too have made use of this broad approach to qualitative research. In fact, in recent years this practice has germinated into conversations about theological ethnography, that is, how ethnography can be used not just by theologians, but also in ways that are theological. I consider the research I undertook to be a practice of theological ethnography in at least three ways.

First, my use of ethnography was theological through the pastoral roles that I took on as I carried out my research methods. As I met with children and adults and spent time listening to them, I was engaged in a form of what Moschella calls “ethnographic listening,”\textsuperscript{31} a form of listening that she believes to be so deeply theological that she names ethnography as a pastoral practice. In listening to and speaking with the research participants, I gave them time and space to reflect on issues, topics, and thoughts that are of profound importance to them. I wonder if, in this way, I was acting as a sort of spiritual director,

\textsuperscript{29} Robert Mager, “Do We Learn to Know God from What We Do? A Plea for a Relational Concept of Action,” in *Pathways to the Public Square: Practical Theology in an Age of Pluralism*, ed. Elaine Grahame and Anna Rowlands (Münster: LIT, 2005), 193, 198.

\textsuperscript{30} Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2008), 4

\textsuperscript{31} Moschella, *Ethnography*, 9
helping individuals to reflect on their personal experiences and perceptions of God. By inviting them to share in a space that was free from judgment or correction, I found that Moschella is correct in writing that this form of ethnographic pastoral listening “validates and honors another person’s experience, insight, and soul.”

Additionally, I acted as a companion on a theological journey with the participants, if only for a limited time. Together, as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, the children and I generated theological knowledge with one another. I asked questions that stirred their theological imaginations and I generated my own theological meaning when they asked me questions, many of which prompted me to reflect on things that I had not previously considered. Engaging in these rich theological conversations gave the children permission to journey to the edges of their imaginations as they wondered about God, Jesus, church, and their own lives, unfettered by the need to tow the party line or respond with “correct” answers. In these deep conversations, it became clear to me that, as Natalie Wigg-Stevenson has argued, communal theological reflection is itself a Christian practice.

Second, the ethnography in which I engaged was theological in its transformative power. Moschella argues that this research method can be named as a pastoral practice in its ability to evoke change. Since she explores how pastoral leaders can use ethnography to better understand their faith communities, she focuses on the transformation that can come

---


33 Moschella, Ethnography, 13.

34 Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 2.

35 Moschella, Ethnography, 11.
about in the shared life of congregations. Yet she notes that individuals who participate in the ethnographic research process can be significantly impacted by it. By having opportunities to have their deep and honest thoughts heard, a person can be empowered to find her or his voice.

Throughout my time with them, I was able to perceive that the children’s involvement in this research had an impact on them. As I will demonstrate in coming chapters, at different points the research process I noticed children feeling a sense of validation and empowerment as I listened to them. For example, Nicholas seemed reassured and at ease knowing that I did not judge the fact that he did not enjoy attending Sunday school, and that I didn’t like Sunday school when I was his age; Stephen told his mother that he appreciated being able to speak freely with me about his theological ideas; and Melissa and Laura, each of whom was hesitant at first, valued their time to openly speak about theological ideas so much that they asked me if we could find a time to talk again in the next day or two. While these snapshots cannot be used to demonstrate any sort of deep, ongoing, or long-term transformation, they do show that there is transformative power within the theological practice of ethnography.

My venture into ethnography also transformed me. The stories, ideas, and activities I engaged in with these children challenged my preconceived ideas. They pushed the boundaries of my faith, calling me to question my views of God, my assumptions surrounding theological integrity and research, and the ways that I practise my faith. Through practices of reflexivity, from keeping a research journal to mulling over ideas and events on

---


the long drives home, I studied myself and opened myself to being changed by the research process.

This brings me to the third way that this research was a practice of theology. “Sometimes,” writes Moschella, “by studying a congregation’s practices—the things they do and the reasons they give for doing them—we can get a vague sense of where God is in all of this.”38 During my year of participating in four congregations, I felt the presence of God, and I was often surprised by those transcendental Spirit-to-spirit moments. God was active within the conversations I had with the children, speaking to me through their voices in ways that call to mind the words of the psalmist.39 The Divine touched my soul as I found myself becoming immersed in the corporate worship of congregations, even as I attempted to take field notes during these moments. I felt the wind of the Spirit in the hospitality and trust that these four congregations extended to me, free and without any merit on my part. In these ways and more, this ethnographic sojourn was a deeply theological practice, one that allowed me to not just speak about God with others, but to be touched by the hand of God through these encounters.

A Defining Interlude

Before moving from the task of locating my research to that of locating myself, it is necessary for me to briefly define some key terms I use throughout this dissertation. Theology, spirituality, belief, and faith—each of these words is incredibly common in

38 Moschella, Ethnography, 40.
39 Psalm 8:2.
research such as mine. But the ways scholars use these terms are not always straightforward or consistent. Thus, some conceptuality clarity is important.

My understanding of theology stems from the etymology of this term, which fuses the Greek words theos, meaning “God,” with logia, meaning “utterances” or “statements.” Thus, theology is concerned with utterances about God, with the meaning human beings make about God and all things related to God. While some might be prone to see theology as only involving rational ideas and concepts, solely a matter of the head, throughout this dissertation it is clear that theology is something that is felt and experienced as well. The utterances about God that we human beings make are not simply the products of our thinking, but also our feeling and action in the world. This understanding of theology is consistent with discourse in practical theology, which I have already described as perceiving of theology as not simply concerned with the theoretical and abstract, but also with the realm of practice and concrete action.

Spirituality, as I will demonstrate later in this chapter, is a central concept to childhood studies and religion. It tends to speak of something broader than theology, something that is more raw and carnal. In making sense of spirituality as it relates to children, I rely on the work of Rebecca Nye, who set out to study children’s spirituality among primary school children in Britain. Out of the knowledge she generated in her study, she defined children’s spirituality as relational consciousness, which speaks of “a distinctive property of mental activity, profound and intricate enough to be termed ‘consciousness,’ and remarkable for its confinement to a broadly relational, inter- and intra-personal domain.”

---

Two related terms that warrant definition are belief and faith. As I use it in this dissertation, belief is a noun that refers to particular statement or assertion that one holds to be true. Faith, on the other hand, can involve beliefs, but speaks of something broader and more abstract. As I conceive of it, faith is a gift from God, freely given to all people.\textsuperscript{41} It is a sense of and trust in God or a higher power, and it can grow, change, and be nurtured over time. Faith can include beliefs, but it does not consist solely in statements that one holds to be true. Rather, it is at some level that unnameable, indefinable conviction in something greater than ourselves, one that people can respond to with acts of faithfulness that extend from one’s experiences of faith.

It is evident that these four terms—theology, spirituality, belief, and faith—are interrelated concepts. While I pull them apart from one another in order to provide a degree of conceptual clarity, the definitions above demonstrate that they are deeply connected with one another.

\textbf{Triangulating Me}

Several years ago, I overheard a friend of mine giving advice to a seminary student who was considering doctoral studies. “What’s that one question that burns within you?” she asked. “What issue keeps you up at night? What’s the question that you can’t not answer before you die?” Academic questions are born from personal experiences. This dissertation and the research contained therein are the result of that “burning question” that was fanned inside of me through the convergence of several life experiences.

I grew up in the heyday of multiculturalism in Canada, a time when interest in culture and cultural diversity was bourgeoning. When I was six years old, my older sister’s Brownie leader gave her group the task of researching their family heritage. My father, being a teacher-turned-superintendent, loved to get involved in these sorts of assignments. He made an inquiry into the Hungarian club in my hometown of Sudbury, Ontario, and arranged for our family to visit the club to do some research on our Hungarian lineage. From that first visit in 1990 until university studies called me to move away from home twelve years later, the Sudbury Hungarian Society was perhaps, more than any other community, the lifeblood of my family’s social world.

Each Friday night, the few dozen members of this group would meet together at Pius XII Elementary School, where we would learn Hungarian dancing, practise playing csokors (a term literally translated as “bouquet” that we used to refer to medleys of folk songs) on our citeras (folk instruments), learn the basics of the Hungarian language, and enjoy delicious Hungarian treats. On holidays like Easter, Christmas, and Hungarian National Day (15 March), the group would hold parties where we would learn and enact traditional folk tales and customs. And a few times each year, we would participate in cultural galas and festivals sponsored by the local, provincial, and federal governments, where the traditional dance, music, and food of several countries would be showcased. We were even fortunate enough to make three pilgrimages to Hungary with this group—in 1993, 1996, and 1999—that allowed us to experience the culture of this place firsthand.

My involvement with the Sudbury Hungarian Society not only allowed me to learn how to play out elements of Hungarian folklore like music and dance; it also helped me
better understand some of my natural inclinations, like mannerisms, familial phrases (or Csinosisms, as I call them), and patterns of thought. By getting to know other people of Hungarian lineage and taking in elements of this culture’s media, I came to believe that the reason why I sometimes behave, think, and relate to others the way I do is because somehow—despite growing up in a small mining city in northern Ontario—there were elements of Hungarian culture that seemed embedded in my DNA, constructing characteristics and shaping tendencies that seemed to come naturally to me.

It was through my involvement in this group that I first came to generate an understanding of the term culture. Through learning about my Hungarian heritage at the end of every week and experiencing elements of other heritages through multicultural festivals, I came to associate culture with ethnic heritage, with the traditional customs and ways of life that existed in the land we now call Canada for centuries or that were brought here through millions of immigrants.

The Canada in which I grew up was riding the wake of multicultural policies that played a role in my involvement in the local Hungarian group and cultural festivals that I attended throughout the 1990s. This context and local involvement gave me tools and resources that I pieced together into a simple view of culture. But it wasn’t until I moved away from my home and native land that I realized the formative (and sometimes dangerous) power of culture.

In 2008 I moved to Richmond, Virginia to pursue theological studies at Union Presbyterian Seminary. Having grown up with constant access to media from the U.S., I did
not anticipate experiencing much culture shock once I crossed the border. Sure, it was the southern U.S., but I thought I knew what this meant when I left Canada.

My naïveté shone through as I discovered that in entering Richmond, I was entering a new world, a new cultural space that, while not too far south geographically, was largely defined by its history as the capital of the Confederate States of America. What particularly shocked, frustrated, and saddened me were the many ways in which this city’s history of racism continued to shape the life of its citizens. Even the predominantly White seminary that I was attending couldn’t seem to get along with the theological school at the historically Black college just down the road, as power dynamics and wounds old and new festered into bitterness and division.42

As I navigated these new waters, I was surprised that so many people I encountered (particularly White Americans) seemed unaware of the dynamics that were so obvious to me. Thankfully, I met a few international students who shared my culture shock. And then I got to know some students of colour who perceived my deer-in-headlights demeanour toward these complex issues and educated me about the reality of race within the American south. But when I broached the topic with American students belonging to the dominant culture of the U.S., I realized that many of them couldn’t see the day-to-day effects of racism that were so blatant to me as I sat in classes, attended social events, and shopped for groceries. I

42 There is disagreement and inconsistency within journalistic and academic formatting guidelines as to whether or not “black” should be capitalized. In this dissertation I capitalize Black to indicate that I am using this term to speak of a socially-constructed racial-ethnic marker that is infused with meaning beyond a simple adjective that denotes a particular colour or shade. See L.D. Burnett, “To ‘B’ or Not to ‘B’: On Capitalizing the Word ‘Black’” U.S. Intellectual History Blog, 23 April, 2016, accessed 8 December, 2016, http://s-usih.org/2016/04/to-b-or-not-to-b-on-capitalizing-the-word-black.html. See also Merrill Perlman, “Black and White: Why Capitalization Matters,” Columbia Journalism Review, 23 April, 2015, accessed 8 December, 2016, http://www.cjr.org/analysis/language_corner_1.php.
wondered, *if these students can’t see the problems that I see because they grew up in this culture, then are there aspects of Canadian culture that I have been socialized not to see?*

It was as if I had taken the red pill.43 This moment helped me realize that culture is much more than folk dancing and buffets of food at multicultural festivals. Culture is the air we breathe as human beings. Or, to use another metaphor, it is the water surrounding us that we don’t realize we swim in until something pulls us out of it. When I left Virginia and moved back to Ontario, I brought with me a new determination to uncover those aspects of Canadian culture that I had been socialized not to see. One of the first things I needed to do on this quest was use my newfound sight to investigate the cultural narrative that was imparted to me during the first decades of my life.

I had always known that the blood coursing through my veins consisted of more than simply Hungarian DNA. My paternal grandparents were both Hungarian. My grandfather emigrated in 1926 and my grandmother’s parents had left Hungary for Canada a few decades earlier, before she was born. But, as is often the case, culture is a difficult thing to pin down. My maternal grandparents crossed deep-rooted Canadian religious and ethnic divisions when they married one another. She was a Roman Catholic French-Canadian born and raised in St. Boniface, the Francophone area of Winnipeg. My grandmother’s roots in Canada dated back a dozen generations to a settler who came to Nouveau France in 1620. My maternal grandfather’s lineage stemmed from Great Britain, and he was raised in one of the predecessors of the United Church until converting to Roman Catholicism in order to marry

43 This reference, popularized in science fiction culture after its use in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, speaks of the choice to become aware of truth and reality or remain ignorant and unaware of one’s true surroundings. In the film, the central character Neo is offered the choice between a blue pill, which will allow him to remain within the digitally manufactured and false world of the Matrix, and a red pill, which will cause him to wake to the harsh reality of the true world.
my grandmother in 1939. Even my Hungarian grandparents have a history more complicated than I first realized as a child, for my paternal grandfather was raised in a poor village that had become part of Romania after World War I, and my grandmother was a second-generation Canadian, who grew up in a family of immigrants in a land that was new to them. Of course, as I will discuss shortly, I perceive culture to be much broader than ethnicity and national heritage. But this family history is the one that dominated my life story and it led me to hold, for a time, a narrow view of culture.

This dissertation is the most penetrating and extensive study I have undertaken into children’s spirituality, theology, and culture, but it is certainly not the first. While a student at McMaster Divinity College, I conducted qualitative research into the spiritual lives of children through which I framed a four-fold typology for children’s spiritual experiences. Three years later, it was published as *Children’s Ministry that Fits*. My Th.M. thesis from Union Presbyterian Seminary moved away from children’s spirituality, but gave me experience in exploring the cultural dynamics of religion through a comparative analysis of the spirituality of emerging adults in the United States and Québec. During my doctoral studies at the Toronto School of Theology, I had the privilege of taking courses about intercultural theology and ministry—like those which I recounted earlier—as well as working with Dr. Pamela Couture to write comprehensive examinations that blended multicultural/intercultural discourse in Canada with research in the field of children’s spirituality and theology. During this time I wrote, presented, and had published scholarly

---

and professional articles that flowed out of these examinations. All of these prior sojourns into this subject prepared me for the research I undertook for this dissertation, research that is intimately connected to my personal history over the past quarter century.

My Assumptions

This dissertation is not only connected to my personal history; it is also deeply intertwined with the assumptions I bring to it. From proposal to fieldwork, coding to writing, every point along this journey has been marked by my understandings of culture and multiculturalism, the United Church’s “Transformative Vision” for becoming intercultural, and the field of children’s spirituality and theology.

Culture and Multiculturalism

Culture is an incredibly complex term that is understood in varying ways. My assumptions regarding culture rest between modernist and postmodern notions. Drawing from modernist viewpoints, I hold that culture is a universal marker of human life; that it shapes humanity but is also shaped by human beings; that the manifestations of culture are seemingly endless; and that every distinguishing feature of a group is part of its culture—as well as some features that are shared across different cultural groups. Building on postmodern ideas, I contend that cultures may be distinct from one another, but they are fluid, contradictory, and

---


46 My understandings of modernist and postmodern views of culture are based on Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1997).
even inconsistent wholes that bind people together as a focus for common engagement rather than agreement; their boundaries are porous, so features of cultures can be shared among several societies and groups; and there can be tremendous internal diversity among a given culture, so much so that such diversity can be a central feature of a cultural group.

Cultures can be large or small, from a shared national culture to that of a small faith community or neighbourhood group. We all exist within several cultures, which overlap and combine and run into each other as they influence and are influenced by each of us who exist within them. While at times colloquial use of the term culture is perceived to be synonymous with ethnicity, race, and/or nationality, culture is in fact a much broader reality, overlapping and encompassing all sorts of aspects of human life, such as religious tradition, country of origin, social class, geographic location, age, gender, sexual orientation, political persuasion, and even personal preferences such as one’s taste in music, books, and movies. With so many aspects bound up with endless manifestations of culture, in reality cultures are incredibly complex entities that operate at several diverse levels of human life as they shape and are shaped by our thoughts, actions, values, and beliefs.47

Over the past half-century, cultural diversity has become a hallmark of Canadian life and self-identity. Canada is known to be a cultural mosaic, where innumerable cultures fit together in our common society. While I carry this assumption into this dissertation, I also understand that the veneer of Canadian multiculturalism is filled with cracks. For one thing,

47 My understanding of culture is in part influenced by that of Carl James, who writes that “culture is a concept that refers to the way in which a given society, community, or group organizes and conducts itself as distinguished from that of other societies, communities, or groups. Culture consists of a dynamic and complex set of values, beliefs, norms, patterns of thinking, styles of communication, linguistic expressions, and ways of interpreting and interacting with the world that help people understand and thus survive their varied circumstances.” Carl E. James, Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity, and Culture, 4th ed. (Toronto: Thompson Educational, 2010), 26.
not all tiles that make up this mosaic are given equal priority, and some are much more prominently placed than others. Those groups who have historically held power in Canada continue to exercise the greatest influence and benefit from privileges not afforded to other cultural groups. For another thing, Canadian multiculturalism rests on simple and surface-level assumptions about culture, seeing it as little more than ethnicity, race, and/or nationality. This is something that Canadian sociologist Phil Ryan asserts by arguing that culture in Canada is often metaphorically perceived as “a sort of ‘container’ of individuals”\(^{48}\) that holds within it all of those elements that make up a culture. While there is some validity to placing boundaries around cultures, I see these boundaries as porous, containing within them a group of people that is fluid, complex, and internally diverse.

The United Church of Canada and Its “Transformative Vision”

The United Church’s “Transformative Vision” seeks to step away from hegemonic and surface-level notions of multiculturalism. It urges the denomination to open its arms and more fully embrace the reality of cultural diversity that it is facing within its congregations and the society in which it participates. But it subverts its own ideals even while attempting to point to a reality that it fails to truly promote.

My reading of the “Transformative Vision”—which I will more fully explore in chapter 6—identifies that the primary view of culture it relies on is problematically narrow and simplified. Throughout the document, culture is perceived to be little more than a synonym for ethnicity, language, and race. By identifying four categories of congregations—

\(^{48}\) Phil Ryan, *Multicultiphobia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 12.
ethnic majority, ethnic minority, Francophone, and Aboriginal—the United Church imagines cultures as settled entities, as containers that are fully distinct, bounded, and internally consistent wholes based on a few narrow cultural elements. There is little room within this fourfold classification for cultures—and congregations—that are internally diverse, shifting, and adapting to new times and places, leaving culture to stagnate into stereotype.

My positionality is that of an outsider to the United Church, yet my education and relationships provide me with access to the inside. In organizing my research for this dissertation, I chose to work within the categories the United Church suggests, while adapting and complexifying them to better account for my assumptions of culture. Thus, each of the four congregations that participated in this research is a unique culture unto itself. Yet at the same time they all exist within multiple other cultures that are held in common with one another—such as their broader denomination and their location within a similar geographic region of Canada—and cultures that are shared with other groups yet distinct from the other participating congregations—such as their racial or ethnic identity, their location in a rural, suburban, or urban setting, their socio-economic status, and their level of internal diversity. In choosing these congregations, I am at once operating within the United Church’s classification yet doing so in a way that acknowledges the complex and fluid reality of culture.

Children’s Spirituality and Theology

The final set of assumptions that I carry with me into this dissertation has to do with the field of children’s spirituality and theology. Within this field, there is a tendency for scholars to
overlook issues of culture and cultural diversity; among those who do attend to culture, most do not do so with adequate depth. There are some scholars, for example, who study children’s spirituality within particular cultural contexts; but culture in these cases is often perceived along lines of nationality, race, and ethnicity. Furthermore, scholars may utilize culture as a primary lens for a research methodology, but continue to ignore it as a variable and framework for interpreting research findings. Thus, there is a gap within the field into which this dissertation speaks.

If, as I assume, culture is an all-pervasive aspect of social life, then a further assumption is that all areas of human life are grounded in cultural contexts. This includes children’s theological meaning-making. The negligence of culture among scholars of childhood studies and religion, however, fails to give concerted attention to this reality. Since no theology is a-cultural, then one can claim, as I do, that all of children’s theological ideas and practices are bound up with their cultural contexts and need to be attended to as such.

Finally, research into the religious and spiritual lives of children has far too frequently been focused on generating insight into the content of children’s theological ideas. These studies open windows to the inner lives of children by exploring what young people think about particular topics, such as biblical stories, perceptions of the soul, and faith practices. Yet I believe that not only is the content of children’s theologies important to understand, but so too are the processes by which they come to make such theological meaning (I will discuss this further in chapter 7).

I have organized, carried out, and interpreted the research within this dissertation out of a multifaceted set of assumptions surrounding culture and multiculturalism, the United
Church’s “Transformative Vision” for becoming an intercultural church, and the broader field of children’s spirituality and theology. Throughout these eight chapters, I rely on these assumptions in explicit and implicit ways in order to generate original insights into children’s theological meaning-making within different cultural contexts, and use these insights to critique the United Church’s vision for becoming intercultural as well as scholarship within the field of children's spirituality and theology.

The Road Ahead

I begin this dissertation with descriptions and interpretations of children's theological meaning-making in different cultural contexts. I devote each of chapters 1-4 to one of the four congregations that participated in my research—Parkdale United Church, Messiah Methodist United Church, Burke Street United Church, and Colkirk United Church. To maintain anonymity, I assigned a randomly-selected pseudonym to each congregation and participant. I begin each of these chapters with an overview of the congregation, including aspects of its geographical context, history, congregational demographics, worship styles, and ministry with children. I then explore the theological outlook of the congregational culture by describing the theological values that its minister(s) and key leaders bring to their leadership of it, as well as aspects of the broad theological ethos that seems to drive its life as a community. I bring this culture and theological ethos to bear on the information generated through interviews with the children at the congregation by interpreting the theological meaning they make in light of their faith community’s theological ethos. After discussing a
few key ways that the children’s theologies express consistency with their congregation, I explain ways in which the children’s theologies differ from that of their faith community.

Chapter 5 brings a shift in focus from the particular contexts of individual congregations to the wider lens of comparative interpretation. I place each of the children in conversation with one another through a multifaceted comparative interpretation of their theologies. Using what Emmanuel Lartey calls a “Trinitarian” view of personhood (which relies on the work of Kluckhohn and Murray49) to affirm that all people are “like all others, like some others, and like no others,”50 I discuss the content, sources, and methods of children’s theologies in ways that showcase commonalities held by all children, similarities expressed within particular congregations, and those aspects of their theologies that make each child a unique theologian in their own right. With culturally-based comparative study missing from the field of children’s spirituality and theology, this chapter is a strategic move toward addressing the gap in the field by providing in-depth interpretation of children's theology in light of culture and cultural diversity.

Chapters 6 and 7 build on those that come before them by using the interpretations of children's theologies in chapters 1-5 as a voice of critique. In chapter 6, the knowledge generated about children's theological meaning-making sheds new light on the United Church’s “Transformative Vision.” I begin by situating the United Church’s plan for becoming intercultural within its broader context of multiculturalism in Canada, describing a brief history of cultural diversity and critiques of Canadian multiculturalism. Then, after


50 Emmanuel Y. Lartey, In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling, 2nd ed. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2003), 34.
introducing the “Transformative Vision,” I draw from the theologies of the children and congregations that participated in this dissertation research to make four points of praise or critique about the vision: it takes a step forward by listening to marginalized voices; it does not take into account hybrid cultural identities; it overlooks contexts of diversity and difference; and it maintains power among those groups that have historically been at the centre of the denomination.

Chapter 7 has as its focus the bourgeoning academic field of children’s spirituality and theology. After placing some loose conceptual boundaries around this field, I articulate four ways that scholars within it address—or fail to address—culture and cultural diversity: by making passing references to it yet relying on implied European-American and British norms; by researching children within a specific cultural context; by conducting studies across multiple cultural contexts; and by giving concerted attention to the importance of culture and contexts in relation to research within the field. With such a perspective of the field in mind, I draw from the theological meaning-making of the nineteen children who gave life to this dissertation in order to make three critiques of research within the field: it needs to pay attention to the processes of children’s theological meaning-making and not only the products; it must explore both the individual and communal nature of children's theology; and scholars can no longer afford to ignore culture as a variable at every step of research into children’s spiritual and theological lives.

In the final chapter, I offer concluding reflections by addressing three issues. First, I address some of the limitations that surround this research and the interpretations I make of it, exploring how the research methods and my power and positionality affect this study in a
number of ways. From there I raise four sets of questions that form important avenues for
inquiry that expand and build on this dissertation. Such questions surround further research
into how children’s congregational involvement, parents and families, additional and
overlapping cultural contexts in children’s lives, and longitudinal studies can all add to the
knowledge I generate in this study. Finally, I highlight implications for congregational
practices of ministry with children that this research leads toward: an emphasis on cultivating
children's capacities for theological meaning-making; achieving consistency among
children’s ministry and broader congregational culture; and giving opportunities for children
to talk openly and creatively about their theological views and experiences.
CHAPTER 1

“THANK YOU FOR MAKING CHURCH”:

PARKDALE UNITED CHURCH AND A THEOLOGY OF COMMUNITY

Parkdale United Church has a history that stretches back nearly two centuries to its founding in 1830. From the busy shopping centres, modest homes, and small apartments surrounding the church, it can be difficult to imagine what the area around the current building looked like when it was erected amidst farmland in 1870. It is not a large church—the stone structure can accommodate about 160 people—but its stature is dominated by a steeple that reaches to the sky. The city has grown up around this once-country church, and the Parkdale United Church of today is holding onto this history as it adapts to its present neighbourhood.

Upon stepping inside this congregation’s building, one is immediately struck by the eclecticism of its current decor that blends past traditions with present circumstances. There are many elements that show this congregation’s rich history—old pews, plaques commemorating congregants who fought in WWI and WWII, large windows that flood the sanctuary with light, and wooden furnishings such as a communion table and a baptismal font. But these more typical features of a congregation as old as Parkdale are juxtaposed by ones that are more unexpected—strings of lights above the chancel doors, a piano adorned with about two dozen small flags from countries around the world, dusty poppies placed among the memorial plaques, and a projection screen hanging prominently above the altar. During my time in this congregation there were several scarves pinned along strings on both
sides of the nave, which members of the congregation had knitted throughout the summer and fall and would soon donate to a women’s shelter and a Salvation Army Christmas clothing drive.

There are four doors in the sanctuary, one of which is at the small narthex and leads to the front steps of the church. The two chancel doors open to a hallway leading to a few small offices and lined with photos and newspaper articles from the church’s 185-year history. To the left of the altar is a door to a small but brightly-lit foyer and stairs leading to the church hall, which can accommodate about one hundred people and includes a small kitchen off to one corner. With one wall for cupboard storage and another featuring large windows, the other two walls are adorned with photographs from past congregational events and a large bulletin board filled with announcements, drawings, and posters for events in the congregation and its neighbourhood.

Parkdale is a congregation that identifies as intercultural and it makes this known in its tagline, which sometimes appears on the front of weekly bulletins: “A community of the world’s peoples sharing faith and culture in Parkdale since 1830.” About one hundred people or so gather for Sunday worship, coming together to form a community marked by a diversity of ages, races, and ethnicities. Approximately half of the congregants are White individuals and the other half are people of colour; the majority of White congregants are Euro-Canadians, but a few are immigrants to Canada from Great Britain. While most people of colour are immigrants from the Philippines, others are Black Canadians and immigrants from South and Southeastern Asia. This racial diversity seems correlated to age. For the most
part, the people of colour appeared to be under fifty years of age, while most of the White congregants were seniors who looked to be seventy and older.

These demographic features are likely related to the high number of newcomers to Canada who have settled in the neighbourhood surrounding Parkdale; but they are also related to the recent history of the congregation. Around the year 2000, it began discussions with West End United Church about the possibility of amalgamating their congregations—both of which had experienced numerical decline—but neither community was willing to give up their church building. Less than a decade later, Parkdale was named a provincial heritage building and, thus, the congregation was unable to close its building for any sort of amalgamation. West End United Church was not in favour of a coming together that would not see the two congregations on equal footing in terms of their buildings, so any talk of joining forces came to an end. Only a few years later, West End had to close its congregation and, after giving their building to Messiah Methodist United Church (coincidentally the congregation that is the focus of the next chapter), a group of elderly congregants from West End—most of whom are White—began attending Parkdale, although they tend to keep to themselves.

Worship services at Parkdale, like its decor, juxtapose formality and informality. Services follow a liturgy of prayers, readings, and hymns written in the congregation’s weekly bulletins that on some Sundays can reach up to twelve pages in length. Yet the formality of a written liturgy is met with informality in how that liturgy comes to life during the service. It is not unusual to see adults and children alike pick up simple rhythm instruments to play while dancing along to hymns, or witness young people moving about the
sanctuary as they write prayers, prepare and perform skits, or go to the hall to set up the soup lunch the congregation shares every few weeks. The rhythm of Parkdale’s liturgy comes to life among the community in ways that encourage noise, movement, and active participation in worship services.

Each month, the youth and children in the congregation organize and lead a worship service called Singspiration! which runs for about one hour before the regular service. Launched about ten years ago as a way to get young people involved in the congregation, Singspiration! is a service that features more contemporary praise songs, a time of Bible quizzing, and a short “inspirational talk” in lieu of a sermon. Attendance at this service increases throughout, as congregants begin coming to the church for the 10:30 am service. If the weekly service can be classified as “informal,” Singspiration! can seem like downright bedlam. Throughout one service alone the youth led the congregation in loud music that was not terribly polished, there was an open mic time for sharing blessings and needs, and at one point several members led an impromptu memorial for a long-time congregant and former chair of the board who recently died from complications associated with AIDS. In multiple instances it seemed as though the youth and adults alike were unsure about who was going to be leading certain parts of the service. Yet none of this informality and confusion seemed to be a problem for the congregation. And from the fact that the great majority of the service was led by young people who appeared to be quite comfortable in their roles, it seems as though Singspiration! is meeting its goal of empowering children and youth to offer leadership in the congregation.
The activities for the members of Parkdale go well beyond congregational worship. Social events and celebrations are regular happenings, and two of the most common events involve sharing food together—every few weeks the youth host a soup lunch and after each Singspiration! service there is a simple breakfast served to the congregation. Other activities occur less frequently, but are still of vital importance. These include a summer vacation Bible camp (the most recent of which was intergenerational), a fair featuring performances highlighting the breadth of ethnic and cultural diversity in the congregation, and a retreat in the Muskoka area shared with members of a Korean congregation that uses Parkdale’s building on Sunday afternoons. Although less frequent than worship services, these activities are spoken of with great fondness and help build community among the members of the congregation.

Making Church Together

Rev. Lynn has been the solo minister at Parkdale for the past six years, and leads the congregation out of a vision firmly rooted within a theology of community. This became evident rather early in my relationship with Parkdale, for when I began speaking with Rev. Lynn about the possibility of having her congregation participate in this research and I shared what I hoped such participation would entail, she stated that I would have to interview the children in pairs or small groups rather than individually. She went on to explain that in everything she does, she seeks to ensure that Parkdale is a congregation in which people do life together, and this meant that it was inappropriate for it to have its children participate in individual interviews.
I asked Rev. Lynn to say more about this theology of community during a follow-up Skype conversation after all the interviews at Parkdale were complete. She explained that her theology of community is informed by “an individual theology of Sabbath” and an “impetus to live as a covenental people.” For her, a theology of Sabbath prepares individual members of the congregation for life in community. Drawing from a Hebraic understanding of Sabbath, she understands the worship life of Parkdale to be one in which all people—children and elders alike—participate in worship. In fact, she encourages young people in the congregation to help lead worship; for example, by having youth like Eva (who served as my research assistant at Parkdale) and children (like those whom I interviewed) preside over, serve, and assist with communion. In this way, Rev. Lynn sees herself as “bringing that kind of Sabbath Friday night role of the youngest child in the family [to] ask the reigning male elder around the table, you know, ‘Why do we eat these foods? Why do we do this?’” But the practice of Sabbath extends beyond Sunday worship. Rev. Lynn encourages older children and teens to go on mission trips and retreats so they engage in a process of realizing “the importance of Sabbath and becoming grounded and resting and kind of reconnecting with God of out where they’ve had powerful experiences.” Thus, this theology of Sabbath is “codified,” to use a term from Rev. Lynn, each week in Sunday worship and in occasional events and retreats that build this practice into the faith lives of its members from an early age.

This theology pushes the congregation to be one that values all people as participants in its life and empowers them to have a voice and a stake in the community. Although she serves as a solo minister, Rev. Lynn calls all members of the congregation to minister to one
another. At times, such ministry involves leadership in worship services, and during my visits to Parkdale51 I witnessed such empowerment as congregants young and old led music, wrote and shared prayers, prepared and served communion, presided over a baptism, and offered sermons. Such empowerment was vocalized as Rev. Lynn began the first service I attended by saying “Thank you for making church today.”

Of course, empowerment of the whole community does not automatically lead to the equitable sharing of power among all members. There were times during my visits when some individuals who have traditionally held power due to their age, gender, sexual orientation, and race seemed to struggle with hearing the voices of people whose attributes have traditionally kept power from them. Under Rev. Lynn’s guidance, this community has been intentional in attempting to empower all people as active contributors to the community, as people join her in saying that it is every member’s responsibility to mentor and form one another. Such a vision was highlighted in one congregant’s reflections on her recent trip to Halifax for the United Church’s intercultural conference. One of her biggest learnings at the event was the importance of “mutually reciprocal” relationships.

Alongside an understanding of Sabbath, Rev. Lynn’s theology of community is informed by a call to go out from the community and do good in the world. In her words, out of a theology of Sabbath comes an “impetus to live as a covenantal people, caring for the widow and orphan, looking to the margins.” One way she builds such a theology into Parkdale is by sharing stories that paint an image of “a loving God who accepts us and

---

51 I visited Parkdale four times during the autumn and winter of 2013-2014. In November, I participated in a worship service; in January, I visited twice to interview the children; and in early February, I returned to participate in worship again, following which I conducted a focus group interview with adults.
welcomes us and asks us to continue to sort of expand the stakes of our tents and welcome people in and learn how to care for one another.” Worship services at this congregation are filled with moments that challenge the community to think and live and act out its mandate to care for others. For example, during the first service I participated in, Rev. Lynn showed a picture of the destruction of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines and provided information about where congregants could donate funds to support the victims, reminding them that the Canadian government would match their donations. This call for donations may be related to the fact that there is large Filipino community within this congregation.

This theology of community through which Rev. Lynn guides Parkdale seems to be built into nearly every aspect of the congregation. For example, it guides its understanding of food, for this is a community that gathers to break bread together, both during the liturgical act of communion and informal yet regularly occurring meals. As food brings the community together, it also shows care for those present, for Parkdale is not a high-income neighbourhood and having food available at many ministries and activities ensures no one leaves hungry.

Parkdale is a congregation that may foster community, but it does so while valuing the tremendous diversity that exists among its members. This congregation self-identifies as intercultural in the very broadest sense of the term, as a space in which people of incredible diversity come together to co-create community. As stated by the tagline of the congregation, placed prominently on the front of weekly bulletins, it is “a community of the world’s peoples.” Having studied, through doctoral research, her congregation’s quest to be and become intercultural, Rev. Lynn affirms an understanding of culture much like that which I
outlined in the introduction, a view that expands culture beyond race and ethnicity and to the whole life of a human community. In her words, “there are a constant collision and collaboration of ‘culture’… we need to stand apart in our difference and work together to cross barriers that can separate peoples based on (several of) race, class, age, employment status, migration history, accented language and so on.”

As I observed and participated in the life of this community for a short time, it was clear to me that it is a congregation that expresses layers of diversity, including ethnicity and race, socio-economic status, nationality, age, liturgical style, and theological view. As stated previously, this congregation is made up of people of multiple ages, races, ethnic backgrounds, and countries of origin. Furthermore, there was significant theological diversity expressed during my visits to Parkdale. For example, while some congregants seemed to cringe at the use of male pronouns for God, several others regularly referred to God as “he.”

The involvement of people holding to multiple differences and diversities is intentionally spoken about in a way that reminds people that, at times, being one community means that every person will be pulled outside of her or his comfort zone. As Rev. Lynn stated before sharing the words of lament during one service, “not all of you will like all the words every week, but it is our lament as a community of faith.” Rather than seeking uniformity among congregants, this minister encourages folks to pay attention to the diversity present and build a community in which differences are respected, appreciated, and contested.
Theological Reflections

The interviews I conducted with the children at Parkdale offered glimpses into the depth of their theological lives. Yet my analysis of these conversations indicates that, overall, the ways these young people generate theology are consistent with and reflect the overall culture of their congregation. I will demonstrate this by discussing the communal nature of their theological explorations, the importance of shared experiences, and their openness to diversity and difference.

Communal Theology

I mentioned earlier that when Rev. Lynn and I first discussed the possibilities for conducting research at Parkdale, she asked that I interview the children in pairs or small groups, for in everything they do at this church, they seek to do it in community; and this includes the generation of theological insight. This is exemplified in the following short conversation with Grace (11) and Angela (12), both of whom were baptized and raised at Parkdale. After I asked the girls to draw a picture of God, each of them created an image of Jesus and then thought together about the features that define Jesus in images:

Grace: Um, he looks kind of old.

Dave: Kind of old?

Angela: He wears robes.

Dave: Yeah?

Angela: In many pictures he wears robes.

Grace: A beard.
Dave: …So why do you think that Jesus wears robes?

Angela: (pause) Um… I don’t know.

Dave: Do you think if Jesus came back, like if he was here today, would he wear robes?

Grace: Maybe.

Angela: Yeah. Or if he wants to wear like a suit.

Grace: Yeah.

Dave: So maybe, maybe not. What makes you think he would or wouldn’t [wear a suit]?

Grace: Because it’s, like, more modern times.

Angela: So he’d wear more modern clothes.

This short exchange was typical of my conversations with the children from Parkdale. They would often respond to my questions and explore ideas together. In this instance, her discussion with Angela led Grace to engage more deeply with what it is that makes pictures of Jesus distinguishable and how even superficial aspects of his life like his clothes and appearance were contextualized to his culture and may be re-imagined in our current time and place. Yet this was only one instance among many in which these children did theology together. At another point during our interview, for example, we began talking about the relationship between God and Jesus and I asked them to say more about how they are related to one another. Grace looked to Angela as if to say How do you think we should answer this?, and then responded with “They’re, like, the same,” to which Angela quickly chimed in with “I think it’s the same.”

Theology, for these children, is not a solo enterprise. Echoing the overall theology of community that permeates the culture of their congregation, these children formulated their
theological views with one another. As they drew pictures of God and talked about their congregations, they were engaged in a process of theological reflection through which they shared ideas and challenged one another as they did theology in community. And our conversation was certainly not their first opportunity to do theological reflection with one another. One way that Rev. Lynn encourages these children to participate in congregational worship is to ask them to write prayers, skits, and other pieces of the liturgy together that they will share during a future worship service. With such practices as common means through which these children do theology in community, the conversational nature of their theological thinking during my interview with them seems to be consistent with the way their congregation nurtures their theological imaginations in the first place.

Experienced Theology

Parkdale is a congregation in which Rev. Lynn helps people do “life in community”—and from my conversation with the children there, it is clear that their activities and experiences in community are of vital importance to their theologies. Worship services are certainly one form of such shared experiences. But as Angela said, it’s “not just the services, but, like, things that we have done like dinners and games nights, where people come together.” Angela, Grace, and Lizzy (13)—the latter of whom arrived late and joined Grace, Angela and me about twenty minutes into our conversation—spoke at length about such activities, including volunteer outreach work, Singspiration!, skits they had written and performed during worship, Christmas pageants, and overnight retreats. They also spoke about a
multicultural fair and told me about the types of dances—Filipino, African break dancing, and hip hop—that members of Parkdale performed.

One of the more recent experiences that these children had shared together—and one that was highly valued by all of the children (and adults) I interviewed from this congregation—was a 2013 vacation Bible camp. Having in the past been led by a paid student from outside the congregation, Parkdale decided that it wanted to reformat this program and asked the youth in the congregation to head it up. The result was unexpected, but has received rave reviews from the children and adults alike. As Rev. Lynn said in the adult focus group,

I just looked at it as intergenerational camp. That’s what it turned into. The youth had done all the programming for a whole week of camp. So we were a good little community. It was quite interesting… There was about twenty of us altogether, I guess. seventeen, twenty, something like that… The Spirit blew and that’s where we ended up with, that’s what we ended up with… I think we should just set it up that way next year… This is what the Spirit blew, so maybe we should just go with that.

After listening to Grace, Angela, and Lizzy laugh and reminisce about experiences such as these for several minutes, I asked them why these moments mattered so much:

Dave: Why has all that stuff [their shared experiences] been so important to you? (they are eager to respond and a few of them try to answer at the same time.)

Angela: Because it’s basically like how we knew each other and how we became closer to each other, and… yeah.

Lizzy: Because it kind of, um… it’s who we are. This church is who we are. Like, if it wasn’t for all the prayers we’ve said, we wouldn’t—we wouldn’t have become so faithful and like, in front of an audience, and...

Dave: What do you mean?

Grace: Like, ’cause like, when we grew up we started doing things in front of the grown up—the group of people that helped us, like...
Lizzy: We started performing at sort of a young age, sort of. And it kind of helped us come out of our little shell. Yeah.

Dave: So you said it’s kind of who you are, it’s made you faithful. What do you think it means for you to be faithful?

Lizzy: That we can always, like, rely on each other and no matter what, God is always with us, and um… yeah.

Dave: (to Grace and Angela) What about you guys? What does it mean for you to be faithful?

Grace: What she said.

Angela: What she said (they all laugh)… To be faithful, I think, like, to be like blessed with this family that we have, and the memories that we had with each other and all the fun things that we had, and yeah...

Dave: Do you think you can be faithful alone?

Grace: It’s good to be alone sometimes. And then when you’re with other people it’s good too—

Lizzy: (interjecting) It’s okay to be independent, but it’s always good to know you have somebody to rely on.

Shared experiences are key sources for the creation of theological meaning in these children. They hold to strong theologies of community, theologies forged through being a part of a congregation that invites them to participate in—and give leadership to—the ways in which they practise their faith together. By engaging in a congregation that invites them into community and sees them as participants in its life, these girls have developed an understanding of faith and faithfulness that requires interconnectedness generated through sharing experiences as they do life together.

Furthermore, as Rev. Lynn’s theology of community is built on an understanding of Sabbath that acts as an impetus for caring for others, so too do the shared experiences of these children provide them with a theology of faithfulness that includes being cared for by
one another. Such experiences have given them a strong sense of belonging not just to any community, but to a community that cares for them, a community on which they can rely for help. Out of the storehouses of their memories, they remember that they are cared for by their congregation. It is no wonder that Angela and Grace both drew pictures of a God who actively cares for others, specifically by healing and helping children with their problems. Out of their experiences of being cared for as part of a “really tight family,” to use Lizzy’s words, their congregation has given them glimpses of a God who helps and cares for people like them.

Shared experiences are vibrant sources for theological meaning among the children at Parkdale. But they are so much more than simply sources for theology. Angela, Grace, and Lizzy spoke of the experiences they shared together at Parkdale in such a way as to attribute these things they have done as theological in and of themselves. They demonstrate that theology is not something that only exists within the realm of thoughts; it is also embodied, in their case in the making of community. In Lizzy’s words, “from this church we all became very close and, like… from all being here together, we all became like a really tight family.” Perhaps this idea was best exemplified when these three children told me about all the memories and relationships that are woven into the eclectic church building in which they meet. Only a few weeks before our conversation, a cherished older gentleman in the congregation passed away, and these girls shared about how special it was that his memory will forever live on the wall of the church into which he and his friend carved their initials and wrote the year—1949—next to it. As they told me about discovering this inscription and several other shared experiences, they were recounting acts through which they have done
theology with their congregation. These moments and experiences that they were recounting and reflecting on as they sat with me that morning were nothing short of experiences of lived theology. Through having those experiences and recalling them in the interview, they were embodying the very theology of community that Rev. Lynn seeks to build into the core of this congregation. These children were remembering moments in which they were the living theology of Parkdale.

Open Theology

Diversity is the order of the day at Parkdale United Church, as it is continually moving toward becoming an intercultural faith community in a broad sense of what constitutes culture. This congregation demonstrates that being a community that is a “really tight family” need not necessitate that all people think the same way. As I listened to the children discuss and generate theology together, it was evident that they were doing so while leaving room for difference and diversity. Throughout our conversations, the children shared ideas that sometimes did not align with those of others, yet they were not quick to simply discount them, but rather carefully considered different ideas. Take, for example, this excerpt from my interview with Jacob (5) and Enoch (10), two boys who played games together on the day that I interviewed them at Parkdale:

Enoch: I think there was an old saying called, like, “Whenever you lie, [baby Jesus] cries.” Or whenever you lie a lightning bolt hits you that God throws at you which you can’t really see.

Dave: Okay. So God wants people to tell the truth?

Enoch: Yeah. To be good… and… because they just… God would give a warning… God would give a warning to those guys who are being bad so…
Jacob: I lie sometimes, but I… I lie sometimes, but I don’t get hit by lightning bolt. I don’t even know why that’s true. It’s really true.

Dave: Hmm… So you both think that God wants people to do good, to be good, like, God cares—

Enoch: (interrupting) Yes, because he gives them a warning and if they don’t listen—

Jacob: (talking over Enoch) Maybe, maybe when I lie I knew.

This snippet of dialogue is one of several in which the children at this congregation considered one another’s ideas as they were speaking about issues that matter to them and “trying them on” to see if these ideas fit within their current theological imaginings.

Sometimes the new ideas they encountered seemed to work well with their own emerging thoughts. For example, when Lizzy shared her definition of faithfulness (see above), Angela and Grace both responded with “What she said.” In some instances, when new ideas were not fitting very well within their current thoughts, the children tweaked their theologies in order to make room for the ideas their peers were sharing with them, which is what occurred in the conversation between Jacob and Enoch above. The saying that Enoch shared with us did not match Jacob’s view, and Jacob was aware of this. But instead of discounting it altogether, Jacob demonstrated a willingness to expand his interpretation of this experience, thinking that perhaps the reason he does not get hit by a lightning bolt when he lies is because he is already aware that he lied. Thus, God need not bring it to his attention with a high-voltage warning.

These children demonstrate that doing theology in community does not mean that all people must think and act in the same way. This sentiment is one that Rev. Lynn encourages in the congregation, reminding people that at times their theologies “brush up against” those
of others, yet this is what is involved in being a community marked by diversity. Clearly, this process by which Parkdale does theology is echoed in the conversations of the young people from this congregation as they demonstrated a significant willingness to genuinely engage with ideas that were new or foreign to them.

Angela and Grace responded to my request to draw a picture of God by drawing images of Jesus helping others. Angela’s Jesus was helping a child deal with struggles like bullies and family; Grace’s Jesus was healing a child from an illness. As they were explaining their drawings to me, I noticed that both drawings included yellow lines around parts of Jesus’ body. Grace said that the yellow streaks of light coming from his hands symbolized Jesus’ power to heal others. This is not, however, the way Jesus actually heals people; for Grace, this image of Jesus’ healing powers represents that “Jesus helps you and he makes things kind of better.” The yellow lines behind Jesus in Angela’s drawings represented rays of light, which she drew because, “for some reason I think that, you know, like the sun… I think it follows you everywhere you go. I think Jesus follows you everywhere you go.”

Both of these girls were manifesting Parkdale’s openness to diversity in their awareness that their images were representations of God, symbolic images of how they imagine God to be and act in the world. Such an awareness of the representational nature of their drawings calls attention to the fact that the way each person imagines God is simply that—their image—and such images are merely representations of a God who is described and imagined in different ways.
Symbols and metaphors were one way that these children demonstrated their comfort with a God beyond their imaginations. Another was through their use of language expressing their comfort with uncertainty surrounding God, which was exemplified best by Jacob. His description of God was peppered with words speaking of the mystery and uncertainty surrounding God, words like *maybe, it seems, sometimes,* and *I think.* For example, in responding to the white clothes that Enoch drew on his picture of God, Jacob said, “well maybe because God’s White… or not.” Just moments later, after colouring his picture of God with all sorts of colours, he said, “It seems to be a rainbow-coloured body.” A little while later, again in response to a question Enoch asked about whether or not God has a beard, Jacob said, “Uh, God doesn’t have a beard, I think.” These are just a few of the many instances in which the language these children used exhibited their comfort with uncertainty and mystery surrounding God and their interpretations of God.

At the very moment that Grace, Angela, and I were sitting in the church hall discussing their drawings, Rev. Lynn was in the sanctuary preaching a sermon about the importance of knowing that different people have different ways of naming their “lamp” and “light” and that the members of Parkdale—who call this lamp Jesus—need to work with people who name it differently. The message from the pulpit was being embodied as Grace and Angela shared their drawings with me. The children’s openness to different perspectives, the representational nature of the girls’ drawings, and Jacob’s use of words expressing uncertainty seem to match the culture of openness at Parkdale. As the congregation seeks to be a community that celebrates diversity in many forms, such openness seems to be a characteristic of the theology of its children.
The children from Parkdale generated and expressed their theologies in ways that were quite consistent with the wider congregation. Yet this was not always the case. In this final section of chapter 1, I will investigate how some of the children at Parkdale differed from the broader theological ethos and culture of their congregation.

Jacob and Enoch both expressed theological views that seemed to be inconsistent with those of their broader faith community. The understandings of God that these boys shared with me were in some ways quite different from the loving and welcoming God that Rev. Lynn shares with Parkdale. As Jacob drew and explained his picture of God, he told of a God who possessed superhero-like qualities. His God lives in a castle created so that “he can protect himself by, like, if somebody was throwing something at him, the castle will block it because it’s made out of brick.” And a castle is not God’s only means of protection; God is a mix of colours so that he can blend into his rainbow-coloured castle, camouflaging himself from those who want to hurt him. What is more, God also has special powers like the ability to walk through the walls of the castle.

Jacob’s understanding of God seems influenced by his interest in superheroes. His is a God that possesses special qualities and characteristics necessary for protecting himself from unspecified evil forces. Perhaps he created this image of God with Enoch and me because he had just been playing with Enoch in a superhero activity and game book; yet the idea of God he shared is also reminiscent of Minecraft, a video game in which the player can create, explore, and engage in combat in digital worlds. As Jacob created a castle for God to

---

52 Throughout this dissertation I will use male pronouns only when speaking of children’s views of God that perceive God to be male. I employ this to be consistent with the male God some of the children imagine.
protect himself from those wanting to harm him, so can Minecraft players build digital structures such as walls and forts to protect themselves from hostile forces. While I was not able to confirm whether or not Jacob plays Minecraft, his theology of God certainly contains parallels to the game.

This boy seems to combine this Minecraft/superhero version of God with his experience at Parkdale’s vacation Bible camp the previous summer. During the week-long camp, a volunteer in a dragon costume walked around and throughout the church building from time to time. Eventually the children at the program welcomed and accepted the dragon into the community and the volunteer took off the costume head. This practice was intended to help those present address issues of welcome and difference, showing that all people should be welcome and are deserving of kindness and friendship. During my first visit to the congregation—a few months after the camp—I saw a banner in the hall that read “Dragons Welcome” and was filled with messages from the campers to the dragon. Jacob—who was only four or five at the time of the camp—seemed to interpret the experience of the dragon in a manner unintended by Parkdale’s leaders. The theology he generates depicts a God who is threatened by difference and must protect himself rather than welcome others into his castle. When he and Enoch told stories about the camp, Jacob’s words demonstrated that he may have been afraid of the dragon; while Enoch was keen to “follow the dragon wherever it goes,” Jacob distanced himself from the mythical creature, saying that “the dragon couldn’t go anywhere” and making sure to say that when the dragon took off his “hat” it was somebody that he knew. Perhaps this experience was frightful for this young boy—which
was clearly not the leaders’ intention—and he has drawn from this experience in creating a view of a God in need of protection, much like he wanted to be protected from the dragon.

Enoch also expressed a view of God that was inconsistent with the theology of his congregation. Although he stated that “God can be anything,” his drawing pictured a God who is a larger-than-life male wearing the whitest of robes. This God was sporting a beard in the picture, and standing on clouds as he conversed with angels flying next to him. For Enoch, God is the creator of all that is good, while “the devil” is responsible for evil, the latter of whom wants to take over the world. “But,” in his words, “there’s only one person standing in his [the devil’s] way—and it’s God.” Enoch also sees God as a sort of divine “spy” and judge who can come down from heaven and observe people’s behaviour and offer warnings to those who are doing evil, for God wants people to do good in the world. God’s judgment comes when people fail to heed these warnings: “they’re doing some bad things and eventually if they keep on doing it over and over and over and over, like continuously throughout their whole life, each day, then basically they’re just going to go plop (he lifts his hand up and opens it as if to drop something) down to hell.” Conversely, people who do good in the world go to heaven to be with God.

Enoch’s understanding of God is not one that I heard preached or spoken about by Rev. Lynn and the wider congregation. It actually seems to contradict the welcoming, accepting, and loving God that this minister presents to the people of Parkdale. It is, in fact, a relatively mainstream understanding within more conservative Christian traditions, with concepts such as God as creator and divine judge, the devil as the source of evil, and the dichotomized eternal destinations of heaven and hell. In many ways, his theology of God is
based on dualisms—heaven and hell, God and the devil, good and bad—that leave no room for the ambiguity and broad acceptance that is commonplace within the theology through which Rev. Lynn leads the congregation. Perhaps the variance of this view from that of Parkdale can be attributed to the fact that this is not the only congregation that Enoch attends. While he comes to Parkdale with his grandmother, he also accompanies her to a Baptist congregation and sometimes attends a third congregation with his mother. The theologies espoused by these churches may have had a hand in the formation of a view of God that in many ways does not align with the culture of Parkdale.

The understandings of God that Enoch and Jacob expressed to me both deviate from the overall theology of Parkdale in some significant ways. However, one can also interpret such excursions as fitting within this congregation. Yes, Rev. Lynn seeks to show a God that is in many ways dissimilar from these children’s views; but she also commissions Parkdale to be a community that is open and accepting of difference—and this includes theological difference. It can be surmised, then, that the inconsistency between Enoch and Jacob’s views of God and those of the wider congregation may in fact be a manifestation of the community’s broad affirmation of an interculturalism that welcomes diversity in all forms.

* * *

The five young research participants from Parkdale generate theology in ways that are consistent with the broader theology through which Rev. Lynn leads the congregation. Their theologies manifest the congregation's theology of community in the communal nature
through which they generate and hold their views, the reliance on shared experiences in their theological imaginings, and their openness to difference and diversity. This is not to say, however, that every aspect of the theologies of these children resonates with their broader faith community. In particular, some of the children developed views of God that draw from sources outside of Parkdale that result in the holding of theologies that differ from the broader congregation.
CHAPTER 2

“WE PUT OUR TRADITION IN IT”:
MESSIAH METHODIST UNITED CHURCH AND A THEOLOGY OF INTERCONNECTEDNESS

The history of Messiah Methodist United Church dates back to the late 1980s. After emigrating from Ghana and marrying a Canadian man, Jane Joiner wanted to start a Methodist congregation in her city. She began inviting other Ghanaian Methodists to meet as a prayer group in the basement of her home and as attendance increased, the need for a space of its own became evident. But the community was divided on what it was seeking in a property to call its own, and a group of congregants broke away and found a new space in which to meet. This break-off congregation experienced another schism and, in 1996, a group of members left and began meeting at a Presbyterian church in a northwest neighbourhood of their city, naming their new congregation Messiah Methodist Church.

Shortly after beginning their own congregation in the mid ’90s, the leaders of Messiah Methodist Church received a message from the lay president of Methodist Church Ghana (MCG) that the congregation should seek affiliation with the United Church, the Canadian member of the World Methodist Council. The United Church welcomed Messiah into its family in 1998, classifying this congregation under its umbrella of “ethnic ministries.” To provide further clarity to its hybrid identity as part of both MCG and the United Church, both denominations signed a “Memorandum of Understanding for
Cooperation” in 2013. By this time the congregation had changed its name to reflect its affiliation with the United Church and was now known as Messiah Methodist United Church.

The 2013 Memorandum was a landmark event in the history of Messiah, as it is the only MCG congregation in Canada to hold such affiliation with the United Church. The leaders of the congregation hold this agreement in high esteem and see it as a solidification of the congregation within the landscape of Christianity in Canada, yet in a way that keeps it connected first and foremost as a congregation of MCG. While allowing the congregation to benefit from leadership connections and resources of the United Church, this agreement gives Messiah the freedom to organize and run itself in accordance with the constitution and polity of MCG. For example, the memorandum allows MCG to appoint senior ministers at Messiah for five-year terms, with the United Church supporting such ministers with immigration assistance and denominational support staff throughout the term. Emmanuel, one of the Sunday school superintendents at Messiah, explained this relationship as one of finding a caretaker for your child:

It’s like you have your baby, and you cannot let another person take care of it. So that’s Methodist Church Ghana, in the Memorandum of Understanding. That’s like, this is my child, but he is away. But I send you with a nice person. He won’t hurt you, so you can take good care of him. But that doesn’t mean that you own the child. It’s just that you are taking care of him or her for me.

Another milestone in the history of this congregation came in 2009, when West End United Church, a sixty-year-old congregation in the area, closed and many of its members began attending Parkdale United Church, the congregation featured in the previous chapter. Upon deciding to close West End, the United Church sought to keep the building within the denomination and gifted it to Messiah, which was continually growing and would have
benefited from a space to call its own. Since then, Messiah has gradually adapted the large building to reflect the unique culture of this congregation.

The building is dominated by a large, box-like sanctuary with tall windows on both sides and a platform at the front, which includes a gradually raised section for the choir. On the walls are plaques commemorating the building’s 60-year history, banners saying “I will serve the church” in English and in Twi, a native language of Ghana, the flags of Ontario and Ghana, and a large image of Jesus depicted as a White man holding a lamb on his shoulders. There are rows of chairs with seating for about 250 people and an altar at the front draped with white linen. The front wall features a large wooden cross with a projection screen to the left and a large banner commemorating West End United Church and Messiah Methodist United Church to the right.

The basement of the church, which is used for Sunday school, was under renovation throughout the six months that I visited this congregation. At the end of a hallway was a pair of rooms that were currently used for two Sunday school classes—one for children up to age twelve and the other for teens. The other half of the basement was the site of the renovation, which was being undertaken in order to care for the building entrusted to the congregation and provide a variety of rooms for age-based Sunday school classes. The space in which the children met for Sunday school during my time among them was a relatively

---

53 My involvement at Messiah spanned a period of six months of 2014. During my first visit, which was in February, I joined the congregation for worship and went with the children to Sunday school for the latter half of the service. Upon realizing that Jemina and Emmanuel were struggling with a lack of teachers on this day, I offered to assist in any way I could, and Jemina asked me to lead the youngest class (about age 4-5) in another classroom so she could continue her lesson with the grade-school children. During two Sunday services in March and April, I conducted interviews with children from the congregation. Because the adult leaders at Messiah were not able to find a time when I could conduct one focus group with them, I held three meetings with adults (one with Emmanuel and Sophia; another with Jemina, and a third Rev. Ayensu) in late July and early August. I attended another worship service on the first Sunday in August.
stark room with light-coloured walls, a whiteboard at the front, and four long tables pushed together with chairs around them.

Emmanuel told me that the members of Messiah “are people that love noise,” and its Sunday services demonstrate this. Although services “officially” begin at 10:00 am, it is not unusual for only a handful of people to be in the large sanctuary when the choir processes up the aisle wearing black gowns and mortarboards. Congregants trickle in during the first twenty or thirty minutes, and then flood in between prayers. By the time the worship band begins playing loud praise songs during a time of greeting, the room is filled with people moving about the space to hug and shake hands with one another. As the music continues, the congregants dance around the room and sing loudly in a spirit of celebration as the lyrics are projected on the screen. Eventually the boisterous music ends and the liturgy continues with prayers, which lead to scripture readings and a sermon preached in both English and Akan.

On the first Sunday of the month, members of Methodist guilds and clubs—like Women’s Fellowship and The Christ’s Little Band—wear their uniforms during the service, a practice shared among MCG congregations around the world.

The vast majority of congregants are people who have immigrated to Canada from Ghana, and they range in age from infants to seniors with no age group missing. While the congregation has at times included a few members who were not Ghanaian, these individuals were people of African or Afro-Caribbean descent, and during my visits to Messiah I was the only person present who was not Black. While most adults within the congregations were born and raised in Ghana, almost all of the children who are part of the congregation are second-generation Canadians. With Ghanaian culture embedded within its life, Messiah tends
to function in a manner distinct from other United Church congregations. For one thing, its leaders and members rely on word-of-mouth communication, tending to keep phone calls and emails to a minimum in the organizational life of the congregation. For another thing, organization tends to happen more organically and in real time rather than through a great deal of pre-planning. For example, even though the leaders were aware that I would be visiting and conducing interviews on particular Sundays, the interviews I held with children in this congregation were organized the morning during which they took place, with leaders speaking to me when I arrived and recruiting children and parents from the pool of individuals who were present that day.

Children’s ministry in this congregation occurs through Sunday school classes segregated by age groups (youth, older children, and younger children), although due to a shortage of teachers and available classroom space during my time with the congregation, there was only one class for all children under thirteen. During the first part of worship services, the children sit in the back rows with their teachers, who struggle to get them engaged and have them participate in the service. Eventually they gather at the front of the sanctuary for a “Time with Children,” which includes a short lesson and prayer that precedes Sunday school.

Sunday school at Messiah is in transition, as it is experiencing a shortage of teachers and undergoing renovations. Thus, during my time there, it was operating with half the leadership and half the space it would normally have to work with. During this transitional period, Sunday school begins with a time when all children gather in one classroom to sing hymns and pray together. Following this, each child is called upon to stand and say a Bible
verse from memory, and then the group divides into their age-based classes. The classes tend to operate out of a schooling-instructional model\(^5\) that emphasizes memorization and knowledge acquisition. For example, in addition to sharing memorized Bible verses, Sunday school includes a lesson and discussion about a particular passage of scripture. Jemina, one of the children’s Sunday school teachers who met with me for a one-on-one interview, tends to follow-up the Bible lesson for the day with a “social talk” during which time she discusses social issues like bullying and careers. During this time, the older children work on colouring pages or other quiet activities related to the day’s lesson.

Sunday school is not the only aspect of children’s ministry at Messiah. This congregation joins others in MCG in having various guilds and fellowships for their children, like Girl’s Fellowship and Boy’s and Girl’s Brigade. Girl’s Fellowship is a time of additional lessons and conversation that girls in the congregation participate in on Saturday mornings. At times, they meet with other Girl’s Fellowships from other diaspora MCG congregations at large North American conventions. Brigade is a program that draws from the military in order to teach discipline to the children through marching and singing hymns together. On some Sundays, members of Brigade will march up the aisles at the beginning of the service wearing uniforms and carrying the flags of Ghana and Canada.

Putting Tradition In It

Speaking about the worship life of Messiah, Sophia—the congregation’s administrator—told me of the importance of Ghanaian culture in the congregation’s worship: “We put our

tradition in it and it makes it work.” This is a congregation that unashamedly identifies as
Ghanaian, and it draws from indigenous religious practices in its boisterous and free spirit of
worship as well as the theological visions that undergird this community. Perhaps the most
pervasive way that a Ghanaian worldview drives Messiah is through an understanding that all
aspects of life are connected. During my interview with Emmanuel, he expressed to me that
Ghanaians—and Africans in general—see everything as interconnected, and this worldview
allowed White people to spread Christianity throughout the continent, for Africans were able
to perceive it as connected to their indigenous religions and belief systems.

Ministry at Messiah considers the whole of the person—the spiritual, physical, and
intellectual—to use Emmanuel’s terms. The congregation seeks to nurture faith in its
members in ways that do not disconnect spirituality from other areas of their lives. For
example, it helps its members not only with issues directly related to faith, but also when
they face illnesses or poverty or other challenges, for the whole of one’s life matters to the
leaders of this community. As Jemina said to me, “under the setting of the church, everything
that we do is spiritual.” I experienced this understanding during my visit to the congregation
one Tuesday morning to interview Rev. Ayensu. Upon arriving at the church, he led me to the
sanctuary and offered prayers for my research and the well-being of me and my family.
Following our discussion, we once again made our way to the sanctuary to bookend this
particular aspect of my research with prayer. To this minister, my research was a deeply
spiritual matter, one that he wanted to bathe in prayer in order to ask God to bless my work,
my family, and their community.
The leaders of Messiah organize and implement ministry with children through a lens of the interconnectedness of all parts of life. Because they see their children as both present and future leaders of the congregation, Rev. Ayensu stated that they “take much or greater interest in the life and growth of the children—more than the adults.” And as they nurture the growth and flourishing of their children, they consider all aspects of their lives. They not only want their children to grow as leaders of Messiah, but also to grow in a way that allows their faith to shine in everything they do—both inside and outside of the congregation. Thus, they teach scripture and spirituality in manners that connect them to other arenas of the lives of the children they are teaching. Going further, the leaders of this church also see Sunday school as a way of teaching the children—most of whom were born in Canada—about the history and culture of their parents’ homeland. In these ways, Messiah connects the “spiritual” with other areas of the lives of its children.

The interconnectedness of life not only affects Messiah’s ministry with children, but also its broader worship life and theological outlook. Western society includes a tendency to classify and separate into categories various objects in the world, a tendency that seemed removed from worship at Messiah and replaced with a focus on interconnectedness. While participating in worship services with this congregation, I struggled to understand its worship

55 In arguing for the consideration of culture and ethnicity into research surrounding children’s spirituality, Mattis et al. state that institutions such as congregations can play a role in socializing in-group members about what it means to be a member of the ethnic community. Jacqueline S. Mattis et al. “Ethnicity, Culture, and Spiritual Development,” in The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence, ed. Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 290. Messiah certainly exemplifies this as it teaches and passes on aspects of Ghanaian culture to its children, most of whom were born in Canada.

56 The indigenous authors in Crisp Blue Edges address the topic of creative non-fiction in a way that alludes to the fact that the need to define and categorize is part of a westernized understanding of the world, and is neither inherent nor important to all cultures. Indigenous Creative Non-Fiction Forum, “Speaking in the Round: Transcript of the Indigenous Creative Non-Fiction Forum,” in Crisp Blue Edge: Indigenous Creative Non-Fiction, ed. Rasunah Marsden (Penticton, BC: Theytus, 2000), 34-5.
style and theological perspective, largely because I have been socialized to separate and
categorize in order to understand. At different times throughout the service, elements seemed
to be charismatic and liturgical, theologically conservative and theologically liberal,
reminiscent of Catholic Mass and evangelical praise services. Such an intermingling of what
are sometimes perceived as distinct theological traditions is made possible by the
congregation’s understanding of connectedness, which was demonstrated in Sophia’s
remarks (albeit inaccurate) about the origins of the United Church: “if you look at the United
Church history, it’s a mash-up of all Protestant people... It is Anglican, the Methodists, the
Presbyterians; they came together to come to the United Church. So in actual fact the
worship is all the same.” This comment showcases the congregation’s proclivity to focus on
similarity and interconnectedness instead of difference and distinction; yet in actuality,
Church Union of 1925 did not erase differences among the founding denominations, and
worship in United Church congregations remains tremendously varied.\(^{57}\) While its Methodist
roots and United Church affiliation are held in high esteem, what matters most to this
community is not which theological category or denominational tradition its worship aligns
with but, as Rev. Ayensu said, “worship should be done in an atmosphere of freedom.” As
Emmanuel explained, many charismatic and Pentecostal churches in Ghana are strict in their
practices of inclusion in worship, and may exclude or put stipulations on the participation of
members who have breached their values or made mistakes. Yet Messiah—like other MCG
congregations—emphasizes the individual’s freedom to express themselves and worship God
as they see fit.

\(^{57}\) See Phyllis D. Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation: Making and Remaking the United Church of
Messiah may self-identify as Ghanaian, but it does so with an awareness that it is also a community that resides in Canada. This context has meant that even while the leaders of this congregation lead it in ways that align with the norms of MCG and Ghanaian culture, they have made changes to address the particularities of their current context. One such change has been the addition of a time of fellowship with tea and light refreshments after the worship service each Sunday. Unlike congregations in Ghana, the members of Messiah are spread throughout the city and its suburbs, with some families driving significant distances to attend worship each week. The physical distance between congregants necessitates greater intentionality in fostering relationships with each other, which the leaders of this church believe tends to occur more naturally in Ghana. The fellowship time after each service is a direct response to the reality of life in Canada, where members of the congregation do not always interact with one another outside of Messiah. Rev. Ayensu believes this time of fellowship is vital because “I take a cup of tea, you also take a cup of tea. We can stand and chat. For even if it’s for ten minutes, it improves our relationships.”

The influence of Ghanaian culture in a Canadian context shapes this congregation’s ministry with children. For one thing, this makes the use of Sunday school curricula problematic. According to Emmanuel, resources from Canada do not fit well because Messiah is a Ghanaian church, and material from Ghana is also problematic because the congregation is in Canada. In light of this, Messiah imports Sunday school materials from Ghana and teachers contextualize them for ministry in its present Canadian context. Another change to Ghanaian tradition that Messiah has made has been to take steps to include children in worship. While congregations in Ghana tend to have children in Sunday school
for the entirety of the service—almost a service unto itself, as Jemina told me—Messiah includes children in the beginning of its service. After an opening hymn, prayers, and some praise music, the children are called to the altar for a “Time with Children”—a practice common in many United Church congregations—and then led to Sunday school classes. Once each month the children remain in the service for its entirety, although they sit at the back with their Sunday school teachers and do not tend to engage in worship, prayer, and other elements of the service. Although the results are mixed, the congregation’s initiatives to include children in worship are a way of contextualizing Ghanaian tradition into a Canadian context.

**Theological Reflections**

A central hallmark of African world views is the web of all relationships, a web that stretches far and wide from the living to the dead, those not yet born, and the whole of the world around oneself. All of life is connected. Such a view of interconnectedness, which is vital to the culture of Messiah, has profound implications on how one views, understands, and interprets the world. The children in this congregation reflect and express Messiah’s vision of the interconnectedness of all things in their theological lives in at least three ways: through their tendency to draw widely from sources for generating theology; by seeing all understandings as accurate in some ways and inaccurate in others; and through sensing God’s presence and involvement in their lives.

---

Wide Theology

I have already described Messiah as a congregation whose worship evades denominational and theological classification. Although this church grounds itself within Methodism, it does so without excluding the influence of other theological traditions. For this congregation, the boundaries between different denominations and theological inflections are quite porous.

Such a vision of openness to multiple theologies and traditions was evident in the lives of the five children I interviewed from this congregation in their tendency to draw widely in gathering sources for creating theology. Each of them was influenced by at least one theological tradition beyond those of MCG and the United Church. Not only do all of these children attend Roman Catholic primary schools, Chris (10) and Marion (11) made their First Communion with their classes, Marion and Dawn (9) are two sisters who attended a Roman Catholic parish before recently making the switch to Messiah, and Luke (11) attended a Pentecostal congregation until his family joined Messiah a few years ago. In my conversations with them, it was evident that these different theological traditions were influencing their current understandings. In the rare instances when one of them indicated that their idea might not be accepted by their congregation, it was only when they drew from sources that were outside mainstream Christian traditions and denominations. For example, when Luke discussed what it means to be a “spirit” he admitted that he watches a show called Long Island Medium, which follows the experiences of a woman who communicates with the deceased: “Church says it’s not good to believe in stuff like that, but I still think it’s good to believe in stuff like that because then you get closure and learn about your loved ones and how they’re doing.”
This tendency to draw widely from other traditions was evident during my discussion with Kaitlyn, a twelve-year-old second-generation Canadian who has been attending Messiah for as long as she can remember. It is exemplified in the following three snippets:

Kaitlyn: (Discussing why she drew God wearing blue clothes) I think of blue as kind of like a pure colour, kind of next to white. I think blue’s just like—I don’t know why. Because I think that’s just like what Mary used to wear. In lots of pictures she wears blue, so probably God picked her because she was so holy.

Kaitlyn: Most of the time you need—like, God wants you to ask him [for help] first. And so he can help you because God only helps others who help themselves… If you woke up, you know, and had a good day, went to sleep and you didn’t get in a car accident or you found out one of your loved ones passed away or something, then I think that God had, he loved you so much so he kept your day going well. But most people, when something bad happens to them they always question God. Sometimes I do that too, but then I remember everything happens for a reason.

Kaitlyn: (Discussing her practices at her Roman Catholic school) [I] don’t really say the Hail Mary that much. Like, for Christians in the Methodist Church we don’t really say it that much. So most people when they say the Hail Mary at school, I don’t really say it… I still do communion and all that stuff—just not, like the Hail Mary.

These three excerpts demonstrate Kaitlyn’s tendency to draw from both her experience at a Roman Catholic school and a Methodist/United Church congregation in generating theological insight. In the first excerpt, she seems to be appropriating Marion iconography as she attributes meaning to the colours with which she draws God. While there are no pictures of Mary on the walls of Messiah (yet there are plenty of images of Jesus), she surely encountered images of Mary—who is traditionally depicted wearing blue and understood as pure within Catholic theology—in the religion classes and Masses at her school.
The theology that Kaitlyn expresses in the second snippet is much more consistent with that which Messiah wove into the services in which I participated. She describes a God who is involved in one’s life (I will say more about this in a subsection below), protects people from harm, and wants to help people. This vision of God was upheld at several points during worship services at Messiah, including prayers for God to “protect us from the evil one” and “expand our territory,” as well as comments about having our spiritual and physical needs met through prayer. Kaitlyn’s theology seems to draw from such a theological perspective, which sees God as the great provider and protector.

The final excerpt is a rare moment in which Kaitlyn intentionally distinguishes between different theological traditions that influence her theology, although she does so without placing an impenetrable wall between them. She underscores praying the Hail Mary as a distinguishable difference between Methodists and Roman Catholics. Yet even while identifying as Methodist, she states that she participates in Catholic Eucharist\(^\text{59}\) at her school, and even alludes that at times she prays the Hail Mary with her class, for she said she doesn’t pray it “that much.”\(^\text{60}\) For her, the boundary between these two Christian traditions is one that can be crossed.

The breadth of sources for generating theology is not limited to traditions and ideas within the realms of Christianity. These children also showcased a willingness to draw from all sorts of other sources, including movies, television shows, personal experiences, their

\(^{59}\) Kaitlyn used the term “communion” when referring to participating in Eucharistic services with her school.

\(^{60}\) During my first visit to Messiah, I helped lead Sunday school with the youngest group of children (about 3-6 years old). At the end of the class, I asked for a volunteer to close our time together with a prayer. The young girl who volunteered led the group through praying the Hail Mary and many of the children knew the prayer and joined in. After the prayer, the girl made the sign of the cross—while saying it—alongside many of her peers in the room.
engagement with scripture, and their own imaginations. For example, nine-year-old Dawn, who recently started attending Messiah with her older sister, explained to me that although she has watched movies about Jesus, she prefers to use her imagination to think about who and what God is: “I imagine it in my imagination. Like, for example, when David and Goliath, when David slingshot a rock at Goliath’s head I imagine that David was doing that to Goliath… Your imagination is very—like, sometimes it could be real… Because God formed your brain to imagine different stuff.” While Dawn drew from her imagination, Luke used the 2001 BBC series Son of God as a means for interpreting Jesus’ crucifixion:

[In the film] you notice that he [Jesus] wasn’t yelling at anyone; he wasn’t really mad. He was only screaming out of his own pain because who wants to get a nail shoved through your hands? But he wasn’t yelling at the people who threw the rocks at him. He just took it and he seemed to be in pain, but he didn’t seem to be mad at anyone. And, like, calmness and stuff like that is really good traits to have because… when you’re not mad, then you get to experience better things. But if you spend your whole life being all grumpy and mad then you’re going to miss out on a lot of stuff.

Whether drawing from Roman Catholic iconography, television shows, or the depths of their imaginations, the children at Messiah blended multiple theological traditions and non-theological sources together as they generated theological insight. And as they did so, they gave very little if any indication that the practice of drawing widely was outside of the norm of their congregational context.

This tendency is understandable when compared to the broader theological vision of their congregation. As a Ghanaian congregation, the leaders and members of Messiah value the interconnectedness of all things, which allows their theological views to be interrelated to any number of other aspects of life, including those that the children utilize in creating theological meaning. Such a view is reflected in the worship life of this congregation as it
makes use of hymns, prayers, and other practices that originate in a wide variety of
denominational contexts. Furthermore, this worldview is reinforced in Sunday school each
week as Jemina leads her class in a “social talk.” Thus, the children’s tendency to draw from
a wide variety of sources seems to parallel that of the theological vision and practices of the
broader congregation.

Blurred Theology

Related to the proclivity of the children from Messiah to draw widely in their sources for
theological insight is their tendency to focus on similarities and avoid making distinctions
between correct and incorrect theology. Rather than drawing lines and highlighting
differences between the various theological traditions and understandings that these young
people have encountered, many of them seemed to speak of how all traditions, doctrines, and
theological ideas are right and wrong in some ways. Luke, a twelve-year-old who has
attended Messiah for the past two years, was the child who expressed this most eloquently, as
seen in these excerpts from my conversation with him:

Luke: When you go to any church they’re always encouraging the same message, and
that’s to be holy and to be good and not to be mean to people. No matter what
church you go to, whether you’re Catholic, Pentecost[al], anybody who goes
to any other type of church, they’re all teaching you the same things. It’s just
where you want to go to learn about it… Each church is right in their own
way. They may not be right at everything. But they’re going to be right
[where] some other churches [are wrong] and they’re going to be wrong
where some other churches are right.

Luke: Because there are people who think there’s only a right way and there’s a
wrong way and there’s a million ways to get it wrong and only one way to get
it right. But that’s not true… Because there’s not one way to solve a problem.
Because you see how God said one plus one plus one didn’t equal three? It
equals one because they’re all one person and that’s his way of thinking about it. And even if it’s not mathematically correct, it’s still correct in its own way. But somebody who’s a mathematician, if you walk up and said “What’s one plus one plus one?” they would say it was three. But then you could come to someone in the church they would know what you said when you said one plus one plus one, they would think about God, and then they’d say that it’s all one because they are all one person.

Luke: That’s just how I like to think, because I don’t like to think that there’s only one way to do things because then you become kind of one-sided. And then you only think about—there’s only a one way to make something look good and one way to make sure that it’s right. But that’s not how I’m trying to think.

Luke’s words call attention to a thread woven among the children at Messiah: a theological lens that gives all views room to be correct and incorrect in some ways. Luke may offer the clearest example of such thinking, but other children at Messiah held a similar view as they discussed their pictures of God with me during our individual interviews. While Kaitlyn said that all pictures of Jesus can be correct because “no one knows exactly what he looks like so there’s no right or wrong [and] everyone that draws Jesus is a little bit right,” Marion discussed names given to God and how each name expresses the same thing but is relative to the language of a people. Such understandings echo Luke’s sentiments about all views being correct in some way, although these girls didn’t explicitly mention that all views may indeed be incorrect in ways as well.

By seeing all views as correct in some way, these children highlighted commonalities among different groups rather than drawing lines and pointing to distinctions and differences. Take, for example, Luke’s opinion about all congregations and denominations teaching “the same things.” Even though he and all the other children I interviewed at Messiah had first-hand experiences with denominational traditions beyond the Methodist and United Church
influences of their congregation, many of them stated that the worship styles, teachings, and doctrines of these churches were “the same” or very similar to one another.

This tendency echoes the understanding held by some of the leaders of Messiah. For example, Sophia’s explanation of the 1925 union of the United Church may not have been completely accurate, but it painted a picture focused on similarities among various Protestant denominations, for she believes “in actual fact the worship is all the same.” When such a perspective is coupled with a strong vision of interconnectedness, as it is at Messiah, it is perhaps no surprise that the children at this congregation discuss theology in a way that leaves room for all views to be correct and they avoid placing boundaries of division between various views. The desire to separate phenomena into categories and classifications is a western tendency and the African worldview at work within this congregation leads its children to challenge such separation by underscoring similarities.

The unique cultural context of Messiah was another factor that played a role in the formation of this trend within the theology of its children. As a Ghanaian congregation in Canada’s largest city, its leaders are continually contextualizing the resources for children’s ministry that they import from Ghana and adapt for the cultural landscape of Canada. Such adaptations certainly require the leadership to examine differences and similarities between these two contexts. One difference that Rev. Ayensu named is the tendency for older teenagers and young adults in Canada to move away from home, a rite of passage that in Ghana is usually reserved for when one marries. However, as much as the practice of contextualizing Sunday school materials—and the whole of how Sunday school at Messiah functions—requires distinctions to be made between Ghanaian and Canadian contexts, it is
done in a way that underscores similarities as well as differences. After all, if significant parallels did not exist between the two contexts, then it would be incredibly difficult to adapt materials from Ghana in the first place. As much as the leaders spoke about the need to contextualize resources based on the ways in which they do not fit within Canadian society, they must also identify how these materials do fit and what similarities exist between the two contexts. This process is woven into the fabric of children’s ministry at Messiah and, in fact, into everything that this congregation does. And the drawing of parallels that is so common within the life of the broader congregation is manifested in the theological insights of its children.

This tendency to focus on similarities and see all theological traditions as correct and incorrect in some ways may help explain the previous trend I interpreted. If, as these children believe, all traditions are similar to one another and correct in their own ways, then it stands to reason that there is nothing inherently wrong with drawing from traditions beyond Methodism/United Church in generating and practising one’s theologies. By holding that, as Luke said, there is not “only one way to do things,” these children become unfettered by walls around denominations and theological traditions and are free to explore the vast expanse of the world as they make theological meaning for themselves.

Involved Theology

During my participation in worship services at Messiah, I experienced a congregation that values God’s active participation in the life of its community and the individuals who make it
up. Their prayers, sermons, and songs make it evident that these are people who believe that God takes an interest in and actively participates in everyday life.

The children at Messiah also held this view of a connected and involved God. Take, for instance, these words from Marion (11), who was born in Ghana and immigrated to Canada with her family, as she spoke about the importance of prayer in her life:

Marion: I love [praying] a lot. If we don’t pray, like, I have to even force my mom to pray for us every day.

Dave: Wow.

Marion: Because sometimes she go to work, she come home at like 10:00. And we have to stay up. We can’t sleep without praying… Even if it’s 1:00 we’ll still pray.

Dave: Why is praying so important to you?

Marion: Because, like, pray [sic] is important because if I don’t know my test, I pray to God and God helped me. That’s what I do.

Dave: Wow! And do you feel that God helps you with the things you ask for?

Marion: Yeah, a lot. And sometimes God is talking to me.

Dave: Can you tell me about that?

Marion: Sure. Like when I’m doing tests, and I’m praying and he says “Marion, you will do your best.” And then I do my best actually.

Marion’s younger sister Dawn (9) also described how she thinks God helps her with tests, but then goes on to say that God protects her as well:

Dawn: [God] was helping me with, like, on a test, to get an A.

Dave: Have you ever thought when you were taking a test—have you ever felt that God helps you with that?

Dawn: Yeah, because this week I got three As.
Dave: Wow. That’s great. Way to go. And so you feel that God helps you with that?

Dawn: Yeah.

Dave: Are there other ways you feel like God helps you with things that are happening in your life?

Dawn: Yeah. When I was sleeping God protects me. He doesn’t let anyone evil come.

These excerpts offer clear examples of a broader trend among the children I interviewed from Messiah: God is involved in their lives. Several times during my interviews with the children, our conversations moved toward a discussion about how God has helped them in their daily lives. In addition to the example of Marion above, who brought up how God helps her during a discussion about prayer, Kaitlyn’s remarks about God helping to keep one’s day “going well” call attention to how she understands God to be connected to day-to-day life. Both girls shifted our conversations in order to speak of God’s involvement in their lives, demonstrating the importance they ascribe to this theological understanding.

The children at Messiah tended to make sense of God’s involvement in their lives by attributing two related roles to God: helper and protector. First, each of the four children who expressed a view of an involved God (Marion, Dawn, Luke, and Kaitlyn) explained that God has helped them to do well on tests and school assignments, as the excerpts from Dawn and Marion above demonstrate. But God’s help extends beyond their educational success and into several other areas of their lives. Luke, for example, felt that God was assisting him in dealing with his unsuccessful tryout for a soccer team. Second, Dawn’s statement about God’s protection over her as she sleeps exemplifies the children’s view of God as protector.

Although held by a smaller subset of children, this was a trend clearly evident in the
theologies of both Dawn and Kaitlyn, the latter of whom believes that even “if something bad happens, most of the time something good happens in the end. So you can’t stop and question God if you’re not like really finished with anything yet. You have to finish it and see the end result.” Kaitlyn's view of God’s protection is wrapped within a consequentialist worldview, for God’s role as protector goes beyond the immediate and perceivable results of actions in the world; although at first it may appear as though God did not protect someone, the end result of all things is a positive outcome that God ordains. This mirrors a common aspect of Ghanaian theology: the divine protection of Jesus that Christians claim as long as they do what is right.\textsuperscript{61}

These related ways of understanding God’s involvement in one’s life are not unique to these children. They are shared by the broader congregation of Messiah and expressed in its worship life. During the services in which I participated, the ministers and worship leaders at this congregation made several comments about God’s assistance and protection in our lives, such as reminding the congregation that “God wants to care for your issues… He wants you to open up and tell him” and praying that God will “continue to protect us from any harm, [from] any plans of the enemy.” This is a faith community that accentuates the involvement of God in the everyday lives of its congregants, as cosmic helper and divine protector, and its children express theologies that are consistent with this view. They are, in a way, examples of this congregational theology in action as they sense God’s hand upon the everyday aspects of their lives, from test-taking to waking up with each new day.

\textsuperscript{61} Acolatse, \textit{For Freedom or Bondage}, 66.
Theological Excursions

The three theological trends that I observed in the children at Messiah—a tendency to draw widely in theological sources, a focus on similarities and the correctness of all traditions, and experiences of God as involved in their lives—were consistent with the broader theological ethos of their congregation. Yet as with the children in other participating congregations, sometimes the young people from Messiah generated theology in ways that differed from their congregation.

In several interviews with these children, our conversation moved toward a discussion about Jesus’ skin colour, often instigated by the visual portrayals of Jesus in their drawings. Yet Marion initiated a conversation about Jesus’ complexion even though she chose not to draw a picture. Toward the beginning of our conversation, I asked her to tell me what she thought about God, and she immediately began talking about Jesus’ skin colour.

Although we spoke about “God,” it was evident afterward that she was referring to Jesus, for she sees Jesus and God as “the same”:

Marion: People think that he’s Black. But I think it’s every colour because he bring us to earth. That’s what I think.

Dave: So God is every colour people are or every colour—

Marion: (interrupting) People. Every colour that people are, that he made.

Dave: …What do you mean, “People say he’s Black”? Who says that?

Marion: Like, all my friends. And some people—all different countries say that. They say that he’s Black, he’s White, he’s Black and stuff. [They] make it up.

Dave: Okay. So people, depending on where people are and what colour—
Marion: *(interrupting)* They just get coloured, they point it as God, that God is White, Black.

The children at Messiah—Marion included—are accustomed to seeing visual representations of Jesus; there are posters and pictures of him throughout the hallways, classrooms, and sanctuary of the church building. Yet in every image I saw at Messiah, Jesus was portrayed as a White man with brown hair (one image was actually a picture of Jim Caviezel’s portrayal of Jesus in the 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ*). When I asked Marion why she thinks Messiah, a community of Black congregants, has so many images of a White Jesus, she responded with “Because sometimes I think we don’t like the Black picture.” To my disappointment, she did not want to say anything more about this.

Marion’s theology transcends any portrayal of Jesus as belonging to a particular racial or ethnic group. It challenges the representations of Jesus as a White man that are common in images at Messiah by expanding any natural physiological realities into an understanding that infuses physical representations with supernatural meaning. For Marion, it is not Jesus’ humanity that determines his complexion, but his divinity. Her understanding of his role as the creator of all humankind leads her to surmise that Jesus’ skin colour is a mixture of the complexions of all the people that he has created. Such an understanding is clearly departure from the implicit curriculum taught by the images of a White Jesus hanging throughout the church building.

Marion shares her interest in Jesus' skin colour with other children from Messiah. During my interview with Jemina, I learned that a few months after my interviews with the children, Luke used the open question time during Sunday school to pose a query about
Jesus’ race. Jemina recounted how this led to a thoughtful and lively discussion among the children, with some asserting that Jesus was not White and others saying that he must be White because his parents were White. Jemina told them that, as a Nazarite, Jesus’ hair was kinky and his skin was dark: “When I recall of the ancient times, they were almost like dark skin, like almost dark. Not like dark like us, but... How shall I call it? Like, just a little close to dark. And then their hair was like a Nazarite.” Because this incident occurred several weeks after the interviews, it did not have any influence on the children’s theological insights about Jesus’ skin colour that they shared with me. But it is interesting to note the difference between Marion’s reflections and those of Jemina. While this Sunday school teacher used Jesus’ humanity—as a Middle Eastern man—to explain his race, Marion understood Jesus’ race by focusing on his divinity—as the one who created and creates all people.

Like Marion, Luke also articulated theological insights that differed from the norms I perceived at Messiah. At one point in our conversation, he spoke about how his view of spirits is somewhat drawn from *Long Island Medium*, a reality show about a woman who communicates with the dead. He went on to say,

> the church says it’s not good to believe in stuff like that, but I still think it’s good to believe in stuff like that because then you get closure and learn about your loved ones and how they’re doing. It may not be true, but you have to get closure in some way, even if they’re just telling you random stuff that doesn’t make any sense.

Without admitting whether or not he believes in mediumship, he acknowledges that even the fact that he sees nothing wrong with holding such beliefs goes against the views of his congregation.
His ambivalent belief in mediumship, however, is not completely unusual. Messiah’s Ghanaian roots may be intimately tied to MCG, but their cultural influence surely expands beyond a relationship with this denomination. Recent scholars into religion in Ghana and the wider continent of Africa argue that ancestor worship is fundamental to African religion. Emmanuel Lartey notes that in Ghana “ancestors are as much a part of Akan and Ga communities as the living. They are, in fact, the custodians of tradition, custom and all that is worthy in the community.”62 In his estimation, ancestor worship among this culture can be compared to the Christian idea of the “communion of saints.”63 Ancestors are the medium between the world of the living and the supernatural world, and through them the latter world becomes real.64 Luke’s estimation that his congregation would object to his belief in mediumship may have more to do with the missionary impulse to eradicate ancestor worship than with the actual views of the members and leaders of Messiah. Although the congregation does not engage in any sort of communication with ancestors, it holds an annual service of prayer for family and friends who have died that year. Many non-Africans have perceived ancestor worship as “‘primitive,’ ‘tribal,’ ‘savage,’ ‘barbaric,’”65 and Methodist missionaries may have caused Messiah to hold a similar view, even if Luke disagrees.

62 Emmanuel Yartekwei Lartey, Pastoral Counselling in Inter-Cultural Perspective: A Study of Some African (Ghanaian) and Anglo-American Views of Human Existence and Counselling (Frankfurt am Maim: Verlag Peter Lang, 1987), 56.

63 Lartey, Pastoral Counselling in Inter-Cultural Perspective, 55.


Shortly after telling me about *Long Island Medium*, Luke shared that he did not believe in the devil, saying instead that there is good in every person while avoiding any conversation about evil in the world. For him bad things just happen, and he refuses to attribute them to any particular source or entity. He then explained that he does not believe the devil exists, saying, “When you think of the devil you think about burning hot and pain and it’s just what people are making you think; it’s not what you’re actually thinking. Because have you ever seen those old cartoons with like the angel and there’s like the devil? It’s what people are making you think. But you have to think for yourself every now and again.” Luke has done just that. And as he thought for himself, he rejected the understanding of some of the leadership of Messiah who believe that an evil being exists from which humanity needs divine protection. When I asked him about this theology of the “evil one” that I heard from the pulpit during one visit, he shared his interpretation of this—that the leader is telling the congregation not to sin—ending with “So I take in what they’re saying. But I also try to think of it in my own way.”

In both of these instances, Luke’s self-reflection has helped him generate a theology that diverges from that of his congregation, in part due to his exposure to a television show and cartoons. In the first case, his opinion that there is nothing wrong with believing in mediumship—and that it may actually be beneficial in some instances—showcases an acceptance of a view that is not openly accepted by his congregation. In the second, Luke’s denial of the reality of the devil demonstrates an instance of his denouncing a belief held by Messiah. Both cases highlight that the importance he places on thinking for himself has led
him to question and challenge the dominant theology of his congregation and develop theological notions that diverge from the culture of Messiah.

This is where the excursions of Marion and Luke become hazy and more complex. Clearly, they both expressed theological insights that are at odds with those I saw and heard at Messiah. But in having deep and thoughtful theological engagements about Jesus’ skin colour, mediumship, and the devil, these children are also incarnating an important element of the theological life of this congregation—thinking for oneself. It is indeed true that the approach to Sunday school utilized by Messiah relies on memorization and knowledge acquisition; yet it does so while encouraging the young people to engage thoughtfully with the scriptures they are memorizing and the theological ideas they are learning. This is one reason why Jemina places such a high value on Sunday school: “Their [the children’s] minds are growing. They want to relate… They want somewhere where they can feel like it’s our place, we are part of it, we are reading the Bible, we are interacting.” Throughout our conversation, she continually used the word “engage” in her description of the purposes of Messiah’s ministry with children. The reason this congregation relies so heavily on a schooling-instructional model of Sunday school is not simply to “make deposits” in the minds of the children, but to help them better engage with scripture and relate it to the rest of their lives. In Luke’s words “they’ll still give you their message, but they’ll also encourage you to think your own way.” Even while holding beliefs that are not in line with those of their congregation, these children are embodying Messiah’s emphasis on thoughtful engagement with theological ideas.
Messiah United Methodist Church occupies a unique space within the landscape of religion in Canada. It is the only MCG congregation to have affiliated with the United Church, and its theology reflects its identity as a member of the MCG diaspora residing in one of Canada’s largest metropolitan areas. Yet while worshipping on Canadian soil, much of its theology relies on an African worldview, not least its broad theology of interconnectedness. This theology was made manifest in the theological insights generated and shared during my conversations with children from Messiah in three ways: in their tendency to cast widely in sources for doing theology; in their proclivity to draw parallels between different traditions and see all views as correct in particular ways; and in the ways they sense and make meaning of God’s involvement in their lives. Yet the children also generated theology in styles that differed from Messiah’s, at times drawing from sources that are not condoned by their congregation and making assertions that diverge from congregational norms.
During the years after World War II, the towns surrounding a particular Canadian city were growing rapidly, and new subdivisions were being developed for families throughout the area. At the same time, membership within the United Church had been increasing steadily since the end of the war. The only two United Church congregations in an ever-expanding community west of the city were unable to meet the needs of the families moving to new housing developments nearby who considered the distance between these congregations and their homes to be too great. Thanks to the support of an existing United Church congregation and the local Presbytery, a group of over 200 charter members inaugurated Burke Street United Church in a temporary building, just in time for Christmas services in 1955.

The new congregation experienced growth at breakneck speed, and it became evident that the temporary building was insufficient for its current and foreseeable needs. There were so many children that Sunday school classes had to be held in nearby homes in order to provide space for everyone. The congregation embarked on a successive building project and worshipped at a local public school until a gymnasium and Christian education building could be completed. Having relocated back into its own space, the growing congregation worshipped in the gymnasium for a number of years while its sanctuary was being

---

66 Airhart, *A Church with the Soul of a Nation*, 257.
constructed. About a decade after its founding, the people of Burke Street worshipped in their sanctuary for the first of what would be thousands of church services.

The building has not changed a great deal over the past half-century. Its sanctuary holds about 250 people in wooden pews with a centre aisle. The steep slopes of the ceiling are marked by wooden boards that give the entire space a warm, cabin-like ambiance. At the front is a large gold cross hanging above the altar in a manner that gives the illusion that it is floating above the choir, which is seated on both sides of the altar. While the sanctuary of Parkdale United Church was covered with monuments, decorations, and other items of importance to the community, Burke Street’s decor is contrasted in its minimalism, with a Canadian flag and a few small banners being the only decorative elements giving colour to the rich, wood-toned hues throughout the space. At the back is a balcony—where some children like to sit for worship—that opens on the front to the sanctuary and on the sides to the small foyer through which congregants enter this space.

The basement of the church is reminiscent of a small school. The cement-block walls are painted a clean shade of white and hold bulletin boards with information about activities and events for people of all ages. There are four prominent rooms in this wing of the church, the smallest of which is a library containing a desk and walls covered in books and videos, most of which are for children. At the end of the hallway is the large gymnasium with basketball nets at each end and court lines, where the congregation worshipped during its early years. Now people gather here for coffee, tea, and juice each week after service, a time that is coveted by many adults and children alike. At the opposite end of the hallway are two

---

67 Other spaces in the church include a youth room, a nursery, offices, storage closets, and a parlour decorated with antique furniture.
large classrooms, one of which is used for Sunday school with children in grades 2 and higher. The room is fairly stark and, with no windows in the space, it is lit solely by fluorescent tube lights. A number of stacks of wooden chairs are tucked away in the corner between the doors to the room and a small electric keyboard. Few decorations break the monotony of the white walls, one of which is a handwritten poster containing the words to the song that the children sing as they take up collection each week. The classroom next door contrasts this sparse Sunday school room, for it contains several child-size tables and chairs and interactive stations that are used during the Godly Play programming offered each Sunday.

The vast majority of the congregation consists of older adults, with some young families peppered among the greying community. With almost no people of colour in the congregation, it’s no surprise that Denise, one of the key Sunday school teachers, repeatedly described the culture of Burke Street as “White middle-class.” In fact, during my interview with three congregational leaders, the participants spent time trying to name all the people of colour who attend their congregation; they were only able to think of a small handful of individuals, some of whom others in the group did not know. Burke Street is a fairly affluent community that historically consisted of “working class management” at a local automotive production facility; and although it has in recent decades seen more diversity in terms of the careers of its members, the congregation remains fairly racially, ethnically, and economically homogenous. As a predominantly White community, members of this congregation see themselves as part of the mainstream of the United Church, a view that was particularly evident when Rev. Monica, the senior minister, remarked that one person on the board
wondered why I wanted to include their congregation in research about children and interculturalism, since, in this person’s estimation, Burke Street has no culture. Because some leaders identify their congregation as a typical middle-class United Church community, they struggled to name features that distinguish it from other congregations in the denomination. Yet one element that makes Burke Street more distinct is the theological and political diversity of its members, a factor that is always present, but sometimes ignored so it doesn’t “rock the boat” of the strong feeling of community cherished by so many members.

Sunday services begin at 10:15 am, but choir rehearsals and other activities usually mean the building is bustling with conversation and commotion well before the service commences. Services follow a liturgy printed in the weekly bulletins alongside a lengthy list of announcements and activities, and include an organ introit, a call to worship, a litany prayer, scripture readings, hymns, an offering, and a sermon. The liturgy is altered each week as necessary, at times including a children’s message, communion, baptisms, or other rites. Services are led by Rev. Monica, who robes each Sunday, and she is assisted by Emma, the minister of Christian education, and a number of congregants. While most who offer leadership during services are adults, at times children join their parents to lead elements such as a call to worship. The altar is framed by a choir dressed in bright green robes that sits on either side and moves to the centre to lead music.

The minister of Christian education at Burke Street has been with the congregation for less than two years, and its ministry with children has undergone some recent changes
under her guidance. Until a few months before my visits with the congregation, children in grades 2 and older participated in a Sunday school program that used a rotational model, which had the children focus on one biblical story for several weeks while exploring it each Sunday through a different object.lesson-based station (games, crafts, kitchen, etc.). While leaders felt this approach was successful, they struggled to find volunteer teachers who were willing to commit to teaching for several weeks in a row. Sunday school now uses a lectionary-based curriculum that guides two groups of children (grades 2-4 and grades 5-8) in learning a new Bible story each week, and leaders rotate from week to week. Children in kindergarten and grade 1 participate in Godly Play, “an imaginative approach to religious education” that Emma began leading shortly after joining the staff team. Both of these programs operate during Sunday worship services; the children join the congregation for the beginning of the service and leave for Sunday school or Godly Play at a time that is dependent on the liturgy for the week (for example, if there is communion, a baptism, a musical presentation, etc.).

---

68 I visited Burke Street throughout the spring of 2014. I began by participating in a worship service and Sunday school, where I led a lesson, in late March. I then held all children’s interviews and the focus group with adults on weeknights and weekends throughout April. Following these interviews, I attended worship and assisted with Sunday school once more in early May.

Engaging Faith Stories

The most prominent feature of the culture of Burke Street is its speculative approach to theology. This is a cerebral congregation, one that puts at the centre of its theological life “the illumination of the mind” through the acquisition, development, and exchange of cognitive insight. Yet Rev. Monica does not lead the congregation in a style that requires its members to think a certain way; in fact, she said that this is “a congregation that’s very open to people who have questions,” and she encourages people to think for themselves as they encounter scripture and engage in liturgy together. This value is shared by Denise, the lead Sunday school teacher, who remarked in our interview, “How can you believe something if you have to turn your brain off to accept it?” As mentioned previously, the individuals within the congregation hold diverse theological and political perspectives, so there are few beliefs held widely among the whole of the community. The speculative theology of Burke Street unites people not because of what they think, but because they think in the first place. Whatever they may believe, these folks emphasize God’s gift of reason.

This aspect of Burke Street is crucial to its ministry with children. Rev. Monica’s approach to children’s religious education is one of “engaging the stories of the faith and getting kids to first of all learn that there’s a story, learn the fact that it is just story and then to make some application to their life… I want the kids to realize that it’s okay to understand that as a story and not that it necessarily happened.” This critical-application-based approach to the Bible is a manifestation of the broader congregation’s focus on a speculative theology.


71 Holmes, A History, 4.
However, this minister is not directly responsible for the children’s programs at Burke Street, and the two most significant ways that this theology is concretely applied in children’s ministry differ from one another in important ways.

Emma’s use of Godly Play is undergirded by this approach’s goals of helping children develop a religious language through wonder, the imagination, experiencing scripture and worship, and asking existential questions.\(^72\) The children age three to grade 1 join Emma each week as she shares a story from scripture or about a part of liturgy using simple manoeuvrable figures and fabrics. Through “wondering” questions aimed to help the children theologically reflect on the story (i.e., “I wonder what this could really be?” “I wonder where you are in the story?”),\(^73\) the children develop a posture of open-mindedness and make their own connections between the story and their experiences. A response time following the story and questions provides the children with a number of opportunities of their choosing through which they respond to the story, such as working with Play-Doh or telling the story themselves using the figures. The program wraps up with a “feast,” at which point the children gather in a circle and share a drink and snack. Godly Play operates from a theological standpoint that values the children’s ability to make theological meaning for themselves as they wonder and encounter the story in their own ways. It reflects the speculative theology of Burke Street in its encouragement to make one’s own interpretations of and connections with the story, and as it leaves room for the children to engage with and ask meaningful questions.

---

\(^{72}\) See Berryman, *Godly Play*.

Although it also reflects the speculative theology of Burke Street, the Sunday school program does so in a dramatically different way than that just described. While Godly Play relies on questions, Sunday school give prime importance to answers. Although she is not the only volunteer, Denise is the most frequent Sunday school teacher and offers significant guidance to the scope and shape of this program. Contrasting Emma’s use of Godly Play, the theology evident in Denise’s leadership of Sunday school is one that tends to equate the acquisition of particular facts with Christian formation in what John Westerhoff has called a “schooling-instructional” model of religious education. She organizes and teaches Sunday school from a theological perspective that learning stories of faith and proper interpretations of such stories is of prime importance to the Christian life. Thus, she struggles with the recent change from a rotational model to lectionary-based approach. In her opinion, the children now move through the stories too quickly and are not able to learn what she believes they should know about them: “the kids aren’t learning the story or the idea behind the story because it’s a new story every week, and they don’t—they’re not getting it. I kind of had a small review last Sunday and it was like they just looked at me blankly.” A primary school teacher by trade, Denise’s believes that by acquiring particular information, the children at her congregation can “grow up and be gentle, loving Canadian citizens” as they apply this knowledge to their lives.

Its reliance on a speculative theology may be the most prominent aspect of the culture of Burke Street—especially as it relates to its ministry with children—but it is certainly not the only one. Another is its emphasis on community. All three of the adults whom I

interviewed emphasized that Burke Street is a welcoming congregation, one made up of people who build community with one another. Although this is a congregation that emphasizes speculative theology, its emphasis on community rather than creed means that being part of the congregation, to use Rev. Monica’s words, is “not so much about a theological stance as it is about community.” While this leaves the door open to diversity among members of the community, its minister admits that the congregation is fairly homogenous and has not been challenged by a great deal of diversity in thought and practice. Thus, in some ways, its view of what it means to be welcoming is somewhat delicate, for some adults identified acts of being welcoming with a focus on greeting visitors—“shaking your hand, [saying] ‘How do you do? This is our website,’ or whatever we say to them. ‘Please come back again.’”—and admitted that their understanding of community has not been stretched through the presence of significant difference.

Theological Reflections

The speculative theology through which the leaders of Burke Street guide the congregation was reflected in my conversations with its children in a number of ways. Each of them expressed a thoughtful approach to faith, yet how they did so did not entirely align with that of their peers. In this section I will speak of three ways that the children relied on a thoughtful, speculative approach to theology: in their experiencing of faith through thinking and learning; their tendency to engage with uncertainty; and the correlation of their approaches to theological meaning-making and the children’s programs at their congregation.
Informed Theology

The speculative theology of Burke Street was shared among the children at this congregation. But for some of them, theology was less something that they came to through their own generation of insight. Instead, it consisted of information that was to be learned from their teachers and other leaders within the congregation, much like learning mathematical formulae or facts from the world of science.

This cognitive, information-based theology was particularly clear during my interview with Rebecca, a nine-year-old girl who always seems willing to offer answers to questions in Sunday school. As she drew a picture of God, she chatted with my research assistant and me about the image that was unfolding on the paper before us. Her drawing depicted a city street with trees, lampposts, a playground, and a passing car. Above this scene she drew clouds and hearts and wrote, “God loves you and is all around you remember that!” After adding these elements to her drawing, we spoke about why she included them:

Dave: (asking about her drawing) So what are those?

Rebecca: Clouds.

Dave: Okay.

Rebecca: Because God is all around you.

Dave: Oh. So what do the clouds—how do the clouds show that God is all around?

Rebecca: Um, because, like, God is everywhere. Um, and... um... yeah...

* * *

Research Assistant: I wonder about those hearts at the top.

Rebecca: It’s for, um, God loves you.
Dave: Okay. Why is that? So you said [on her drawing] “God loves you and is all around you. Remember that.” You mentioned, like, the God being around us part. But why is it important in the picture that you show that God loves you?

Rebecca: Because if you ever do something that you don’t think is right, you can always think that God loves you and he will forgive. He will forgive you if you forgive, like, do the right thing, and forgive the other person… or apologize.

Dave: Okay. Cool. What makes you think that God loves us and is all around us?

Rebecca: Because, um… everybody says that and I want to believe in that, so, yeah.

Dave: So when you say “everybody,” who do you mean?

Rebecca: Like, people around the church, like Mrs. Hill75 (Denise), Monica, Emma, a bunch of the Sunday school teachers.

Dave: Okay. What do you mean that you “want to believe” that?

Rebecca: Because, like, I want to believe that God loves me and that he’s all around me and he’s protecting me.

Dave: That seems really important to you, to know that. Why is that so important?

Rebecca: I don’t know, really.

The central tenet of Rebecca’s theology is reflected in the words that she wrote in the middle of her drawing: “God loves you and is all around you.” Everything she drew symbolized this idea, for the reason she drew a town is because God is “around you when you’re out and when you’re in, and when you’re in a different country he’s always around you.”

75 Most of the Sunday school teachers and leaders at Burke Street have the children call them by their first names. However, Denise prefers that the children call her Mrs. Hill because she is a teacher at a local public school.
When I asked her to say more about this view, she repeatedly struggled to go deeper than “God loves you” and “God is all around you,” except to say that because God loves people, God extends forgiveness to those who seek it, and that God’s presence in her life means that God is protecting her. In fact, throughout our conversation, many of her responses to questions I asked about all sorts of aspects of faith and her involvement at Burke Street centred on God’s love and omnipresence. She said “God loves you and is all around you” five times during the interview, and talked about God loving all people six additional times, and the same number of times she mentioned that God is all around.

This is an understanding that she has learned from the leaders in her congregation, and she has internalized it more as a bit of theological information rather than something she has come to believe through experiencing God’s love and presence. Each time I asked her to say more about why this idea is so important to her beliefs, she struggled to respond without simply repeating that God loves and is all around. By writing “Remember that” and saying that this is something she “want[s] to believe,” she indicated that she is aware that a cognitive affirmation of such a belief is important, but she struggled to understand just why this is so or what this belief means in a deeper, more personal way.

This is not to say that Rebecca was unable to make theological meaning for herself during our conversation. There were a few instances during which she responded to open-ended questions by drawing on the basic tenets of God’s love and omnipresence in order to develop ideas for herself. For example, when she shared that she thinks God had no beginning and will have no end, I asked her why she didn’t think God will ever end. She responded by saying “Because he loves so many people and then there’s going to be, like,
new people are born, and then he will have to love them too for generations and generations.” Here she was making connections between the two key aspects of the God she learned at Burke Street—love and presence—by explaining that God’s very existence is wrapped up with God’s love for humanity.

Rebecca was the clearest example of a cognitive, information-based theology imparted from teachers and leaders in her congregation; but other children displayed similar attributes. In addition to affirming God’s presence and love for all people—albeit in less explicit ways—twelve-year-old Stephen (who happens to be Rev. Monica’s son) also expressed a cognitive approach to theology, one informed by faith leaders in a few different contexts.

Stephen’s cognitive, information-based approach to theology was evident throughout my conversation with him. This eloquent boy responded to my request for him to draw a picture of God by sketching an image of his congregation’s building because “this is where I’ve learned the most and experienced God the most.” This was just the first of several instances in which he associated hearing, learning, and talking about God with experiencing God, a correlation that demonstrates the knowledge-based approach that undergirds his theological life. He was able to recount several instances when he enjoyed learning and talking about theological matters with individuals at Burke Street and at a two-week-long Mennonite music camp that he attended about eight months before I spoke with him; yet it was difficult for him to identify moments when he experienced God firsthand. For example, at one point he told me that he thinks God works through people, and when I asked him if he
ever felt God working through him, he was unable to identify such a time. Much like Rebecca, Stephen’s theology is one that is based on knowledge rather than experiences.

Stephen also shares Rebecca’s struggle to generate theology for herself. Although he is quite knowledgeable in theological matters and was able to articulate his theological thinking at a greater length and depth than other children in this congregation, it appeared as though Stephen was parroting understandings and ideas that had been taught to him at his congregation and the music camp. For example, after sharing extensively about how the theme of the music camp was peace and how much he enjoyed talking with other campers about peace for the two-week program, he struggled to respond when asked, “What does peace mean to you?” In most instances, he responded to questions right away; but in this moment he looked embarrassed as he sat silent for a long period of time before quietly saying “I don’t know.”

These two children demonstrate one way that their theological meaning-making reflects the speculative theology of their wider congregation. Theirs is a theology based on acquiring knowledge, yet they struggle to generate theological ideas for themselves.

**Uncertain Theology**

The cognitive, information-based faith expressed by Rebecca and Stephen is not the only way that the speculative theology of Burke Street is evident in its children’s theological meaning-making. I mentioned earlier that a central aspect of the theology that guides Rev. Monica’s leadership of Burke Street is openness to individuals who bring their questions with them. This quality was manifested in some of the children at this congregation in their
willingness to address uncertainty and doubt. Take, for example, this excerpt from my time with Nicholas, an eight-year-old boy who attends church irregularly with his brother Theo (5) and does not tend to enjoy it when he does come\textsuperscript{76}:

Nicholas: (\textit{talking about God}) Well... he’s actually kind of like a legend... Because I do not know if it actually existed yet.

Dave: If what existed?

Nicholas: God. If he actually did exist for sure.

Dave: So what do you mean that it’s a legend?

Nicholas: Well, I don’t exactly know if it is a legend or if it’s true or false. I don’t know, like, if it actually did or not.

Research Assistant: What is a legend?

Nicholas: A legend is something that might be true but also might not be true.

Dave: What do you think? Do you think it’s true or not?

Nicholas: Not really...

Dave: Do you think other people think it’s true?

Nicholas: Yeah. A lot of other people might think it, but I don’t really.

Dave: Why do you think it’s not true?

Nicholas: Well, basically, I don’t know if it is or isn’t. And that’s the only thing... It’s kind of hard to guess, in a way... if you don’t even know if it is true.

Dave: Hmm. What is it that makes it hard to think that it’s true?

Nicholas: So, I’ve never actually heard somebody say that somebody, like, told them that somebody has actually, or whatever, who’ve never known...

\textsuperscript{76} Throughout this portion of my conversation with Nicholas and Theo, the younger of these brothers interrupted and moved the discussion to topics such as the 2014 Winter Games and movies. The excerpt I include here has been edited to remove the extraneous bit of our conversation about God.
Dave: What do you think you would need to know? What would need to happen in order for you to know for sure?

Nicholas: Ah, well... right now I think that he did not exist a second time. That he only actually existed once. The second time, that’s kind of fiction that somebody probably made up.

Dave: Now, when you say “he,” do you mean Jesus?

Nicholas: Yes.

Dave: Oh, okay.

Nicholas: Like how he came back a lot after he died... That is probably fiction... It’s probably fiction that somebody just put in a story... Just like invented it or something like that...

Dave: Now do you think, like, do you think stories about Jesus before Jesus died are true?

Nicholas: Before he died?

Dave: Yeah.

Nicholas: Probably. But after he died—that’s probably not. It’s extremely rare that that would happen... It might... maybe. But it probably shouldn’t...

Dave: So how do you know what’s true and what’s fiction, then?

Nicholas: (immediately) Well, what I know—do you know how I know it? It’s because you—somebody with the fiction part is that, like... The only fiction part is when he died and then came back to life.

Dave: Okay. How do you know that’s not real?

Nicholas: Because how do you make somebody come back to life with oil? I don’t get it.

Dave: What do you mean “with oil”? So what’s the story, then?

Nicholas: Oil. Like, the story is his disciples were kind of friends, put this oil on him and other stuff, like, some of this stuff, and then after some time he came back
to life. I don’t get how do you do that. And how does a person die and then come back to life. That’s almost impossible I think.

Dave: Right. Hmm. And how do you know—what makes you think that everything else that they read is true?

Nicholas: (immediately) Well, it’s that it can happen.

This boy’s speculative theology appears in his inclination to doubt the resurrection of Jesus, claiming it to be a “legend.” Like Rebecca and Stephen, his theology is based on cognition, but he is less prone to simply take the information taught in Sunday school and church services at face value (he prefers to stay with his family in Sunday services, so his experience of Sunday school is infrequent). His is the faith of a sceptic,77 and his uncertainty rests less on whether or not an event recounted in a biblical narrative actually happened or not, but on whether or not the story as told could be possible in the natural world. Thus, the resurrection is impossible in his mind, because the facts of the story—as he understands them—rely on the plausibility of the miraculous.

Although this young naturalist does not believe in the viability of a bodily resurrection, his approach to generating theology is consistent with his wider congregation. After all, Burke Street is a community that encourages deep thinking about matters of theology and faith, and alignment with a particular doctrine or creed is not required for being part of this congregation. Its speculative approach to theology invites people to think for themselves about the deep questions and uncertainties embedded within Christian scripture and tradition. In fact, its understanding of belief is one that requires questions and doubts

---

77 In naming Nicholas as a sceptic, I do not wish to convey that he has no faith, but rather that a tendency to question, doubt, and be curious is central to his faith.
such as those that Nicholas shared with me. As Denise said, “How can you believe something if you have to turn your brain off to accept it?”

Jeremy (6) is another child from Burke Street who displays characteristics of uncertainty in his theology. He attends services and Sunday school very frequently and seems well connected to others in the congregation. Yet while Nicholas’ uncertainty surrounding the bodily resurrection causes him to reject such accounts as works of fiction, Jeremy is comfortable with mystery and uncertainty in his faith. Throughout our discussion, he used his imagination and his own experiences as he drew a picture of God as a six-year-old walking in the woods with his parents on their way home from a picnic. As we spoke about God and heaven, Jeremy was comfortable responding to my open-ended questions and was not shy about expressing his uncertainty about theological matters, often saying “I think” or “I don’t know” before going on to respond with his ideas. The way that Jeremy generates theology reflects that of a mystic using the imagination to express ideas shrouded with mystery.

Although Stephen’s rational approach to theology is one focused on his knowledge of information regarding scripture and theological matters, his way of thinking reflects a particular level of abstraction that leaves room for uncertainty. In explaining his drawing of his church—and why it represents his image of God—he said, “I don’t like to think of God as a person; more as an idea or like a thing that’s always there. It’s not like God is right here (he points to a place on his drawing). God is here (he makes large movements with his arms)… It’s more like a spirit that’s just all around you and in you. Just not a person or one singular

---

78 Perhaps Jeremy’s proclivity to express uncertainty is related to that fact that his mother, who spoke with me while Jeremy was taking a washroom break, told him before our interview that I was not looking for right answers from him, and I just wanted to know what Jeremy thought about things.
thing.” If Nicholas is a sceptic and Jeremy a mystic, then Stephen is a metaphysicist, a budding ontotheologian who has acquired a metaphoric and abstract notion of God using church experiences and his own reflection as sources for this understanding. Such a view of God leaves open the door for God to be anything and everything imaginable. Stephen avoided boxing in this understanding of God with the words he used, being careful to use the pronoun “it” when speaking of God—even when he caught himself referring to the “thing” that is God as “he.”

The ideas and opinions shared by Nicholas, Jeremy, and Stephen showcase three different ways that the wider affirmation of uncertainty and questions in the theology of Burke Street are manifested in the lives of its children. Yet it raises queries about why the children at this congregation express a common speculative approach to theology in approaches that differ from one another. This very subject forms a third way that the broader culture of Burke Street is manifested in the lives of its children.

Varied Theology

Of all the congregations that participated in this research, this one posed the greatest challenge to me in the analysis of interviews with children and the generation of common themes within their theological processes and ideas. In many ways, the children at Burke Street seemed to engage in theological meaning-making in ways that were rather distinct from their peers, with some children such as Rebecca internalizing teachings at face value and others like Jeremy forming views rich with theological imagination.
Perhaps one explanation for such diversity is found in the different theological and pedagogical approaches that undergird the ways that children participate in the worship and educational life of Burke Street. More so than their peers at the other three congregations, the children here engage in their congregation’s life in ways that offer them wholly different experiences: Stephen and Rebecca are lifelong regular attendees of Burke Street and have participated in its Sunday school program for a number of years; Jeremy and Theo do not attend with the same level of frequency (Jeremy attends regularly; Theo attends half the time due to his involvement on a hockey team) but both participate in Godly Play; and Nicholas, like his younger brother, attends irregularly but when he does walk through the doors, he sometimes remains upstairs with his parents, where he listens to the worship service while working in “workbooks” he brings from home. These different experiences at Burke Street correlate with the theologies of these children in the very manners in which they do theology for themselves.

The children who participate in Sunday school on a regular basis are more likely to hold relatively simplistic ideas that have been imparted to them. Both Stephen and Rebecca expressed theological ideas that they stated they learned from their congregation (and, in Stephen’s case, the Mennonite music camp), and when I asked them questions to tease out their own interpretations and ideas, they struggled to respond at a greater level of depth and seemed embarrassed when they were unable to answer my questions immediately (even though I encouraged them to take their time). For example, when Stephen brought up the

---

79 In making this statement, I do not assume that the children at Parkdale, Messiah, and Colkirk had experiences or ways of thinking that were identical to their congregational peers. I am simply highlighting that the correlation between congregational experience and theological thinking was so evident among the children at Burke Street that it warrants closer interpretation as a theme in and of itself.
importance of interpreting the Bible in one’s present context and I asked him to give me an example, he gave a detailed interpretation of David and Goliath that he said he had heard someone say but, in his words, “I can’t really remember where,” and he struggled to respond to my questions that penetrated deeper into his own thoughts regarding this biblical narrative. Perhaps the cognitive, schooling-instructional approach to Sunday school has encouraged a style of theological engagement focused on acquiring information rather than generating ideas for oneself.

Conversely, the children who participate in Godly Play (Jeremy and Theo) expressed a style of theology that in several ways aligned with the attributes of this approach. First, rather than emphasizing particular theological “points,” they were much more prone to have a “storied” approach to theology. This was most clearly expressed through Jeremy, who tended to respond to my questions by telling stories that he had heard at church (i.e., the birth of Jesus; the Good Samaritan). But he went further than simply telling stories he had learned; he also created his own stories. As he explained his drawn depiction of God with “God’s parents”—which he named as Mary and Joseph—Jeremy told about how “they were at a picnic at a warm place but now they’re going home from the picnic” and they are walking through the woods and must arrive home before nightfall. This example also serves to demonstrate a second characteristic of the children who participated in Godly Play: they were much more likely to be imaginative in their generation of theology. For instance, Theo’s understanding of God involved the idea that God has died, but still exists in some invisible form. A third quality inherent in Godly Play that these children expressed is a slow pace in the rhythm of theological thought. While Stephen and Rebecca seemed embarrassed when
they needed time to think before responding to my questions, Theo and Jeremy were not prone to rush to speak when I posed a query to them. Perhaps this was most clearly demonstrated when Theo and Nicholas were drawing their pictures. At one point, Nicholas told me he was done his drawing and then decided to add something to it, and I told him that they could draw as much as they’d like to. Without looking away from his drawing, Theo added “and as slow as you want,” a line that seemed so tied to Godly Play that I wondered if Emma says it as she leads it each week.

This interpretation demonstrates the correlation of these children’s approaches to theological meaning-making and their experiences at their congregation. The children who are regularly involved in Sunday school do theology in ways that are consistent with the schooling-instructional model in which they participate in this program. Theirs is a theology that is learned, and their ability to generate theological notions for themselves is relatively limited. Conversely, those who participate in Godly Play showcase attributes of this approach in the storied, imaginative, and slow nature of their style of doing theology.

**Theological Excursions**

The particularities of Burke Street pose certain challenges to the interpretation of my research in search of the ways that its children’s theological meaning-making depart from the culture of the wider congregation. As discussed previously, an important element of the approach to theology emphasized by the leaders at Burke Street is the value they place on thinking for oneself. As Rev. Monica stated, children’s ministry at this congregation should help the children engage with biblical stories by interpreting them for oneself and coming to
one’s own conclusions: “What is this story teaching you? That’s just something that I wouldn’t say you’re just teaching that to a fourteen-year-old. You need to be teaching that to a two-year-old.” This opens wide the gates to multiple interpretations, and in a congregation that is theologically diverse, it can seem as though any theological idea or opinion has its place within the community. Such an open approach to theology not only makes it difficult to name theological excursions among the children—it can actually serve to encourage distinctions as the children interpret scripture and theology for themselves.

Nevertheless, it is possible to find a few instances in which the theological ideas and approaches of these five children diverge from those of the broader congregation. One such instance involves Rebecca’s tendency to interpret scripture in literal ways. At a few moments during my conversation with her, Rebecca abandoned the learned information she had picked up from Sunday school and began to respond to my questions by starting to generate her own ideas. As she did so, she made comments that demonstrated that she interprets scripture as a biblicist. For example, when we spoke about how she is aware that some of the children in her school are not Christian, I asked her how she knew this. She responded by saying “They’ll say, ‘All of the stories that your church tells you aren’t real.’ So I can tell that he’s not Christian.” At another time, she explained to me that she knows God has been “real” for a long period of time because Jesus “usually mentioned God [in Bible stories], and that was a long time ago. So I knew that he would be alive for a long time.” These responses to my questions pushed her to move beyond the information she acquired from Burke Street and to form her own interpretations. Yet in both instances there are hints of a literal reading of the Bible that shine through her words. In the first instance, she identifies believing stories in the
Bible to be “real” as a mark of being Christian, while in the second example she draws from a literal reading of Jesus’ words about God as an argument for God’s existence for “thousands of years.”

This literal reading of scripture departs from the metaphorical approach that Rev. Monica seeks to form in children. Her goal is to help children realize that it’s okay to understand that as a story and not that, not that it necessarily happened… So seven days of creation. I’m not talking about seven days. This is story to help us understand that when God created over the universe, over universal time, and continues to create, God is continuing to say ‘It is good.’

Perhaps one explanation for this departure from the norms of Burke Street is the developmental stage at which Rebecca’s faith is functioning. In his now classic Stages of Faith, James Fowler posits that children of about her age tend to appropriate beliefs and interpret ideas in a literal and one-dimensional style. Rebecca’s biblicist reading of scripture may be largely indicative not of an unwillingness to engage in the metaphorical and symbolic interpretation of scripture valued by Rev. Monica, but rather an inability to think in such a way due to the developmental phase in which she currently makes meaning of and expresses her faith.

While one reading of Rebecca’s literal interpretations of scripture sees them as excursions from Burke Street’s broader culture, through another lens, it appears that her biblicism does not completely deviate from that of the leaders of this congregation. In fact, it can actually appear to be consistent. Perhaps her literal reading of the Bible is in fact a product of her willingness to think for herself, a key element of her congregation’s culture.

---

Thus, while it can seem to be wholly divergent from the broader congregational culture, her approach to interpreting scripture may actually be the result of Burke Street’s encouragement to draw one’s own conclusions.

This brings us to a second excursion. As explained in the previous section, both Rebecca and Stephen had difficulty generating their own theological ideas; for them, doing theology involves learning what they are told to believe rather than coming to their own conclusions and interpretations. This in and of itself is a sort of theological excursion, for it departs from the value placed on helping the children cultivate their own interpretations and thoughts regarding scripture and theology, which was expressed as pivotal by Rev. Monica and Denise and is consistent with Godly Play. Thus, the fact that these two children focus on rote memorization and learning facts and information over generating theological insight for themselves goes to show that in doing so, they are choosing to do theology in a way that differs from the overall culture of their congregation.

Yet even while such an approach stands in glaring contrast to the theology espoused by leaders at Burke Street, it actually remains consistent with the pedagogical and theological practices of its Sunday school program. Rev. Monica and Denise may say that they want children to use their cognitive capacities to generate their own theological suppositions, but the actual practice of Sunday school undermines this value by promoting rote memorization and learning “the point” to biblical stories. Perhaps this difference between Burke Street’s Sunday school and its broader ethos can be attributed to a choice of curriculum that departs from the culture of the congregation, or Denise’s approach to primary school education that she brings into the Sunday school classroom, or even a belief that before children can create
theology for themselves they must learn basic presuppositions and tenets. Whatever the reasons, what is clear is that although Rebecca and Stephen’s approach to theology differs from the broader congregation’s culture, their tendency to acquire theological information taught to them rather than creating ideas for themselves is in some ways consistent with the ethos that drives Burke Street’s Sunday school program.

* * *

During one of my early conversations with Rev. Monica, she chuckled as she told me about that board member who did not know why I would ever want to include Burke Street in a study about culture, since it has none. Apparently culture, for him, was something that only applied to those who did not belong to dominant groups of people in Canada (White, English-speaking, Canadian-born, etc.), groups in which he believed Burke Street was included. This attitude of being part of the mainstream of the United Church—and Canada—and possessing no distinguishing features has made it difficult to uncover the particular theological assumptions that drive this congregation.

Yet despite its members’ inability to name its own distinctive cultural markers, I have perceived Burke Street to be a highly speculative congregation, and its children reflect this cultural marker in more than one way. Overall, these children express very cognitive approaches to doing theology, ones that are consistent with the various theological and pedagogical assumptions that drive the programs that this congregation offers for children. And even amidst the diversity of the programs, it is still possible to name how these children
break free from the broader culture of Burke Street and do theology in ways that are all their own.
Every time I drive up the long gravel driveway towards Colkirk United Church, it feels like I’m driving toward a big hug. When the members of this congregation constructed their current church building in the 1990s, they designed it in such a way as to give the impression that it has outstretched arms waiting to embrace all who approach it. The building is made up of three sections, connected in the centre by a small foyer with coatracks and a few small tables with photo albums and brochures. On either side are the two “arms,” one of which contains a kitchen and small church hall with just over half a dozen round tables with seasonal handmade centrepieces. The other consists of an office, washrooms, and a short hallway leading to a Sunday school room with bright windows and walls plastered with children’s artwork.

The “body” of the church building is its sanctuary, a simple space with tall windows on both sides of the room and ten rows of pews flanking a centre aisle. At the front, an upright piano rests before the altar, which is accessible by steps at the front and a ramp along the side. A Christ candle sits prominently on the end of a handrail, and an electric organ—which is rarely played—hides behind the handrail. To the right are two chairs and a simple wooden pulpit where sermons are preached and announcements are delivered. At the centre of the altar are three large chairs and a communion table with a small image of a “homeless...
Jesus’ statue propped up against one of its legs. This image is not the only item that
decorates this space; other decorations include a wood relief picture of Jesus at the gate, a
drawing of God embracing the earth that was created by one of the congregation’s children,
and a small wooden cross on the wall above the communion table. These and other items are
rooted in the community, with members of the congregation having made or acquired many
of them over the years. Each week there may be new images and items adorning the space,
depending on what has taken place in the community during the week. In February, for
instance, there may be red, pink, and white balloons leftover from Colkirk’s Valentine’s Day
dinner. When a member of the congregation passes away, there may be a framed picture of
that person in the sanctuary for several weeks afterwards. Such items are markers of the close
web of relationships among the people within this small congregation, who care for the
community so much that they actively decorate it with items that are meaningful to them.

Colkirk is an Aboriginal congregation that was founded in 1846 as a Methodist
mission. Since that time there have been three buildings that stood on this lot nestled on their
reserve between fields and a river. The first was a log church, which was replaced in the early
1900s with a structure that burned down at the end of the century. The current building,
which was dedicated in 1996, is the meeting place of a community that has seen significant
change over the past few decades.

Only a generation or two ago, the local church was the main venue for events on the
reserve on which Colkirk stands. A large percentage of the broader community attended
Sunday services, for there was little else to do on the reserve on Sunday mornings. As Rev.
Martha, the current minister of Colkirk stated, “The church was kind of the default place.”
Yet much has changed since she was a child in the congregation, and attendance has shrunk in light of a growing number of options for what members of the community can do with their time.

All this means that the people who continue to remain active at Colkirk certainly do not do so out of obligation. They have a sense of being truly called to be part of their congregation. This is particularly true for the small group of children who attend Sunday services or other activities the congregation hosts. These individuals have a strong sense of the love and spirit that’s shared among members of this community, a love that extends to those who have passed on as well. This is a congregation that values connection to the past, and prefers to sing old hymns with piano accompaniment rather than invest in new songbooks. These hymns and that piano remind them of their parents and grandparents who have since passed away.

Another change in recent years has been the movement away from pastoral leadership from a White United Church clergyperson to the calling of an Aboriginal minister who was born and raised in this congregation. This change turned the tide of this congregation away from a reliance on paternalistic approaches to “missions” among the Aboriginal community and toward leadership from within their own people. Coupled with the formation of the All Native Circle Conference in 1988, this change of leadership has helped the congregation worship and “conduct the business of the church in a way that works for us,” to use Rev. Martha’s words. Gradually, the wounds of colonialism that came about by the United Church are being addressed in the congregation, despite the ongoing sting of defunding and perpetuated institutional racism. While becoming more aware of and involved in happenings
in the wider denomination, Rev. Martha makes it clear that this community continues to be marginalized: “the broader church really has nothing to do with us because culturally, politically, socially, geographically, they’re isolated from us.”

Sunday services—like every other aspect of life at Colkirk—are quite informal. Worship begins sometime around 10:00 am, but it’s not uncommon to see Rev. Martha and other adults in the community chatting and setting up for fifteen or twenty minutes after the service was scheduled to begin. There are about a dozen people—all but one of who are Aboriginal—at any given Sunday service, and most of these folks are older adults. While it is common for only a few children to be present, it’s rare to have a service with no young people involved. Services follow a simple order of worship, and begin with a hymn sing when congregants are encouraged to request songs that they’d like to sing. After lighting the Christ candle, Rev. Martha leads the community through prayers, readings, musical interludes, a children’s time, and a sermon that is listed in the bulletin as “Words of Encouragement,” followed by a few moments of silence. After reciting The New Creed and praying the prayers of the people, Rev. Martha extinguishes the Christ candle and the congregation gathers in the hall for a simple lunch of soup, biscuits, cheese, and other items that congregants chose to bring that day.

Sunday services are just one aspect of congregational life at Colkirk. To address issues facing their broader community—such as systemic poverty, the breakdown of community relationships, and the rise in Sunday morning extra-curricular activities—the congregation hosts a breadth of other activities aimed at building community among their members and neighbours. Such events include a knitting circle and special meals such as a
Valentine’s Day dinner. In recent years, Rev. Martha and a congregant named Arlene have emphasized ensuring that the congregation is a safe and loving place for children. To this end, they have expanded their children’s ministries from Sunday school to week-long vacation Bible school (VBS) programs during school breaks and a weekly “drop in” day during the summer—all at no cost to the community. These programs help them build relationships with children who do not attend Sunday worship and they meet a real need in the community for affordable (in this case, free) childcare during school breaks.

Every way that Colkirk engages in ministry with children is focused on building loving relationships with them and valuing them as participants, contributors, and leaders in their congregation and community. Although each program includes regular, semi-organized activities (such as a Bible story at the beginning of Sunday school and a short chapel service each day of VBS), informality is the order of the day. Whether they show up once or every time there’s a program for children, each child has a small storage container in which they are free to keep craft projects, school assignments, and other items that they’d like to work on while at Colkirk. The children direct the activities they engage in, which sometimes results in independent activities and at other times a plethora of suggestions about what they would like to do together, such as baking cookies, watching a movie, toboggan, or flying kites. The only agenda that Rev. Martha and Arlene bring to these programs is to show the children love, invest in their self-worth, build relationships with them, and help them build relationships with one another. For the most part, any teaching or lessons they wish to impart to the children is done informally, through conversations as they share ingredients to make pizzas or the many “teachable moments” that arise throughout their time together.
Healing Wounds

Rev. Martha has served as the minister of Colkirk for the past half-decade or so, recently moving from the role of student-minister to ordained clergy. Having grown up in this congregation and on the reserve that it calls home, her leadership represents a tremendous shift toward autonomy of the local community, as it no longer relies on leadership from either temporary student ministers or White clergy from off the reserve.

For this minister, leading this congregation is intimately intertwined with the history of her community. Ministering to the people within her congregation—particularly its children— involves above all things working to heal the wounds caused by centuries of colonialism. For most of the history of Colkirk, ministry has been carried out in ways that undermine the culture and context of First Nations people, with White clergy driving home the sinfulness of Aboriginal spirituality and ways of life while offering a narrow vision of salvation and life in Jesus Christ. This interpretation of the gospel has resulted in wounds that fester as they are passed on from one generation to the next and are felt even among the very young children within this congregation. Rev. Martha explained to me how this reality shapes her ministry at Colkirk, especially that which she carries out with children:

First Nations people are inextricably linked to history. So a lot of what’s happening here in this church and in this community are just part of that river of history. This is where we are at this particular moment in time. And it’s had a specific course and it has a specific course in the future. And we’re trying to influence that course as much as we can based on who we are and not what Indian Affairs says we can be or not what is possible under the law, but who we say we are. So we’re trying to influence that river as it goes from here. So a lot of the work that we do with the kids, as I see us trying to do it anyway, is about healing that colonial wound so that the church is no longer the place that you go to hear that you’re a bad person and you’re a sinner and you can only be saved through this particular way.
A primary avenue for healing such wounds is relationships. It is because relationships are so vital that Rev. Martha and Arlene spend extraordinary amounts of time simply being with and listening to people within their congregation. Rather than focusing on congregational structures and well-organized services, their emphasis on relationships blends with their congregation’s informality to create a space where building community is prized above all else. As Rev. Martha once remarked, “As Aboriginal churches, we need that. We need that time and relationship to actually know what [one another] are talking about, to know what people are all about, what we’re all about.” Everything from the child-led approach to children’s programs to the weekly post-service meals and the passing of the peace—during which time all people present shake hands with all others—are aimed at forming strong relationships with one another and with the place they call Colkirk.

Healing the colonial wound also necessitates the redemption of Aboriginal spirituality from the marginalized and even demonized place it has held at the hands of settlers and missionaries. In the many months that I spent building relationships of mutual trust and respect with the people of Colkirk, I rarely heard them speak about the juxtaposition of Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity; yet I witnessed several ways that Rev. Martha and

---

81 My relationship with Colkirk began in the winter of 2013, when I met with Rev. Martha and Arlene to talk with one another about my research and how I hoped their congregation could participate in it. Over the next several months, we continued to meet together and discussed how I could give back to the community without creating additional work for them in order to find a way to reciprocate their assistance to my studies. We agreed that I would help them with some vacation Bible school (VBS) programs they hoped to run during 2014, but for which they struggled to find enough leaders. Rev. Martha invited me to attend worship with them in November 2013, and then again in February to help the children and me get to know one another before the two VBS programs that I assisted with in February and March of 2014. After helping with another VBS in July, at which I conducted the interviews with children, I participated in worship in August, following which I held the focus group conversation with Arlene and Rev. Martha. Since moving to Halifax shortly after this visit, I have continued to maintain a relationship with Colkirk through occasional letters, emails, and even a few visits when I am back in their area.
her congregation blends these two traditions together. For example, each time she lights the Christ candle, Rev. Martha draws from Aboriginal spirituality with words such as, “We light our Christ candle. And we remember that Jesus is the fire at the centre of our circle, uniting us with all our relations.” Going further, there are several ways that the members of this community blend Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality in informal ways, such as one elder who shares her retelling of the Nativity depicting Jesus’ birth on the reserve or a conversation Rev. Martha had with a young girl about how she doesn’t need to be afraid of spirits that they see in their homes and in their church building. These are just a handful of the many simple yet profound ways this minister and her broader congregation implicitly and freely synthesize elements of Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity.

Above all else, healing the wounds of colonialism among the members of Colkirk and its surrounding community involves making church a place of love. As Rev. Martha once said to me, “our church is a place to go to know that you are loved and experience the love of God whenever you come here. That’s what I’m trying for.” This sort of love is one that this minister hopes will permeate throughout the relationships being built among her congregation. It’s a love without conditions, one that invites people to bring their authentic selves into relationship with others, knowing that even when things go awry and they make mistakes, they are still welcomed and accepted. “The church is a place where you can be yourself and you know that you are loved by God, you know that you are loved by the congregation, that you are supported, that you are forgiven even when you mess up.” For Rev. Martha, God’s love is not something that is simply preached from the pulpit; it is felt
and experienced in tangible ways as the congregation shows the breadth and depth of God’s love to all who walk through the doors.

Such love subverts the lure of western materialism that is sweeping throughout the reserve, leaving many in the community struggling with depression, addiction, and hopelessness. In Rev. Martha’s eyes, as the colonial wounds of their community continue to fester in individuals’ lives, the rise of material resources—and in some cases wealth—results in a lack of “inner resources or connection to those things that ultimately sustain us.” This in turn means that more and more people “now have better houses in which to commit suicide.”

In light of these challenges, the leaders of Colkirk name their ministry with children as “suicide prevention.” Many of the children in their congregation have experienced a “rough start” to life even from their earliest years, and this congregation’s approach to ministry with children takes this into deep consideration. The primary goal of its ministry with children is “not about learning the books of the Bible or the Ten Commandments.” It is about keeping the children alive into adulthood by helping them develop the “inner resources” and loving relationships that can support their long-term flourishing. To achieve this, they minister out of two specific emphases.

First, they support the children in developing the freedom to be themselves whenever they are at Colkirk. It is for this reason that their Sunday school and VBS programs are

---

largely unstructured, for it allows the children the freedom and power to have a say in the activities they engage in within this congregation. There is a great deal of “free time,” during which the children can play sports and games, make crafts, read, and talk with one another, and the role of the adult helpers is simply to join them in their interests and lives, embracing teachable moments as they paint, kick around a soccer ball, and simply talk together. It’s not unusual for Arlene to brainstorm with the children about what they would like to do during VBS—from making pizza to going to a conservation area—and then make plans to engage in these activities together during the week.

A second emphasis leads out of this first one. Their approach to children’s ministry not only considers giving the children the freedom to be themselves without apology, but it also focuses on supporting them as they learn to be in community with one another. They place a great emphasis on the ways that the children interact with one another as they develop healthy self-images. It is not enough to show children that their voices matter; they must also learn that the voices of others matter as well. Thus, when a conflict arises among the children, they take great effort to help all parties involved to listen to one another and respect one another’s feelings and opinions. This is not simply about group management; it is about helping the children form healthy and sustainable ways of relating to one another in community.

**Theological Reflections**

Rev. Martha’s theological vision of healing the colonial wound in her community is difficult and ongoing work. It involves facing significant challenges head-on by building relationships
of love and support, especially as the young people in the congregation learn to be their authentic selves in community with one another. This ethos runs through every aspect of life and ministry at Colkirk, and it is present in the theology generated by the children in this congregation. In particular, the children’s theology reflects this vision in two ways: through their blending of Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology and through their focus on relationships and community.

Blended Theology

Each of the four children I interviewed at Colkirk expressed their theological ideas in ways that demonstrated an interweaving of Christian theology with Aboriginal spirituality. Their way of blending these two traditions was implicit and unspoken, and they seemed uninterested in discussing how they juxtapose these traditions, acting as though they know no other way of doing theology.

Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology intersected throughout my conversation with Melissa (11) and Laura (13), two girls who are leaders among the children who come to services at Colkirk (although with differing levels of regularity), participate in VBS, and attend school on their reserve. It is difficult to pinpoint one particular instance when this theme became especially clear. Thus, I will share two snippets of our conversation, each of which bookended a lengthy period when I listened as they shared stories about the creation of the world they had learned from their congregation and school. In response to my request for them to draw pictures of God, Laura created a scene of trees at various stages of growth and
Melissa drew the backs of heads of girls belonging to different races. I asked them why they drew these images as representations of God:

Melissa: Because he made all those people.

Dave: And Laura, what about all the trees?

Laura: I don’t know, just kind of like, creation of life. You get born. And then you die.

Dave: Oh, so is that why all the trees are at different stages?

Laura: Yeah

Dave: So what do you mean, like, the creation of life and the cycle of life?

Laura: Um, he made them.

Melissa: He made them.

Laura: Yeah.

Dave: God made them? Is that something a lot of people talk about at Colkirk, or—

Melissa: (interjecting) I just heard it from school, I guess.

Laura: Yeah, well we get taught, like, the Creator and stuff like that. But, it’s like, when we come here (Colkirk), it’s kind of the same thing, just in a different point of view.

* * *

Dave: So when they tell you the stories—I don’t know a lot about them. So when they tell you the stories, are the stories meant to be told, like, that’s how it really happened?

Laura: I think they change over time.

Melissa: Yeah. A long time ago they might have been really detailed and everything.

Laura: And now they’re shortened to like five minutes.

Dave: Why do you think that is?
Melissa: Well, because they get passed, passed on. It passes on through a whole bunch of people.

Laura: Through generations and generations.

Melissa: Yeah, and they might not remember all of it, but they remember the really important stuff.

Dave: What does that feel like to you, to learn these stories that you know many generations before you have learned?

Laura: It’s good to know, though—

Melissa: (interrupting) Yeah.

Laura: But sometimes we know it and they keep telling you. Then it gets very frustrating.

Melissa: Yeah.

Dave: …What makes it good to know? Like, why is it good to know?

Laura: So that you’re keeped [sic] up with your… I guess—

Melissa: (interjecting) Your people.

Laura: Yeah, your people.

Melissa: And you can relate it to things, like God.

It is difficult to capture the full breadth and depth of the connections these girls made between Aboriginal spirituality and Christianity without adding several pages of dialogue. Between these two excerpts, they riffed off each other as they told me four stories that, in their words, “hook together”: the story of the woman who fell to the waters and made the earth on the back of a turtle; the story of the birth of the right-handed and left-handed twins and the creation of good and evil; the narrative of fighting between the twins; and the story of
the Peacemaker, who travelled throughout warring nations spreading a message of peace and
guiding the nations to bury their weapons under the tree of peace.83

Like most of the other children who participated in this research, Melissa and Laura
drew pictures of God near the beginning of our more formal interview.84 As they explained
what ideas about God were embedded in their drawings, our conversation moved to names
they use when they speak of God—Melissa calls God Creator, while Laura refers to God as
Maker—and they told me that they learn stories about the Creator at their school on the
reserve. Believing that school and church “kind of say the same thing” about the Creator, but
that sometimes at church they call the Creator God, they began telling me stories about the
Creator that they have learned from school and from Colkirk. At times, they made clear
connections between Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology, like when Melissa told
me—and Laura agreed—that she sees Jesus as a person who “would help people, kind of like
the Peacemaker would in the story.”

However, the great majority of instances when these girls made explicit connections
between these two traditions were actually responses to questions I posed in an attempt to
have them share their thoughts about such intersections. Left to their own accord, they were
quite content to express their Christian faith through the stories of their Aboriginal tradition,
blending these traditions together with seamlessness and subtlety, allowing the connections to
exist between the lines.

83 A version of this story was recently published as a children’s book. See Robbie Robertson, Hiawatha and the

84 Over the course of the eighteen months that I spent getting to know Colkirk, I had had many informal
conversations with the children in this congregation. However, based on our mutual understanding, I am relying
on the more formal interviews—which happened at the end of these eighteen months—in generating ideas for
this dissertation.
One of the most significant ways that these children interwove Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality in their generation of theology was in their reliance on narrative, a central hallmark of Aboriginal knowledge.\textsuperscript{85} Their is a storied faith, one that makes sense of the world around them through the stories they tell about it. Several times throughout our conversations, all four children from Colkirk expressed their faith through narratives. Ethan (8), a child who attends VBS regularly but is an infrequent Sunday school participant, explained his drawing of a river to me by telling me a story he seemed to be creating through our conversation. It was a story about a God who lives at the headwaters and a people who can travel up the river to God as if they were climbing a ladder. Of course, this improvised story was not perfectly crafted according to standard dramatic structure from exposition to climax to denouement. But his ideas were expressed by building an ad hoc narrative about who God is and how humanity can encounter this God. Such a reliance on story is built into the DNA of Colkirk and is a primary means through which these children have learned about Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality, within both their congregation and school.\textsuperscript{86}

The blending of Christianity and Aboriginal spirituality was a commonality shared among all four of the children I interviewed from Colkirk. While it is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by Melissa and Laura, who responded to my questions about God with Aboriginal stories passed down from generation to generation, Ally (7) and Ethan also expressed their theologies in ways that juxtaposed these two traditions. This commonality,\textsuperscript{85}


\textsuperscript{86} While Melissa, Laura, and Ally all attend school on the reserve, Ethan attends a Catholic school in a nearby city.
however, does not equate uniformity; these children may have relied on both traditions in generating theology with me, but they did so to varying degrees. As mentioned, in their conversation with me, Melissa and Laura moved our discussion forward in ways that demonstrated their reliance on Aboriginal spirituality in understanding who God/Creator/Maker is and how this being interacts—or does not interact—with the world. As they blend these two traditions together, they both lean toward Aboriginal spirituality more than Christianity, using the former as a lens for understanding the latter. Yet while they both tend to be on the same side of the spectrum, Laura’s approach tends to be less balanced than Melissa’s, as Melissa names God and Jesus more frequently than Laura. This may very well be related to the fact that Melissa attends Sunday services and Sunday school with far greater frequency than Laura, whose main involvement with Colkirk is the VBS programs during school breaks, which include a lower percentage of time dedicated to explicitly faith-based practices such as Bible stories, prayer, and hymns.

While Laura and Melissa both draw from Aboriginal spirituality more heavily than Christianity in building the mosaics that are their theologies, Ally leans predominantly toward Christianity. This bubbly seven-year-old is quite involved in Colkirk, attending VBS and participating in Sunday services with her grandparents and mother. Her understanding of God, Jesus, and heaven reflect this high level of involvement in a Christian congregation. During the course of our interview, Ally spoke about how Jesus lived in the desert, was put on a cross, and “died for us,” and she expressed an understanding of God that is largely consistent with mainstream Christianity. For her, God “lives in the sky” and “We only get to see him on pictures when we’re down here [on earth], but when we die and go back up to
heaven where we came from, we get to see him in real life.” While her theology is largely sourced from Christianity, she joins her peers at Colkirk in blending these views with Aboriginal spirituality, although doing so in ways that prioritize Christianity. The most prevalent way that Aboriginal spirituality informs her theology is in her understanding of God; for her, God’s primary role in the world is that of creator, the one who makes all good things in nature: “He didn’t make that furniture. All he made was grass, trees, leafs [sic], bark, animals… and he makes us.” Like her older peers at Colkirk, Ally’s understanding of God’s creative powers aligns with the right-handed twin, who, as Melissa shared, made all in the world that was good.

Relational Theology

The priority the leaders of Colkirk place on building relationships among members of the congregation seeps into every nook and cranny of their theological beliefs and practices. This is especially true for their ministry with children, and the theological lives of the children I interviewed at Colkirk are grounded in relationship. One instance that exemplifies this is a vignette from my conversation with Ally. As she chatted with me on the steps of her church’s altar, she told me that she’s been learning “lots about God and Jesus and the Christian” for a few years. I asked her to say more about this:

Ally: Because almost every day when I wasn’t sick or I wasn’t busy, I would always come to church with my grandparents and sometimes my parents.

Dave: Every day or, like, every—

Ally: (interjecting) Every Sunday.
Dave: Every Sunday? Okay. And you come sometimes with your mom, sometimes with your grandparents.

Ally: Sometimes we just come all as a group and sometimes I just come with my grandparents.

Dave: Okay. I’ve seen you here with just your grandparents. I think the first time I met you, you were here with your grandparents.

Ally: I think you might have sat with us.

Dave: I did! Over there. I remember that.

Ally: I wasn’t sure who you were then!

Dave: (joking) But you know who I am now, right?

Ally: Yes!

Dave: And I remember, you were doing something up here (on the altar).

Ally: Oh! See that thing with numbers (the hymn board)? Each week we change the numbers. And see where there’s a little space at the bottom?

Dave: Yep.

Ally: Because only if there’s communion there’s only a certain number that goes at the bottom. That’s what I’m doing.

Dave: …You change the numbers?

Ally: And if I get here early, like maybe fifteen or twenty minutes before church starts, Arlene wants me to help her get everything set up for church.

Dave: Wow. And do you like helping?

Ally: Yeah. And I really like to keep things neat a lot. My room’s really clean.

Dave: …Let’s pretend we never met at church and we met somewhere else.

Ally: Okay.

Dave: Let’s pretend I don’t know anything about your church.
Ally: Okay.

Dave: What would you want to tell me? If I said, “Ally, can you tell me about your church?,” what would you tell me about your church?

Ally: Um... that it’s nice and I learn a lot.

Dave: What kind of stuff do you learn?

Ally: Well, one time we sat here and Arlene got a whole bunch of hearts. After I’ll go show you when we’re finished.

Dave: Okay.

Ally: They’re in the hallway there. You know those signs, those big things. Um, we used hearts and she cut out hearts and hands and then we wrote kind words on them.

Immediately before this vignette, Ally was telling me about how she has learned about God and Jesus for the past few years. The conversation above was sparked by my asking her to tell me more about where and what she has learned. She moved the conversation to one of sharing memories of her time at church, and of how we first met eighteen months earlier when Rev. Martha invited me to visit Colkirk one Sunday and begin to build relationships with members of the community. In asking Ally to say more about her learning, I was expecting her to recount cognitive information that she had gained. Instead, she spoke about memories of times shared together at Colkirk, denoting the importance of relationships in her theological life.

I had come to know Ally from helping Colkirk with three VBS programs—in February, March, and July of 2014—and during the final VBS I assisted with she was aware that I wanted to have a conversation with her about her ideas surrounding God and church. In
preparation for our chat, she took it upon herself to start a book of prayers that she shared with me at the outset of our more formal interview. I asked her about the book and she seemed to come up with a name for it in that moment, calling it her “book of… Christian Christ.” When I asked her what “Christian” means, she responded by saying, “…almost like church? You learn Christian at church” and she could not recall what “Christ” is, although she knew it had something to do with church. At first, Ally seemed focused on using the proper language in our interview, perhaps influenced by her involvement in a conservative Baptist congregation on the reserve that she periodically attends with her mother. Yet while she knew that these words had to do with church, she was unable to articulate any sort of understanding about what they meant. This fact, when placed alongside her desire to talk about the memories she has made with people at Colkirk, may evidence the prioritization on community-building at the heart of this congregation. For these people, knowledge of proper theological terms or statements takes a back seat to a deep awareness that one is loved and valued among this congregation. Ally’s inability to articulate any sort of cognitive theology and her capacity to share deeply about her involvement in the congregation is a testament to the value placed on relationships at Colkirk.

This young girl is certainly not the only child at this congregation who showcases its prioritization of relationships. Melissa, Laura, and Ethan all spoke of the importance of the community of relationships that exists at Colkirk. For example, Melissa and Laura expressed that their congregational community is like a family. They identified these familial-like connections as the most important aspects of their congregation, later speaking of how they feel more connected to their church community than to their clans at longhouse:
Dave: What is it about this family that you seem to feel more connected to than longhouse?

Laura: *(interjecting)* You just meet them more.

Melissa: Yeah, like, I’ve just known them my whole life. I don’t remember when I didn’t know them… And at longhouse there might be different people every time you go. So, you get to know people here because they’re always here and... they always talk to you and they’re friendly.

While more articulate than Ally, these two girls express a similar understanding of the importance of relationships to Colkirk. Church, for them, is less a place to learn certain things than it is a place to know that you are loved by your community. This certainly echoes the broader culture of the congregation, which Rev. Martha identified as somewhere that young people can develop sustainable inner resources by being part of a loving community.

For these children, Colkirk is a place steeped in relationships with people who know them, spend time with them, and care for them.

But what do these relationships mean for the theological lives of these children? Although it may be argued that they have an impact on the way children generate theology, such a view of these relationships does not fully consider their sheer depth. These children represent what would be a paradigm shift in many other United Church congregations. The relationships do not simply shape the children’s theology; the relationships are the theology itself. The profound connections that these children have with one another and with others in their congregation is the very stuff of theology, a theology embodied and expressed in these lived relationships.

This becomes clear when we consider my conversation with Ethan. At some point during each interview with children from each congregation, I asked them to share about
what they would say if someone who knew nothing about their congregation asked them to tell them about it. Ethan’s response revolved around the people who spend time with him at Colkirk: “There’s kids there. And they play. And there’s Rev. Martha and Arlene and Dave. And they help. And then after we go to chapel in the morning. And then after chapel, we go outside and play. And some days we make lunch.” I asked him to say more about chapel, and again his response involved the people there: “We would pray and sing. And then after that we would read a book—Dave would read books.” Ethan does not attend Sunday services regularly, but he and his family are well known among the congregation and he is an avid participant in VBS programs. Yet the relationships he has with the people he encounters within this congregation form the very core of his idea of what Colkirk is. His theology is not so much about knowledge that God loves him or the other theological ideas embedded in the books he hears at VBS chapel services. It is the very act of being loved that is his theology. As Arlene, Rev. Martha, and the other folks at this congregation take an interest in his life and his well-being, theology is happening.

**Theological Excursions**

A congregation such as Colkirk, which puts more emphasis on relationships than on helping children acquire particular information, may, from one angle, seem to have no particular theological truths that it wants its children to learn. This, however, is certainly not the case, for this congregation imparts into children an embodied theology of love and acceptance. In particular, Colkirk’s focus on this sort of theology is aimed at countering a theology of guilt, inadequacy, and sinfulness that has plagued Christian mission work among First Nations
communities for centuries. As much as Rev. Martha and Arlene intentionally build an ethos of love and support with the children in their congregation, at times the children demonstrate theologies that diverge from their congregation’s wider culture.

Such excursions were most pronounced in Ally’s theology, particularly in her understanding of church. While she holds to a relational approach to theology—as demonstrated earlier—in some instances Ally’s remarks during our interview showcase that she associates church with learning particular things, a view that is not at the forefront of Colkirk’s identity. For example, at the outset of our interview, three times she associated going to church with learning. In the first instance of this, she remarked that there are only a few other children in her class at school who also go to church (they attend other congregations). But she also said, “I know more than them,” demonstrating that she is making associations between knowledge and churchgoing and at times assuming that knowing the right things is the marker of a good Christian. This sort of understanding counters Rev. Martha’s goal of building community among the children. But it is not the only aspect of Ally’s theology.

This young girl seems to hold implicit and explicit theologies. Her implicit theology is evidenced by the importance she places on the relationships and experiences she has at her congregation, and it seems to align with the wider culture of Colkirk.

Yet her explicit theology is one that equates faithfulness with learning particular things and engaging in particular practices. The words she uses to speak of her theology reflect this view, which at times seem to focus on earning approval among the leaders of Colkirk—in which she includes me—rather than feeling the unconditional love and
acceptance of the congregation. This approval-seeking approach to faith came through in Ally’s insistence on showing me her book of prayers, a book that only included one or two prayers which she began when she learned a few days earlier that we would be talking about church and God together sometime during the week. It appeared as though she wrote the book to make it clear to me that she prays regularly at home and, thus, is a good Christian. Yet this sort of behaviour—of having to prove oneself worthy and earn the love of leaders in her congregation—is the very attitude that Rev. Martha and Arlene are intentionally working to counteract.

The association Ally makes between church and learning led her to speak more than her peers at Colkirk about the content of her faith. She shared theological ideas about scripture, the crucifixion, and evil, and in some instances her thoughts were those one would expect to hear from more conservative evangelical congregations rather than Colkirk. For example, she focused on the importance of believing “what it says in the Bible” as a marker of belief in God and Jesus, and she said Jesus “died for us” but she was not able articulate what exactly these statements mean. It appeared as though Ally was using language and phrases that she had learned somewhere, but did not understand, demonstrating that she gives value to the content of theology, which is evidenced through proper terminology. This was most clear when we discussed where bad things come from, and she said, “Uh, what’s that man’s name? Oh… hm… No, not Samuel. Um, who’s the guy who leads, um… hell?” When I asked if she meant Satan, she immediately said “Yes, Satan makes the bad things.” Ally knew that she had learned about Satan, but was unable to remember his name. From my experience with Colkirk, they do not hold this sort of theology.
If the aim of children’s ministry at Colkirk is to heal the colonial wound, then the most obvious example of theological differences occurred when Ally drew her picture of God. Her image was of an elderly man, and as she was colouring her picture, she searched the bin of crayons for what she called “skin colour.” After struggling to find the shade she was looking for, she picked up a crayon and held it against my arm saying “Does this look like your skin?” Her concept of God was not akin to the images of an Aboriginal Jesus found throughout Colkirk’s building. God, for her, is a White man, a view based on White westernized ethnocentric assumptions.

The wounds of colonialism are deep, and Christianity is bound up with them. Ally’s theology—both in some of its content and in her quest to earn approval—are manifestations of a colonialistic Christianity, one that her congregation actively seeks to subvert. Perhaps these aspects of her theology are also the result of her involvement in the conservative Baptist church that she attends with her mother from time to time. Regardless of how she has come to hold these theological views, she demonstrates that as much as some children may reflect their congregation’s broader culture, they will generate theology in ways that vary from it as well, drawing from sources beyond the congregation and creating theology in ways that are all their own.

* * *

Colkirk United Church is a congregation steeped in history. Unfortunately, much of that history is intertwined with the paternalistic and hegemonic history of politics and mission
work among Aboriginal communities in Canada, a past that has left many within this
congregation and community with serious wounds that continue to fester with each new
generation. The leadership of Colkirk actively seeks to heal these colonial wounds by
building lasting and loving relationships among their community—especially their youngest
members.

The children at this congregation generate theology in ways that reflect this ethos of
love and acceptance. Their theology redeems the Aboriginal spirituality that has been
condemned by western missionaries by holding it up and blending it with Christian theology
to create understandings and ideas that are unique to their particular context and history.
Additionally, they build relationship into the core of their theology, valuing the people and
experiences at Colkirk as vital to their theological lives. While both of these aspects of their
theology are consistent with that of their congregation, these children also venture out into
the theological landscape on paths that are all their own, drawing from sources and forming
ideas that differ from the ones held by the community of Colkirk.
CHAPTER 5
KALEIDOSCOPIC THEOLOGY:
A COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION OF CHILDREN'S THEOLOGIES

The preceding four chapters discuss the theologies of the nineteen children who participated in this research, demonstrating that their theological meaning-making reflects their congregational cultures. Additionally, these young participants’ theologies expand beyond those of their congregations in content, sources, and methods that work together to make their theologies their own.

This chapter shifts the focus from the narrower contexts of individual congregations to the wider lens of comparative interpretation. Rather than studying the children’s theologies in light of the culture of their broader congregations, I will place the children themselves in conversation with one another using what Emmanuel Lartey calls a “Trinitarian” understanding of personhood—which emphasizes the universal, cultural, and individual spheres of human life. Each aspect of Lartey’s understanding attends to a different sphere of personhood that, when taken together, move toward a truly intercultural vision of humanity. Such comparative interpretation of children’s theologies has been lacking within the field of children’s spirituality and theology. Thus, this chapter makes a strategic move toward filling the gap within this field that I identified in the introduction, shedding new light on the content, sources, and methods of children’s theologies.

---

87 Lartey, In Living Color, 34.
Finding a Framework

One of the challenges of research into multiple cultural contexts is that it too easily lends itself to analysis based on comparative evaluation, on comparing different communities not alongside one another, but against one another. Rather than attempting to give equal priority to all cultural contexts and evaluating each one in light of itself, comparative evaluation is a slippery slope toward making judgments about the superiority/inferiority of various cultures with an objectivity and impartiality difficult among subjective human researchers. Such practices perpetuate paternalistic and hegemonic approaches to researching culture. Rather than seeing the value embedded within each cultural context, comparative evaluation allows the lens of the researcher—her or his presuppositions, values, and world view, all of which are intertwined with the cultures that shape the researcher—to be the basis for judging and evaluating the communities and cultures under investigation. Thus, any comparative evaluation I make of the participating individuals and congregations would be at risk of having my own cultural context normalized in such an assessment. Not only is such a framework inconsistent with the manner in which I imagined, structured, and carried out this study, but it actually disrespects the people and communities who breathed life into it, undermining my relationships with the individuals and communities who joined me on the journey.

In an essay on insider/outsider status within research, Sharan Merriam and her colleagues address the importance of representing truth embedded within research findings. In their discussion, they describe the ways in which constructivist and postmodern understandings of truth complicate the authoritative views of knowledge put forward by
positivism: “Constructivists argue that knowledge/reality/truth is constructed by individuals and by human communities, while postmodernists assert that there is no single truth or reality independent from the knower.” Taking these words seriously, what I require in this chapter is a method of comparative interpretation that acknowledges the full personhood of the children who participated in this study, all of whom combine their unique perspectives with the aspects held in common with their peers as they search for their own understandings of truth; I require a method that allows, in the words of Pranee Liamputtong, “[t]he cultural knowledge of a particular group [to be] counted in its own right,” rather than assessed in light of others.

Theologian Emmanuel Lartey has written extensively about pastoral care and counselling in intercultural and diverse contexts. With a broad vision of culture in view—like that undergirding this dissertation—Lartey formulates an intercultural approach to pastoral care. In his words, this approach provides:

many voices from different backgrounds a chance to express their views on the subject under review on their own terms. It does not then rush to analyze or systematize them into overarching theories that can explain and fit everything neatly into place. Instead, it ponders the glorious variety and chaotic mystery of human experience for clues to a more adequate response to the exigencies of human life.

I have until this chapter interpreted each congregation in light of itself. Yet here I wish to widen my view from one particular congregation—as has been the case of chapters 1-4—and place all four congregations alongside one another. This summative interpretation


90 Lartey, *In Living Color*, 32.
will enhance the congregation-based interpretations by bringing further nuance and complexity as the children’s theologies are interpreted from a new angle.

Rather than seeking to reduce the complexity of each congregation and its members into neat categories, such an interpretation relies on a perspective of human diversity wide enough to include both shared commonalities and unique differences. Lartey uses this sort of interpretative framework in his intercultural approach to pastoral care. Drawing from a framework originally proposed in 1948 by Kluckhohn and Murray, Lartey uses a threefold—or “Trinitarian,” to use his words—understanding of human personhood that affirms the many ways that similarities and differences meld together in human beings and communities. This understanding asserts that “Every human person is in certain respects 1. Like all others, 2. Like some others, 3. Like no other.”

Each of these assertions expresses a different aspect of human life. The first draws attention to the universal characteristics of all people, such as entering the world as helpless infants, holding relationships with others and the world around oneself, and the inevitability of death. The second acknowledges the cultural communities in which we all exist. These communities shape and influence us through their cultural attributes, and in many ways those belonging to common communities share aspects of their cultural life. The final assertion recognizes the particularities of individuality, calling attention to the uniqueness of all people. From DNA to life stories, fingerprints to feelings, each person is a unique individual who exists in personal ways that are distinct from the billions of others in our world.

---

91 Kluckhohn and Murray, “Personality Formation.”

92 Lartey, *In Living Color*, 34.

93 This description of the three spheres of human life is drawn from Lartey, *In Living Color*, 34-5.
Although Lartey describes these three spheres using social, psychological, and physiological ideas, I contend that each one also carries theological meaning. All human beings, for instance, are like all others in that we are made in and bear the image of God, we are beings who are marked by sin, and yet God’s unconditional love permeates all our lives equally. The second sphere allows us to acknowledge that we exist within communities that shape and are shaped by us. We are beings in relationships—with families, faith communities, and cultures—that form our identities, ethical stances, and faith. Finally, as individual persons, we are unique beings to whom God has given autonomy, consciousness, and free will with which we have a hand in determining the trajectories of our lives and our responses to the world around us. While God has made us all in the Imago Dei and placed us in relationship with others, God has also given us the gift of self-determination.

When learning about people in different cultural contexts, as I have done, the most obvious of the three spheres above is the second: All human beings are like some others. This is, after all, the level most closely aligned with culture, and it is this sphere that has been in central focus throughout this dissertation thus far. In this chapter, however, I widen this view to include all three of Lartey’s assertions—universal, cultural, and individual—as I interpret the content, sources, and methods of children’s theology. By holding these three spheres in creative tension with one another, my interpretation in this chapter will affirm that all three are present in the lives of each child who participated in this study and join Lartey in ensuring that “living, growing and changing human persons is what is expected, treated as the norm, and attended to.”

94 Lartey, In Living Color, 35.
categorize and stereotype by making room for the multitude of ways in which people and communities hold things in common and express uniqueness unto themselves. Yet I do not overlook the irony that it does so through yet another categorization or formulation. Nevertheless, it allows the stories and relationships to truth embedded in this research to be attended to in their own right rather than compared against one another, letting me interpret the children’s theologies in a kaleidoscopic way, that is, at multiple levels, from different angles, and with an awareness of the complexity of human personhood as it exists in all three spheres.

**Like All Others**

I begin my interpretation by exploring the broadest aspect of human personhood—universality. In doing so, however, I do not assume that all children in all times and places share the characteristics I will discuss; rather my use of the term “universal” speaks to aspects of children’s theologies held in common among all the children who participated in this research. In this section, I discuss ways in which the content, sources, and methods of children’s theological meaning-making are held in common, particularly their concepts of God, their use of congregations as theological sources, and their conversational approach to generating theology.
God Concepts

The most obvious piece of theological content shared among all children who participated in this research is that each one of them held to and could describe a concept of God. Of course, one reason why their God concepts may have been so prevalent in the interviews is that I used them as the starting point of our conversations by asking the children to draw a picture of God. Nonetheless, all of the children were able to express an image of God and none of them—even Marion and Lizzy, who did not draw a picture—evaded responding to my questions about their understandings of God.

Of the nineteen children, eleven expressed personified concepts of God. While children from each congregation held to this view, the majority of those who saw God as a person were from Messiah and Parkdale. Of this group of nearly a dozen children, six of them seemed to interpret God as Jesus, drawing and responding to my questions about God by talking about attributes of Jesus (such as his death on the cross, his resurrection, or pictures of Jesus within their congregation’s building). Even Nicholas, who was sceptical that Jesus rose from the dead, expressed a fair amount of certainty of Jesus’ existence and drew a depiction of Jesus in response to my request for him to draw God. The remaining five children conceived of God as some sort of divine man, sometimes telling me about God’s special powers (such as the ability to talk with angels) and—in all but one case—depicting through words and drawings that God has a moustache and/or beard. This God concept is reminiscent of depictions of God the Father that arose during the Renaissance period and

even today remain ubiquitous in contemporary television, movies, and media. With over half the children expressing a personified view of God, this was by far the most commonly-held concept among these children.

The next most frequent God concept conveyed by the children involves God’s creative action in the world. Three of the children—all of whom were part of Colkirk—conveyed understandings of God’s role as creator. As mentioned in chapter 4, Laura and Ethan drew images of nature (trees and a river) because they connect these natural objects with God’s creative capacities.

Of the five remaining children, two of them moved this conversation from the concrete personifications expressed by eleven children to understandings firmly rooted in abstraction. Rebecca and Stephen—both attending Burke Street—depicted God in forms meant to convey God’s omnipresence. While Rebecca drew a picture of her town and wrote the words “God loves you and is all around you,” Stephen’s drawing of his congregation’s building depicted that this is where he has “learned the most and experienced God the most.” He continued, “And I don’t really, I don’t like to think of God as a person—more as an idea or like a thing that’s always there… It’s like more like a spirit that’s just all around you, not—and in you. Just not a person or one singular thing.”

There were two children who expressed God concepts that were more unique. While both conveyed a personified God, I do include them in the first group of children because they do not depict Jesus or a divine “God the Father” figure. From Parkdale, Jacob’s God is one that in many ways parallels superheroes and video game heroes. This God, as described in chapter 1, lives in a castle and protects himself from “bad guys” who try to harm him.
Jeremy, a young boy from Burke Street, drew and told a story about a God who is a six-year-old child walking home with his parents. These may both be concepts that were not shared among their peers, but even in expressing these less conventional images of God, these boys demonstrated that they do indeed hold to particular concepts of God.

Finally, it is difficult to interpret Lizzy’s perception of God. While she certainly holds one—as she mentioned praying to God, explored with her peers and me what faithfulness to God looks like, and said “God is always with us”—she arrived half-way through the interview. Angela and Grace had already discussed their God concepts with me, and after Lizzy joined us, our conversation moved toward other topics. Thus, while it is certainly possible to see elements of a caring, relational, omnipresent deity in the few words she offered about God, any additional details would be pure speculation.

Whether perceiving God as Jesus or as a superhero, all of the children who participated in this research hold to and conveyed a theology that involved a concept of God. However, these understandings are not etched in stone. Throughout my conversations with the children, their ideas about God shifted to varying degrees, calling attention to the fact that the content of their theologies—whether concepts of God or something else altogether—is in flux. None of the children expressed theological ideas or concepts that are completely fixed and impermeable. Their theological ideas, regardless of congregation, are open to transformation and change as they encounter new ideas, engage in new conversations, and have new experiences.
It is no surprise that the most evident commonality regarding the sources of the nineteen child participants’ theologies is that they all draw from their congregations. The previous four chapters make this clear. Yet there is not one consistent way through which they draw from churches. In fact, their theologies are sourced from the following aspects of their congregations: theological knowledge (both explicit and implicit), experiences, and relationships.

All of the children generated theologies by using the communal theological information or knowledge of their congregations, both their explicit beliefs and their implicit theological ethos. The tendency to draw from explicit beliefs was made clear by Rebecca, who spoke often about the importance of knowing about God’s love and omnipresence, two important theological assertions taught to her at Burke Street. While Rebecca’s theology seemed to rely on rote memorization of beliefs held by her congregation, Lizzy’s views—while also informed by her congregation—seemed to have been expressed in her own words. Her figurative view of scripture, especially her interpretation of God’s commands regarding sexuality, were commonly-held beliefs among members of Parkdale. But she expressed them in a way that was her own. Both of these girls exemplify the tendency shared among all the children to rely on their congregation’s particular beliefs or explicit theological tenets in doing theology for themselves.

This first aspect of congregational sourcing—by drawing from its theological knowledge—is not limited simply to explicit beliefs. The previous four chapters demonstrate that the broader and often implicit theology of a congregation also acts as a source for
children’s theologies. For example, the ethos of uncertainty and thoughtfulness that permeated the culture of Burke Street was widely held among its children, even if Sunday school programming contradicted it. Stephen and Nicholas both expressed understandings of God that included a significant degree of mystery and uncertainty, and Jeremy articulated a view of God that relied on his imagination and curiosity. Additionally, the children at Messiah relied on their congregational norms of interconnectedness in sourcing their theology. In essence, it gave each of them permission to draw widely and view sources from multiple faith traditions and those of no particular faith tradition—such as reality television—as connected in their theological understandings. In all of these cases, the broader congregational culture served as a source through which children created ideas and knowledge about God.

A second way that children used their congregations as sources was through their experiences at and within these communities. Rather than drawing from certain beliefs or tenets, some children drew from the activities and events in which they have been involved. Although children from all four congregations manifested this type of sourcing, it was particularly evident among those at Colkirk and Parkdale. For example, the three girls at the latter congregation spent a large amount of time reminiscing with one another about the memories they have formed together through camps, retreats, meals, and leadership opportunities they have engaged in with one another. These experiences were fodder for their communal generation of theology, one that is deeply rooted in a sense of community and held together by the love of the “really tight family” that has been forged through the many shared happenings among their congregation. These girls were certainly not the only children to rely
on such experiences to create their theologies, but they offered a clear manifestation of this tendency.

Another method of drawing from congregations involved using relationships to generate theology. I refer here not to the communal approach to theological meaning-making like that investigated among the children of Parkdale, but rather how the children use the relationships and community formed among the congregations as actual sources for creating theological meaning. While certainly not exclusive to their congregation, the children at Colkirk were most likely to use relationships as a source for their theological meaning-making. As chapter 4 demonstrates, these children had a relational approach to faith. The loving relationships they had developed with members of their community were sources of insight for generating theologies that sometimes appeared to be more felt than spoken. While they were less prone than some of their peers to speak particularly of God’s love, their words spoke volumes about a theology of love incarnated in the relationships among their congregation. These relationships were certainly sources of insight for them as they made theological meaning.

All of the children who participated in this research utilized their congregations as sources in the generation of theological insight, drawing from their theological knowledge, experiences, and relationships. Yet as they did so, they also relied on several other sources, including television and movies, art, school, and other congregations in which they participate to a lesser extent. Thus, not only is a reliance on congregations as a source for theology a universal characteristic among these children, but so too is their tendency to place it in conversation with extant sources. Some of the children, such as Luke from Messiah,
were aware that they were drawing from beyond their congregation and interpreting multiple sources in light of one another. However, many of the children seemed less cognizant of their tendency to amalgamate sources, so they did so in tacit ways.

Theology in Conversation

When it comes to the methods that children hold in common in their generation of theology, a particularly salient feature is that they do theology in conversation. This was an important characteristic among the children at Parkdale because it reflected the communal theology among their community. But with a wide-angle lens in place in this chapter, it is evident that each one of the nineteen young participants shared this tendency. Whether speaking with one another or with me, it is clear that the interview was a “co-constructive process of meaning-making”96 which provided a forum for the children to engage in a conversational method of theology. Some children—like those who participated in small group interviews—generated theology through discussion with their congregational peers. The others, however, while not having peers with whom to do theology during the interviews, still used a conversational method of theology, using my research assistants and me as discussion partners.

This conversational approach to theology was particularly clear at Parkdale because Rev. Lynn requested that I interview the children in small groups, since she attempts to avoid activities in her congregation that are done individually rather than communally. Thus, the very format of these interviews may have predisposed the children to form theology through

---

discussion with one another. Looking broadly, however, for a number of circumstantial reasons, I conducted one interview at each of two other congregations (Burke Street and Colkirk) with two children present. Therefore, out of the nineteen child participants, almost half of them (nine children) participated in small group interviews. I did not organize this research with an eye toward conversational theology, so no children engaged in both an individual and small group interview. I am therefore unable to make informed conclusions about the effects of conversational theology. Nevertheless, it is possible for me to interpret those two approaches to a theological method that relies on conversation—with their peers and with my assistants and me.

A first approach to conversational theology involved the creation of theological insight that the children engaged in as they spoke with one another during interview sessions. I have said much about this in regard to the children from Parkdale, but I conducted small group interviews with Laura and Melissa, two friends from Colkirk, and Theo and Nicholas, brothers who attend Burke Street. In all three of these interviews, I witnessed these children engage in theological meaning-making as they spoke with, questioned, and challenged one another’s views. Take, for example, the dialogical approach to interpretation that Laura and Melissa used to recount stories they had been told from their schoolteachers and congregational leaders on their reserve. They had different views of the goodness of the Creator/Maker. Laura told us that “there’s sickness, right? And, I don’t know, those ain’t really good things. There’s things like cancer. There’s things like poison ivy.” Melissa responded with her interpretation: “Well, I just think of that as the left-handed twin.” As they shared their differing interpretations with one another, both girls appeared to open themselves
to considering each other’s views, for their certainty about these matters gave way to responses such as “I’m not really sure” and “I don’t know.” The conversational style of theology exemplified by Melissa and Laura was manifested among the other children who participated in group interviews. Regardless of congregation, as children shared their opinions and heard ideas that differed or even contradicted their own, they tended to become open to the uncertainty that such discrepancies unearthed. At times, the conversations would continue as the children engaged with one another’s ideas. In other instances, such as that just described, the differences resulted in a posture of theological openness, even if the conversation about the particular topics did not continue.

A second way in which these children utilized a conversational method of theology is by engaging in dialogue with me and, when present, my research assistant. As I will consider more fully in chapter 7, some researchers into children’s spirituality and theology seem to assume that interviews help reveal children’s predetermined theological thoughts. Each one of the children from every congregation, however, demonstrated that the interview process was a means by which the children actually made theological meaning. There were certainly moments when a young participant would respond to a question my assistant or I posed to them with what appeared to be an idea they brought with them into the interview. This was quite obvious in my interview with Stephen, a young member of Burke Street who, as explained in chapter 3, answered what in some cases were more difficult questions with responses he seemed to have learned from his congregation and at camp. Yet when my assistant asked him what peace means to him, he was unable to come to a response. Eventually, as we validated the difficulty of the question and asked follow up questions to
help Stephen think about when he has seen or experienced peace, he started describing an understanding of peace that he may not have arrived at on his own. Stephen was generating theology as my assistant and I asked questions to help him think deeply about his theological ideas. This was a common occurrence with each child involved in this research. Their theological method relied on conversation as a way of discussing and thinking deeply about all sorts of matters, and for the duration of our interviews, I was their main companion on this journey.

Clearly, conversation was the theological method that was most clearly held in common across congregations. Each one of the nineteen children relied on dialogue with me and with one another as they generated theology for themselves. It appears, however, as though opportunities to engage in such rich and stimulating conversations are not always provided in their congregations. At least one child from each congregation admitted that some of the ideas they shared with me are ones they have not told to others. In some instances, children went so far as to say that they do not have conversations such as ours with the people within their congregations. This was indicated by Laura and Melissa who approached me after our interview and asked if they could talk with me again later in the week (I conducted the interview during the summer VBS program). Unfortunately, unforeseen events prevented us from having a follow-up conversation. Nevertheless, the initiative of these often-shy girls indicated that they may not have many opportunities to engage in such theologically-stimulating conversations, even though Arlene and Rev. Martha regularly make time to listen to them. Additionally, shortly after the long drive home from
Burke Street following my interview with Stephen, his mother emailed me to tell me how much Stephen appreciated the opportunity to talk with my assistant and me. In her words, the overall theme of his comments were as such:

‘No offence to you Mom… but you are my mom and Dad is dad… I don't talk about these things with you. I know your [sic] a minister… but you guys are my parents. It was good to talk to them tonight… because I said things to them that I have only thought about in my own head. It was fun to say them out loud.’

Like the girls from Colkirk, Stephen indicated that our conversation was a special moment for him, one that he may not experience very much within his congregation.

**Like Some Others**

In this section, I redirect attention from the commonalities held among all children to the sphere of cultural specificity. While this aspect of human personhood has been the focus of the preceding chapters, I attend to it in a different way here. Rather than studying how children do theology in ways that reflect their particular congregational cultures, I will focus on the actual content, sources, and methods of the children’s theologies, identifying key commonalities held among children of particular congregational cultures.

**A Programmatic Ecclesiology**

Each group of children exhibited attributes of theological assumptions and ideas that were broadly shared among their congregational peers. The content of each child’s theology—while unique—manifested parallels and similarities to those held by the other children who
belong to their congregation. In this section, I will exemplify this tendency by exploring the ecclesiology that appeared among all of the children from Burke Street United Church.

At some point during each interview, I asked the children to describe their church as they would to someone who knows nothing about their congregation. Their responses to this question provide significant insights into their ecclesiologies. I was fascinated by what they tended to speak about as their “gut reaction” perceptions of church. Some children described their congregation in terms of the people who are part of it—both laypeople and clergy. But others, including each one of the children at Burke Street, closely associated church with the activities they engage in at their congregation. Theirs is a programmatic ecclesiology, one that paints a theological vision of church as activities and events in which one can participate.

Each of the five children from Burke Street responded to my request to tell me about their congregation by describing the programs it offers and the aspects of these programs. Rebecca, for example, told me about the coffee time after services each Sunday, and then went on to name parts of her congregation’s Sunday school program: crafts, games in the gymnasium, stories, and cooking in the kitchen. She even gave examples of these activities, describing particular craft and baking projects that she has participated in at her congregation, such as bread-making, creating finger-puppet snakes, and a hula hoop game. Only minutes later, she named several events that Burke Street has hosted apart from Sunday morning programming, including a country dance, a talent show, pancake suppers, and movie nights.

Rebecca is certainly not alone in her tendency to associate her congregation with its programming. Her peers also described Burke Street by identifying the activities it offers.
Sometimes these activities were programs, such as those named by Rebecca. But at other times the children described not only the programs, but also the particular non-programmatic activities in which they engage at their congregation. Nicholas, for example, does not like participating in the programming offered for children on Sunday mornings, but he described his congregation by sharing about the activities that he does to make his experience at Burke Street more enjoyable, such as workbooks that he works on while sitting with his parents during Sunday services. Here one can see an ecclesiology that not only relies on a congregation’s “official” programmatic offerings, but also on the particular ways that children participate in the life of the faith community.

The focus on the “what” of congregational happenings does not mean that the ecclesiolgies of these children completely omit relationships. The people within their congregation matter to their theologies of church in at least two ways. First, many of the children associated the programs with particular groups of people, recounting all the programs offered to children of various ages, such as the Sunday school classes and multiple children’s vocal ensembles—each of which has its own name. Going further, however, the children indicated that the relationships they have with various individuals within their congregation are also an important aspect of their ecclesiologicals. However, these relationships are defined by the activities and programs that have had a hand in forming and sustaining them. Jeremy, for example, held a theology of church that relied on his experience of helping to serve tea during the weekly post-service social time. This activity has allowed him to build relationships with all sorts of people at his congregation, of whom there are so many that he didn’t want to name them all. Similarly, Stephen spoke fondly of the friends he
made at the local peace camp he attended, relationships that were closely tied with this
program. He expressed the difficulty of knowing that this community is so intertwined with
the program that “it’s really hard because you meet these people and you go through these
experiences with them and then you can’t go there again.” While relationships are certainly
vital to these children’s theologies of church, these young theologians often speak of them as
intertwined with and even a by-product of congregational programming.

An interesting phenomenon embedded within these children’s programmatic
ecclesiologies is an absence of God. Throughout my conversations with them, each of these
children spoke about the programs at their congregations as well as their ideas surrounding
God. Yet it is notable the there were very few instances when these two topics were
interwoven during the course of the interviews. Their views of church tend to lack a sense of
divine involvement or participation. Jeremy and Stephen, however, spoke of God in relation
to their programmatic ecclesiologies. In chapter 3, I described Jeremy’s drawing of God,
which depicted a six-year-old God walking in a forest with his parents. According to him,
they were on their way home from a picnic. Jeremy’s God, then, is one that, like him,
participates in activities and programs—in this case, a picnic. Stephen’s ecclesiology does
not include a vision of a God who participates in activities the same way he does, but rather
one who shows up in the very programs in which Stephen himself engages. This was evident
when Stephen was talking about the musical he was part of during the Mennonite music
camp he attended the previous summer. Without any prompting, he inserted God into the
programming of the camp, saying “God was definitely there,” particularly in providing
patience through the many hours of rehearsal. For the most part, however, God remained
absent in the programmatic ecclesiologies expressed by the children of Burke Street. And even in those rare moments when the young participants inserted God into conversations about their churches, God did not take centre stage.

The reliance on programming in the ecclesiologies of the children from Burke Street is simply one example of the cultural sphere of human personhood in the content of children’s theology. The children at each particular congregation expressed their theological ideas in several ways that overlapped and paralleled those of their congregational peers, demonstrating that when it comes to the content of theology, children indeed are “like some others.”

Camp Theology

As was the case with the content of their theologies, the sources the children drew from in generating theological insight showcased commonalities held across congregational peers. To demonstrate one instance of this, I will interpret the use of a vacation Bible camp program at Parkdale United Church.

In the final section of chapter 1, I suggest that Jacob’s theology seems to be influenced by his experiences at the small vacation Bible camp that Parkdale organized the preceding summer. Broadening this interpretation, however, it appears as though each of the children at this congregation—all of whom participated in the preceding summer’s camp—utilized this experience as a source for theological knowledge. There were at least two aspects of the children’s theologies that seemed to rely on their camp experiences: their God concepts and their ethics.
For a number of years, Parkdale had been organizing summer camp programs for children under the leadership of hired directors from outside of the congregation. For the camp preceding my time among the congregation, it decided to facilitate the entire program in-house, with its youth planning and overseeing the programming, and a number of adults participating in the camp as volunteer leaders. With three or four adults for each of the half-dozen or so children who attended the program, this year’s vacation Bible camp became in intergenerational event. As outlined in chapter 1, one of the threads woven throughout the week of programming was the practice of welcoming those who are different. Over the week, a volunteer from the congregation dressed up as a dragon and wandered around the church building—inside and outside—while the children followed clues to find eggs representing values like acceptance and friendship. Eventually the group welcomed the dragon into their community. All this was meant to be an experiment in learning to accept and welcome those who may be different from oneself. This experience has become lodged deep within the collective psyche of this congregation, and as described in chapter 1, many months after the camp, a banner still hung from the ceiling of the hall, saying “Dragons Welcome.”

All of the children I interviewed from Parkdale spoke with great enthusiasm about this particular vacation Bible camp, which became significant fodder for their generation of theological insight. One way that it has influenced them is in their concepts of God. This was most evident during my conversation with Jacob and Enoch, both of whom seemed to draw from the experience of the dragon, yet in different ways. In my interpretation in chapter 1, I posited that Jacob’s assertion that God is in need of protection from forces and people seeking to harm him may have actually been the result of his experience at the camp. Perhaps
the fact that a dragon was wandering around the building invoked fear and anxiety in this young boy, and he associates this feeling with the need for protection from that which is different. Of course, this was not the intended outcome of the experience, but he seems to draw from it nonetheless in his concept of God. Enoch mined this vacation Bible camp in forming his view of God as well, but in a very different way. His main source from the camp was the experience of having a leader dressed as an angel appear to the group: “there was an angel that came by and said to protect the egg and we had to protect the egg from the dragon.” His drawing of God depicted a personified male deity talking with an angel that was flying next to his head. When I asked whether the angel was small or God was large, he said that the angel was a normal size (which is the size the angel at the camp would have been), but God was very large. Additionally, he went on to say that God can send angels to earth, a statement that seems lifted from his experience of having an angel appear and give instructions to the camp participants. In very different ways, both Enoch and Jacob relied on their experiences at vacation Bible camp in forming concepts of God.

While the boys at Parkdale expressed elements from vacation Bible camp in their God concepts, the girls drew from the camp in their sense of ethics. They seemed to have picked up on the intention of the dragon and egg exercise and built this into their ideas surrounding how to treat those around oneself. Toward the end of the interview, as the girls were sharing memories of many activities and programs they had experienced together at Parkdale, Grace brought up the recent vacation Bible camp and Lizzy and Angela both remarked about how much they loved the camp. Grace continued by talking about the dragon, saying, “we had to find an egg and at the end of the week we learned to accept
everyone.” She understood the intention behind the dragon and egg exercise and, along with the other girls, seems to have built it into the fabric of her ethics. Only minutes later our conversation shifted to discussions about what faithfulness means, and the girls expressed their frustration over people who use the Bible to support views that exclude others, particularly members of the LGBTQ community. As Lizzy was speaking about this, Grace quietly said, “Be who you want to be.” Embedded within this conversation is an ethics of acceptance and welcome of those who are different from oneself. This posture was the main point intended by the dragon and egg exercise from the recent vacation Bible camp. As I sat in the hall listening to these girls that day, above us hung the “Dragons Welcome” banner, a clue about where they were drawing from as they generated this ethic of acceptance.

A Narrative Approach

In the preceding chapter, I touched on the narrative approach through which the children at Colkirk seem to generate theology. Here I will make this phenomenon the focus of attention, as it is a prime example of how children at a common congregation make theological meaning using approaches shared among their peers. There are at least three ways that the four children at Colkirk each manifested a narrative method of theology: through learned stories, by sharing their own narratives, and by narrating their theological ideas. In chapter 4, I explain how Melissa and Laura blend Aboriginal spirituality and Christian theology through their interpretation of stories that have been passed on orally for many generations. By hearing and learning stories that are told to them, the children at Colkirk engaged in a narrative approach to theology. In some instances, particularly with
Melissa and Laura, the narratives they learned were those that have been passed on from generation to generation for many centuries. These include the stories of the creation of the world and the Peacemaker. Other stories are ones created and shared by elders within the congregations. Laura and Melissa told me that a senior woman at Colkirk created a retelling of Jesus’ birth within the context of their reserve. In Melissa’s words, “When [Jesus] was born, they went to all these different houses and asked if they could stay. But there was not room for them anywhere… There used to be a barn by the old arena, and they went there.” The children also do theology through stories told during Sunday school and VBS, most of which are from Bible storybooks. For example, when imagining God, Ally pictured God wearing clothes similar to those in the illustrations of a story about Cain and Abel that I had read to the children earlier during that week of VBS. Although each type of story here differs from the other, they are at the crux of the theology of these children, not only as sources but also as the very methods through which they do theology, for the stories themselves are the theology.

A second way that these children use narrative as a theological method is by telling their own stories. Throughout my interviews with these children, they shared stories with me about their lives and experiences. They were neither particularly refined nor often terribly lengthy, but these narratives were a primary means through which these children expressed their inner lives, their thoughts, and their emotions. This was especially true for Ally and Ethan, who were both dealing with struggles in their personal lives, such as the loss of family members through the separation of parents and siblings as well as struggles to make friends.

at a new school. For example, Ally voiced her fear and sadness over the challenges she was dealing with as she continued to settle into a new school on the reserve as she shared about her moments of trial. In narrating these experiences, she expressed emerging theological ideas surrounding loneliness and hospitality as she spoke about how children at her school tend to play amongst themselves. Not only did these children share their stories, but at times they invited me to do likewise. At multiple times during my interview with Ally, she asked me about my school and my teacher, urging me to follow her lead and narrate my own experience of being a student.

The final way in which these children take a narrative approach to theology is through expressing their theological ideas by narrating them. I have already explored, in chapter 4, how Ethan expressed his views of God by creating a story in that moment. After drawing a river, I asked him why the river reminded him of God. As we looked as his picture, he began to notice that it looked a bit like a bridge “that’s crawling up, that’s going to be at the top is God.” This “water ladder,” as he called it, became a pivotal narrative in his expression of his concept of God. Contained within it were his ideas about a God who created the world yet remains somewhat distant, as well as a distinguishing mark of faithfulness, for the ones who are able to swim against the tide are those who believe in God. In this way, he manifested the narration of theology, a theology that is not only based on stories, but relies on story as the main form of expressing one’s inner thoughts and meanings.

Understanding the full meaning of narrative theology among these children involves a paradigm shift of sorts. For them, narrative is not only a means of expressing theological content or a source for meaning-making. The narrative is the theology itself. Such a premise
is consistent with broader assertions about the narrativity infused into Aboriginal knowledge.

Marlene Castellano, a member of the Mohawk Nation living in eastern Ontario, names narrative as one of the primary characteristics of Aboriginal epistemology:

Traditionally, stories were the primary medium used to convey aboriginal knowledge. Stories inform and entertain; they hold up models of behaviour; and they sound warnings. Recounted in ceremonial settings and confirmed through many repetitions, they record the history of a people. They teach without being intrusive, because the listener can ignore the oblique instruction or apply it to the degree he or she is ready to accept, without offence. Stories of personal experience can be understood either as reminiscences or as metaphors to guide moral choice and self-examination.98

These four children move Castellano’s words from the past (as she notes “stories were the primary medium,” emphasis mine) to the present, showing that stories continue to be at the forefront of theological knowledge among these children. The stories that children learn, know, and tell are the very stuff of theology; theology is held and generated as stories are told and retold again and again. These stories do not demand particular theological presuppositions or certain ethical responses; they leave themselves open to the listeners for them to do with them what they must. This is precisely what happened when Melissa and Laura told the narratives of creation, for their interpretations of where bad things come from (Melissa believed it was the left-handed twin, while Laura surmised that the Creator was the source) differed although the story was the same. As Thomas King has said, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”99 When it comes to these four children, it can be surmised that the truth about stories is that that’s what theology is.


Like No Other

In the final section of this chapter, our gaze narrows to the level of the individual child. Here I will explore the content, sources, and methods of children’s theologies through the lens of the uniqueness of each young participant, not exploring their theologies as excursions from broader congregational cultures—as I did in chapters 1-4—but as theologies generated in their own idiosyncratic ways. Of course, it is impossible for me to consider the theology of each of the nineteen young participants who breathed life into this dissertation. Thus, I will speak of particular children who highlight that in very specific ways, the content, sources, and methods of children’s theologies are indeed “like no other.”

Contextual Theology

Eleven-year-old Marion, a relatively new member of Messiah, articulated her beliefs in a way that demonstrated her emerging recognition of the contextual nature of theology. Her theology includes a belief that ideas about God and Jesus are related to one’s broader culture (which, of course, is a central argument of this dissertation).

As we sat together in a Sunday school room at Messiah, she opted to describe her concept of God to me with words rather than a drawing. Right away she said, “People think he’s Black. But I think it’s every colour because he brings us to earth… Some people, like all different countries, say that. They say he’s back, he’s White, he’s Black and stuff.” Here she alludes to but does not specifically name her awareness of theological contextualization. Yet she also inserts her own particular viewpoint into this discussion of the colour of God, arguing that God is every colour (at least every possible shade of human skin) for God
created all people, regardless of the colour of one’s skin, and reflects this diversity in God’s very being. Shortly afterwards, as we were speaking about the relationship of God and Jesus, she said “It’s just that [God] has so much different names. Like here, they call—sometimes they call him Jehovah.” When I asked her why she thinks people refer to God using so many different names, she responded, “That’s what they think. Maybe their language. How other languages [say God’s name].” In saying this, she further nuances her view by naming language as a particular variable at work within the contextualization of theological beliefs.

While Marion is not alone among these nineteen children in the belief that theology is relative to one’s context (Melissa, Laura, and Stephen, for example, all alluded to similar ideas), the uniqueness of her theology lies in the level of depth and theological maturity through which she articulates such a belief. Not only is she more eloquent and nuanced in her understanding of theological contextualization by actually naming this belief, she also described its specific incarnations by giving examples of how particular contextual phenomena—such as one’s country and language—might shape one’s theological ideas surrounding God’s colour and name. Going further, Marion showcased depth and maturity by holding herself to the same standards as others. She demonstrated clearly her belief in the contextual nature of theology, going so far as to say that people who believe that God is either Black or White actually “make up” this idea, that it is not necessarily grounded in the reality of who she believes God to be. Yet this young girl also applied this view to her own theological meanings. As she spoke about her personal beliefs, she separated them from those of other people with whom she has met, but she did so using terms like “I think,” indicating a
self-recognition that if the beliefs of others are related to their contexts, then hers must be as well.

Marion’s views regarding the contextual nature of belief set the content of her theology apart from that of her peers, both at Messiah and at other congregations. Perhaps her distinct experiences of diversity—as a child born in Ghana and now living in Canada who used to attend a Roman Catholic parish and now worships at Messiah—had a hand in the formation of this particular aspect of her theological ideas. However she has come to hold to this view, this aspect of Marion’s theological meaning-making is a prime representation of the uniqueness of the content of theology in each and every one of the children.

**Dreaming Theology**

Dawn, who happens to be Marion’s younger sister, exemplified that children build their theology from unique theological sources by drawing from her dreams. During our forty-minute conversation, Dawn told me about two dreams that she has had, which she believes are ways that God communicates with her. In the first dream, she told me that God took her to heaven:

> So I was flying up past the sun and I didn’t melt… And in my head I was thinking it was impossible, right? And I went past and after I went to heaven and I seen the gates and angels beside them… I went through the gates and I seen different stuff. Like, I seen different kinds of plants and different kinds of people… And pathways golden. And there’s a lot of gold in heaven… I seen Jesus. But I didn’t see him well… He was doing different stuff, like helping prepare meals and other stuff.

I asked Dawn if there were other instances in which God spoke with her in this way, and she went on to tell me about a dream in which God appeared to her at her school. Although she
did not describe this dream in much detail, she mentioned that God “was invisible but I was the only one that could see [God]. Like, I had been at school. All my friends couldn’t see God but I could.” I gently asked her to describe what God looked like, and she responded by saying, “he has brown hair and he spoke my language [a Ghanaian language].”

In keeping with a characteristic of Christianity in Ghana,¹⁰⁰ Dawn utilized these dreams as significant sources of theological insight. The second dream in particular revealed aspects of who God is that she wove into her drawing of God and subsequent explanation. For one thing, this vision of God paralleled the image of Jesus—although unclear—that she witnessed in the first dream. This led her to believe that God and Jesus are connected somehow, and she placed this view alongside scripture by reminding me that “In the Bible, they said God came to life and he formed himself as Jesus.” Going further, while she did not directly weave the fact that God spoke her native language into her theology, it surely conveys something about the intimacy she feels in her relationship with a God who speaks to her in dreams and helps her with aspects of everyday life such as tests at school. This is a God who knows her so well that he speaks to her in her first language, the language that had a hand in forming her worldview.

The first dream that Dawn shared with me is a storehouse of insight from which she can draw to generate theology on any of a number of topics. It offers insight into angelology, providing her with ideas about what angels look like and their roles may be in heaven; it provides information about cosmology, offering Dawn a “sneak peek” into heaven, a place of great beauty filled with gold and unique creations; it speaks of Jesus as a person who even in

heaven takes on the role of a servant as he goes about his way busily preparing meals; it even provides fodder for a soteriology, for echoing Paul’s writing in 1 Corinthians 13:12, Dawn interpreted the blurriness of Jesus to mean “if you believe in God you can see [Jesus] one day.” Using Paul’s words, the promise of heaven for Dawn is that of no longer seeing “dimly,” but seeing Jesus “face to face” with full clarity.

Dawn’s dreams are rich with resources for making theological meaning, and she explained them to me with great passion and conviction. Yet she admitted that I was the first person with whom she shared both of these dreams. While she told the first dream to her mother, who didn’t believe her at first, I was the only person given the privilege of hearing about the second dream. Dawn’s fear of being told that the things that happened in these dreams did not really occur, which she expressed to me with tears in her eyes, keeps her from feeling free to tell them to others. Grateful for being able to hear about them, Dawn’s divine dreams showed me the uniqueness through which children construct a theology that is all their own.

Mysterious Theology

Two boys—Jacob, from Parkdale, and Stephen, from Burke Street—both expressed a theological method that relies on a comfort with mystery and uncertainty, which was particularly evident during our discussions about God. However, how they utilized this approach shaped their theological ideas in ways that were unique to each of them.

I have already interpreted, in chapter 1, the comfort with uncertainty that Jacob exhibited during my interview with him and Enoch. As these two boys spoke with me after starting to draw their pictures of God, Jacob articulated his ideas in a way that left God shrouded in mystery. He used words like “maybe” and “I think” as he described what God might look like, demonstrating an awareness and comfort with uncertainty surrounding who exactly God is and how this God appears.

Although he is twice Jacob’s age and attends a United Church congregation with a radically different culture, Stephen’s method of doing theology also relied on mystery and uncertainty. Rather than drawing a physical being—even a representation of what God might look like—Stephen drew a picture of his congregation’s building to demonstrate that this is the place where he has learned and experienced God more than any other place. In our conversation, he was quick to say that, for him, God is an “idea” or a “thing that’s always there” rather than a “person or one singular thing.” His theological method seems to use mystery as a starting place for making meaning about God and other theological matters, and this reliance on mystery and uncertainty is a trait he shares with the young boy from Parkdale.

What sets these two boys apart from each other is how this common characteristic nuances their theological ideas, which is most clearly visible in their approaches to describing God. For Stephen, the mystery and uncertainty surrounding who and what God is dissuades him from pinning down any particularities in God’s character and being. After asking him to say more about his ideas about God once he told me why he drew a picture of Burke Street’s building, he used metaphorical language to convey that God is like an
omnipresent spirit. In saying “It’s more everything,” he even avoided tying any sort of personified pronoun to his theology of God. As I continued asking questions, he continued to skirt around any language that would place conceptual boundaries around God: “Um… it’s hard to explain… just kind of like a spirit that loves you no matter what. And is always there.” This leads me to interpret his theological method as leading him to avoid describing God in any sort of detail. Perhaps for Stephen, to do so would be to lose the mysterious aspect of who and what God is.

Jacob, on the other hand, had no qualms about providing details—in words and images—about God. Over the course of our interview, he eagerly went into great detail about several of God’s qualities, including where God lives, what colour God is and why God is that colour, and how God defends himself from forces that seek to do him harm. His is a God that he imagines with great creativity, and he was completely comfortable telling me about God’s qualities, such as his ability to walk through walls or change himself into things that nobody else can see. And as he explained several aspects of who God is to me, his mystery-laden approach to theology left room for his assertions to be inaccurate, which he demonstrated with words like “maybe” and “I think.” He found a way to speak with great detail about a God who remains cloaked in mystery.

Stephen and Jacob share a common theological method that weaves mystery and uncertainty deep within it. Yet despite this similarity, the uniquenesses and idiosyncrasies of their individual theologies appear in the dramatically different ways that they speak—or perhaps in Stephen’s case, do not speak—about God. This is simply one way that, once again, it is evident that children generate theology in ways that are all their own.
This chapter demonstrates that the children who participated in this research make theological meaning in ways that are held universally with one another, that are shared in common with their congregational peers, and that are unique to each one at an individual level. As I have already stated, the tendency of research such as mine is that it can easily fall prey to prioritizing the cultural sphere of human life and ignoring the other two spheres. Yet holding up any one sphere at the expense of the others can lead to ethical violations that theologians would name as sin: a focus on the universal ignores difference and can allow those in power to impose their experiences as normative to others; prioritizing the cultural can lead to conflict and widespread disagreement among different groups, as well as scapegoating those who are not seen to be part of one’s own cultural group; a focus on the individual can result in nihilism, selfishness, and isolation at the expense of collaboration and community. Thus, some sort of tension among all three spheres is necessary to avoid these trappings.

This chapter has moved toward maintaining a degree of tension among all spheres, and by doing so it honours the fullness and complexity of children’s lives. By analyzing the children’s theologies in light of these three spheres of life, I have steered away from theologically trivializing them as active in only one aspect of human life. Their theologies demonstrate that children are full human beings, that they are active members of communities, and that they are also individual people who possess agency in the world. For example, in analyzing the sources of their theological meaning-making, had I only explored how these children all like one another, I could have made assertions about the influence of
congregational culture on the theologies of all children. But in doing so I would have overlooked the fact that the children at each congregation sourced their theologies in ways that were unique to their particular contexts. I would have also focused so much on the universality of children’s theological sources that I would have overlooked the fact that they are not merely passive recipients of the theologies of their broader congregations, but that these children are also active theological agents who create meaning for themselves in distinct, nuanced, and personal ways. Likewise, had I focused solely on the idiosyncrasies of the children’s individual theologies, I would have had to gloss over the enculturating role of communities and the ways that children, as full human beings, possess commonalities shared among all others. By using Lartey’s Trinitarian view of personhood as an interpretive lens, I have attended to the fullness of children’s theological lives, seeing them at one and the same time as whole human beings, as members of communities, and as active self-determined agents.

* * *

In this chapter, I have used a number of different angled lenses to interpret the generation of theological insight among the children who participated in this research. Relying on Lartey’s threefold understanding of human personhood, this kaleidoscopic comparative interpretation sheds light on the ways in which children from different cultural contexts make theological meaning at the universal, cultural, and individual levels. It is evident that these children are like one another in their holding of particular God concepts, their tendency to source their
theology from their congregations, and the dialogical approach through which they generate theology. Some content, sources, and methods of theology are also held in common among their congregational peers, as evidenced by the programmatic ecclesiologies of the children at Burke Street, the use of a recent vacation Bible camp as fodder for theology among those at Parkdale, and the narrative approach to theology shared by all the children at Colkirk. Finally, one can see the uniqueness of children’s theological meaning-making through Marion’s contextualized ideas, Dawn’s reliance on her dreams as sources of insight, and the approach to theology that relies on mystery and uncertainty utilized—in different ways—by Jacob and Stephen.
This chapter marks a move from practice to theory, as I draw from the information generated through this study in order to critique the United Church’s “Transformative Vision” for becoming an intercultural church (chapter 6) as well as the academic study of children’s spirituality and theology (chapter 7).

This chapter responds to the question, how does the theological meaning-making of children within these four diverse congregations confirm or challenge the way the United Church constructs its vision for becoming intercultural?, which I asked at the outset of this dissertation. By foregrounding children’s theologies and the lives of their congregations, it is possible to bring to light new perspectives on how the United Church’s “Transformative Vision” is—or is not—reflective of the realities of individuals and congregations who make up this denomination. To frame this discussion, I will begin by offering background information about multiculturalism in Canada as well as key critiques of it. Next, I describe how the United Church sought to respond to problematic aspects Canadian multiculturalism with its vision for becoming intercultural. I then interpret the “Transformative Vision” through the lens of the theological lives of the children and congregations that I discussed in previous chapters. Such an approach raises four significant critiques of the United Church’s report for becoming intercultural: a strength of it lies in the priority it gives to voices on the
margins; it simplifies culture by leaving little room for cultural hybridity; it overlooks the ways that individuals and congregations within the denomination are already expressive of interculturalism in and of themselves; and such problems allow those who have historically held power to remain at the centre of the United Church, placing others on the periphery or ignoring them altogether.

Multiculturalism in Canada

Multiculturalism is a contested term within Canada, one that carries with it multiple meanings and understandings. Richard Day, among other scholars, argues that multiculturalism can be used in at least three distinct ways. First, it can refer to the fact of diversity, a fact that is often perceived as problematic and in need of government solutions. Second, multiculturalism can speak of an ideology or “bottom-up narrative,” which Rinaldo Walcott sees as a product of civil rights, postcolonial, and new social movements that arose during the latter half of the twentieth century. The result, in May Chazan et al.’s estimation, is that many Canadians believe there is a consensus that “some version of multiculturalism—whatever its limitations—is here to stay, lodged deeply at the heart of

---


103 Day, *Multiculturalism*, 20. Day notes that while conversations about multiculturalism are new, diversity in this land is not. His broad arguments and sweeping interpretation of the history of diversity in Canada demonstrate that throughout the post-European contact history of Canada, the presence of diverse “others” has always existed and has always sparked official and non-official government bureaucratic “solutions” in order to manage, control, and even exterminate these “others.”


Canada’s national identity both at home and abroad.”106 Finally, multiculturalism can reference a particular set of policies or what Grace-Edward Galabuzi names as a “top-down approach” resulting from public demands to officially recognize and accommodate diversity among the Canadian population.107 While these policies can imply that official multicultural legislation is static and settled, the reality is much more complex.108 Although there is general consensus surrounding these three understandings of multiculturalism, some scholars add additional definitions of this term. Mark Leman, for example, adds a fourth perspective, which he does not expand beyond the following definition: “the process by which racial and ethnic minorities compete with central authorities for achievement of certain goals and aspirations.”109

A (Brief) History of Contemporary Multiculturalism110 in Canada

Day posits that throughout the early 1900s, the English language was seen as the “great assimilator” for immigrants to Canada, ensuring that English Canada remained fairly monocultural.111 But in the 1960s, he notes, there was a growing awareness of diversity and

106 May Chazan et al., “Introduction: Labours, Lands, Bodies,” in Home and Native Land: Unsettling Multiculturalism in Canada, ed. May Chazan et al. (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2011), 1. Richard Day specifies between multiculturalism as a word used to “prescribe a social idea” and one that describes an “already achieved ideal.” Day, Multiculturalism, 6.


108 For one thing, Chazan et al. note that such policies are actually a fluid set of policies that the government adapts as the “multicultural consensus” and the reality of diversity changes over time. For another thing, multicultural policies do not always meet their self-proclaimed mark and remain nominal and marginal to federal initiatives. Chazan et al., “Introduction,” 1.


110 Unless stated otherwise, I use multiculturalism and multicultural to refer to both the ideology of multiculturalism in Canada and multicultural policies.

111 Day, Multiculturalism, 157, 178.
an emerging consensus that it would be difficult to prevail against this diversity.\textsuperscript{112} As immigration policies became more liberal and newcomers increasingly hailed from regions outside of Europe, policies of *assimilation* into English Canada developed into those of *integration*, which allowed immigrants to retain some elements of their home cultures.\textsuperscript{113} Day critiques the racism and imperialism implicit in the transition from assimilation to integration, which did not actually involve a significant shift in how the Canadian government addressed the reality of “others.” In his words, “[e]ach method is thus based upon the transformation of a problematic Other into a non-problematic—‘eliminated’ or ‘participating’—Self.”\textsuperscript{114}

The 1963 Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was a landmark event on the journey of multiculturalism in Canada. Launched to recommend action to forge equal partnership between Canada’s “two Founding nations” (the British and French)\textsuperscript{115} the Commission’s report (known as the B & B Report) included an entire volume about “The Cultural Contribution of the Other Ethnic Groups,” which addressed members of the population who were not of British or French heritage.\textsuperscript{116} According to Clifford Jansen, this volume of the B & B Report carved a path for an official policy of “multiculturalism in a bilingual framework” put forward by Prime Minister Trudeau in 1971.\textsuperscript{117} Trudeau claimed

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item Day, *Multiculturalism*, 178.
  \item Day, *Multiculturalism*, 165, 171.
  \item Day, *Multiculturalism*, 195.
  \item Jansen, “Canadian Multiculturalism,” 25.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
that Canada had two official languages but no official culture, which in turn made culture a key marker of differentiation among citizens. According to George Elliott Clarke, this policy marked the first instance in which the government positively recognized that non-White, non-British, or non-Aboriginal persons were also Canadian. Fifteen years later, in 1986, the Employment Equity Act was passed, which, in Patience Elabor-Idemudia’s estimation, sought to remove barriers to meaningful employment for “visible minorities” and other marginalized Canadian groups. Day remarks that this year also marked the first time that the federal census allowed Canadians to select multiple identities as their “ethnic group.” Since 28% of Canadians chose to do so, it appeared as though hard-and-fast cultural groups could not always conceptualize, organize, and capture Canadian diversity.

Two years later, Prime Minister Mulroney passed the Multicultural Act, enshrining multiculturalism into the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and demonstrating that it transcended political parties.

While aspects of multiculturalism appeared to be well for some time—at least among members of dominant groups—it became more and more clear that there were cracks in the multicultural veneer. In particular, contemporary scholars believe that the events of September 11, 2001 blew a hole in multiculturalism, which suddenly became open to being

---


121 Day, Multiculturalism, 199.

122 Galabuzi, “Hegemonies,” 70.
revised and challenged. And in recent years, the attention Aboriginal people are bringing to Canada’s legacy of residential schools has also gone a long way in challenging federal policies for managing cultural diversity. Yet according to Chazan et al., even as governments revised multicultural policies, they continued to pay little attention to objections and criticisms, despite the fact that trend-tracker Michael Adams has found that many Canadians continue to hold multiculturalism as an integral part of our national identity. It is to these criticisms that I now turn.

Critiquing Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism may be for many a central source of Canadian pride, but it has been a point of contention among scholars and authors who witness and experience its underside. Three such thinkers are Lawrence Hill, Neil Bissoondath, and Himani Bannerji, who call attention to the fact that multiculturalism proliferates limitations and creates challenges. I will describe three critiques that they lob against Canadian multiculturalism: it simplifies cultural identity; it sanitizes and stagnates culture; and it allows those groups who have traditionally held power to continue to dominate cultural “others.”

Simplification

Through stories about being “Black and White in Canada” and informal interviews with thirty-four Canadians with one Black and one White parent, Hill raises critiques that speak to the simplistic notions of culture that Canadian multiculturalism at best leaves intact and at worst encourages and reinforces. Throughout his memoir, he demonstrates that multiculturalism leaves little room for hybrid cultural identities (in Hill’s case, hybrid racial identities). He and the people he interviewed state that they have been asked countless times “what” they are and where they are “really from.” Hill shares that he struggled to assert his Blackness, was not perceived as White, and was continuously challenged by fellow Canadians who refused to give him room to explore his identity as a child of a Black father and a White mother.\(^{129}\) Although self-identifying as Black, he acknowledges that, “I have many different sides. They all fit together into the configuration of who I am.”\(^{130}\)

Hill calls attention to the fact that in contemporary Canadian contexts, wider, fluid, and more complex perspectives of culture—like that to which I ascribe—tend to get stripped down and simplified into one contained and racially-defined culture or another. Canadians, he argues, ignore such racist simplifications of culture: “In this country, racism is like a fleet-footed bedbug that runs for cover under a sweet-smelling duvet stuffed with politeness and tolerance for multiculturalism.”\(^{131}\) Such simplifications shut the door on possibilities for the mixing, regeneration, and creation of cultures and cultural elements in the complex realities of human life.


\(^{130}\) Hill, *Black Berry*, 75.

\(^{131}\) Hill, *Black Berry*, 155.
Sanitization and Stagnation

Born in Trinidad to parents of Indian descent, Bissoondath identifies a number of ways that Canadian multiculturalism (specifically multiculturalism as government policies) affects “our individual and collective selves.” Analogizing its tendency to sanitize culture to the sanitization of the jungle at DisneyWorld, he argues that multiculturalism commodifies culture and puts it on display in ways that allow others to have a “taste” without experiencing its full flavour. Multiculturalism assigns members of non-dominant groups the role of the “other” who must preserve their stereotyped and de-contextualized cultural heritage rather than evolving and adapting to new times and places. In his words, “Culture becomes an object for display rather than the heart and soul of the individuals formed by it.”

Bissoondath’s critique rests on a vision of culture as a living organism that multiculturalism makes stagnant. “Culture is life,” he writes. “It is a living, breathing, multi-faceted entity in constant evolution . . . Stasis is not possible. A culture that fails to grow from within inevitably becomes untrue to itself, inevitably descends into folklore.” In his mind, multiculturalism promotes a culture of festivals and folklore in which participants can become exposed to “theatre” rather than the people who breathe life into culture, where “easily digested stereotypes” are the order of the day and culture is stripped of its power

---

132 Bissoondath, Selling Illusions, 7.
133 Bissoondath, Selling Illusions, 76-7.
134 Bissoondath, Selling Illusions, 77, 222-3.
135 Bissoondath, Selling Illusions, 81.
136 Bissoondath, Selling Illusions, 75.
137 Bissoondath, Selling Illusions, 77.
and weight as it is “manipulated in social and political usefulness.” In the end, what is left of culture is a stagnant, sanitized commodity that upholds what is simple and appealing at the expense of a fuller understanding of culture that includes breadth, shadows, shame, and ugliness.139

**Domination**

A Bengali-born sociologist who spent her career teaching at Toronto’s York University, Bannerji focuses on race and gender in her outline of how multiculturalism acts as an apparatus of the state for maintaining hegemonic control of those deemed to be “other.” Canada, she argues, is constructed by citizens of European descent who categorize people of different skin colours and ascribe “otherness” in order to manage those who diverge from the (White/male) status quo.140 This management of otherness, she contends, is an integral aspect of multiculturalism,141 which through social policies and racist ideologies “supplies an administrative device for managing social contradictions and conflicts” within a settled and homogeneously-perceived Canada.142

Rather than maintaining a simple binary categorization of citizen and non-citizen, Bannerji identifies a paradoxical third category of “insider-outsider” for those who

---

139 Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions*, 80.
142 Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 73.
simultaneously belong and do not belong.\textsuperscript{143} For her, these “nominal citizens”\textsuperscript{144}—of which she includes herself—are non-White persons who, because of their racialization, are “part of [Canada’s] economy, subject to its laws, and members of its civil society. Yet we are not part of its self-definition of ‘Canada’ because we are not ‘Canadians.’”\textsuperscript{145} Bissoondath makes a similar argument, stating that hyphenated identities among (non-British, non-White) Canadians are not meant “to define the word ‘Canadian’ but to mark a distance from it, the hyphen that links them a sign of acceptable marginalization.”\textsuperscript{146} Bannerji argues that multiculturalism is a means of racialization through which the Anglo-Canadian culture maintains its dominance while “tolerating” and organizing others as “multiculture.”\textsuperscript{147} It is a way of tolerating otherness, but only as otherness does not threaten to disrupt the (White/Anglo-Canadian/able-bodied/male) status quo; it is not meant to dig to deeper issues like social justice and equality.\textsuperscript{148} In the end, multiculturalism maintains power among those dominant cultural groups that have historically held power by legitimating inequalities already present and containing disapproval and wariness.\textsuperscript{149}

\textsuperscript{143} Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 65.

\textsuperscript{144} Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 67.

\textsuperscript{145} Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 65. When arguing that members of non-dominant racial groups are not “Canadians,” Bannerji is referring to a perception among dominant (White/male) Canadians and not a status of legal citizenship.

\textsuperscript{146} Bissoondath, \textit{Selling Illusions}, 108.

\textsuperscript{147} Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 78.

\textsuperscript{148} Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 79.

\textsuperscript{149} Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 77.
A “Transformative Vision” for the United Church of Canada

In 2006 the United Church sought to respond to the shortcomings of multiculturalism in Canada with a vision for transforming the denomination into one that honours and respects its internal cultural diversity. In this section, I will use broad brush strokes to describe the role of culture and diversity within the United Church from its founding to the early twenty-first century, tracing its move from the assimilation of cultural others to the celebration of diversity through interculturalism.

With the establishment of the United Church in 1925, its leaders envisioned a “national” church made up of and reflecting the ideals of White, Protestant, British Canadians. Yet United Church theologian Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng notes that as Canada became increasingly diverse, the denomination likewise became marked by greater levels of diversity. In response to changes in government policies regarding multiculturalism and immigration during the last few decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, the United Church has in recent years become an active participant in discourses about multiculturalism and diversity in Canada.

Over the past nine decades, the United Church has evolved from a denomination of assimilation to one that celebrates diversity. In an essay about ethnicity in the United Church, Ng states that for more than the first half-century of its life, it addressed pluralism by

---

150 Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, “The United Church of Canada: A Church Fittingly National,” in Christianity and Ethnicity in Canada, ed. Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 204.

151 Ng, “The United Church of Canada.”

152 For an overview of the history of the United Church of Canada’s response to Canadian multicultural and immigration policies during this time, see Hyuk Cho, “‘We Are Not Alone’: Historical Journey of the United Church of Canada’s Response to Becoming an Intercultural Church,” International Review of Mission 100, no. 1 (2011): 48-61.
fostering assimilation to English Canada among its congregations and ministries. Yet from this time onward, gradual shifts occurred in the United Church that led it to re-examine its relationships with non-dominant cultural groups, a process that began with the formation of the National Ethnic Committee in 1972, a committee of the Division of Mission in Canada. Over two decades later, after the establishment of two additional committees—the Ethnic Ministries Working Unit in 1988 and the Feasibility Task Group on Ethnic Ministries in 1992—the United Church inaugurated the Ethnic Ministries Council in 1996 with the purpose of adding non-dominant voices and supporting non-dominant congregations and laypeople in fully participating in the denomination. This council was to bring under its umbrella all United Church congregations and missions that were non-Anglo, non-francophone, and non-Native and organize them into “associations” and “coalitions.” A decade later, the Ethnic Ministries Revisioning Task Group—a committee established in anticipation of the tenth anniversary of the Ethnic Ministries Council—put forward “A Transformative Vision for the United Church of Canada” at the 2006 General Council. This report prompted General Council to declare the United Church to be a “national church where the intercultural dimension of ministries is emphasized as a denominational priority.” The “Transformative Vision” put forward the notion of shifting from the assimilation of non-dominant cultures toward an acceptance of diversity, a vision marked by

153 Ng, “The United Church of Canada,” 206, 208.
154 Cho, “‘We Are Not Alone,’” 53.
155 Cho, “‘We Are Not Alone,’” 56-7.
156 Ng, “The United Church of Canada,” 209-10.
a change in language from *multicultural* to *intercultural*. Since that report, the United Church has produced resources and organized conferences that attempt to foster appreciation, understanding, and celebration of diversity among the denomination.\(^{159}\)

**Becoming Intercultural**

According to Adele Halliday, Team Leader for Transformational Ministries in the United Church, the “Transformative Vision” evolved from a feeling among several non-dominant groups that “the United Church needed something *like* multiculturalism, but that would go *deeper* than superficial interactions and a desire to be more transformative.”\(^{160}\) In an effort to “go deeper,” to envision more than the problematic notions of multiculturalism criticized by Bissoondath, Bannerji, and Hill, the United Church took a stance of becoming *intercultural*.

---

\(^{159}\) Resources include: Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, ed., *Our Roots, Our Lives: Glimpses of Faith and Life from Black and Asian Canadian Women* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2003); Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng, ed., *That All May Be One: A Resource for Educating toward Racial Justice* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 2004); United Church of Canada, ed., *A Healing Journey for Us All: Uncovering the Wounds of Empire* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 2006); United Church of Canada, *Circle and Cross: Dialogue Planning Tool* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 2008); Susannah Schmidt, *Ending Racial Harassment: Creating Healthy Congregations* (Toronto: United Church of Canada, 2008); and Rob Fennell, ed., *Intercultural Visions: Called to Be the Church* (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 2012). In addition to these print resources, the United Church has hosted a number of conferences to address interculturalism, including Behold! One Another: An Intercultural Conference (Toronto, 2008), River Running: An Intercultural Conference (Winnipeg, 2009), Behold! We Are Many, We Are One (Vancouver, 2011), Prairie Mosaic (Saskatoon, 2012), Behold! Many Circles, One Sacred Hoop (Halifax, 2013), and Prairie Paths (Regina, 2014), and Prairie Horizons: Unfolding Church (Saskatoon, 2014). The United Church distributes many highlights from these events through the “Intercultural Ministries” playlist on its YouTube channel. The denomination has also set up a Facebook group for sharing ideas and resources for intercultural ministry, called “Behold! An Intercultural Community.”

At its best, interculturalism moves away from the simplification, stagnation and sanitization, and domination of cultures to what United Church ethicist Roger Hutchinson names as “encounters among persons and groups with cultural differences.” As the “Transformative Vision” states, interculturalism moves the point of focus from issues of tolerance, assimilation, and integration to relationships of “mutually respectful diversity and full and equitable participation.” In choosing to become intercultural, the United Church acknowledged that the forms of multiculturalism prevalent in Canada since the 1970s are not appropriate and have failed to address the inequality of power and wealth. It sought to move the denomination toward recognition that one single cultural group no longer dominates a space, speaking instead about how, as Hutchinson states, “the public realm is, and should be, both shared and contested.”

Central to the “Transformative Vision” is the realization that this is not a vision of present realities, but one of future possibilities; the authors of the document admit that “[i]t is

---

161 In Québec, interculturalism has a particular definition, since multicultural policies in this province are perceived as dangerous to the maintenance of Québec’s distinct culture and its relatively homogenous national identity. Susan Judith Ship argues that scholars and policy-makers in the province see the threat of multiculturalism to be “an attempt to deny the cultural integrity of la belle provence, and as a policy that, by relativizing culture, occludes the issue of the national question that has otherwise dominated federal politics.” *Interculturalisme* in Québec is a way of managing diversity in ways that preserve the province’s national and cultural identity. It rests on the idea of “cultural convergence,” of a society arranged by peripheral ethnic groups and the dominant Québec nation. But, unlike the way I use *interculturalism* in this dissertation, *interculturalisme* is based on a hierarchical notion of the Québécois nation standing above minority groups and it does not include any element of reciprocity. Susan Judith Ship, “Citizens of the State but not Members of the Nation: The Politics of Language and Culture in the Construction of Minorities,” in *Possibilities and Limitations: Multicultural Policies and Programs in Canada*, ed. Carl E. James (Halifax: Fernwood, 2005), 86–7.


165 Hutchinson, *Ethical Choices*, 5.
a vision of a United Church of Canada that we want to become but are not yet." Thus, the report includes an appendix that outlines a three-year plan (2006-2009) for building a program of intercultural ministry into the United Church, a plan that involved recruitment and hiring of staff members, national consultation, and reporting recommendations for further action. It seems, based on the 2009 report from the Task Group on Intercultural Ministries, that a number of the steps for further action have been taken, which has led the Ethnic Ministries Unit to be renamed the Intercultural and Diverse Communities in Ministry Unit.

**Critiquing the “Transformative Vision”**

When read in light of the children and congregations that participated in this dissertation, the “Transformative Vision” can be seen as marking a path away from late twentieth-century political and social understandings of Canadian multiculturalism with all its problems and toward more just and equitable relationships among various cultural groups. This becomes particularly evident in its tendency to look to voices on the margins of the denomination and hear what they have to say as gifts that can help the United Church move toward a more just vision for becoming intercultural.

But while this is certainly a helpful step in a positive direction, the document actually replicates some of the critiques lobbed against multiculturalism and brings with it new sets of challenges and limitations. There are at least three additional points that surface by critiquing

---

166 United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 583.

the “Transformative Vision” in light of the children and congregations considered in earlier chapters: it fails to account for hybrid cultural identities; it leaves little room for contexts of diversity and difference; and it maintains as the envisioned centre of the United Church those groups that have historically held this ground.

Gifts from the Margins

The children and churches involved in this dissertation affirm the call to take seriously the voices of the people on the margins of the United Church, a call that the “Transformative Vision” offers to the denomination. According to this document, such people offer “guidance, wisdom, and insightful leadership as gifts for the wholeness of the church.”

In a spirit of “collaboration, accompaniment, and partnership,” the “Transformative Vision” seeks to bring together those in the United Church who are from non-dominant cultural groups as well as those who are part of cultures that have tended to hold sway in the denomination. In this way, the denomination can continue to move toward being an inclusive and justice-seeking church. This laudable task was undertaken through a number of steps that led to the “Transformative Vision.” First, the members of the Ethnic Ministries Re-visioning Task Group, who put forward this document, are part of many different cultural groups within the United Church, both those at the centre and on its margins. Second, they engaged a two-phase re-visioning process, the first phase of which included holding focus groups with a diverse cross-section of individuals from across Canada in order to evaluate


the purposes of the Ethnic Ministries Unit and explore new visions for it.\textsuperscript{170} The second phase consisted of a broad strategy of consultation with leaders from several cultural groups—for example, Aboriginal, Francophone, and urban ministry leaders—as well as staff at the General Council Offices, conference level, and among Presbyteries.\textsuperscript{171} In all these ways, the Task Group took seriously a wide range of voices from many cultures, especially those from non-dominant cultures.

As people who do not traditionally hold power within congregations, the children who participated in this dissertation demonstrate that voices on the margins can lead congregations toward new understanding and action. Take, for example, the conversation between the three girls at Parkdale as they spoke about how to interpret the story of creation in a way that allows people to, in their words, “be who you want to be.” These words challenge the congregation toward authenticity and, from that, a theology of radical acceptance. Or consider the invitation toward a theology of mystery that Nicholas can offer to his community as he makes meaning of the Resurrection, wondering aloud how it can be possible for someone to rise from the dead and doubting the validity of this theological tenet. His is a challenge to think deeply about the claims of faith that may be so commonplace within congregations that members overlook just how radical or miraculous they really are. It’s no wonder, then, that Rev. Lynn calls the children at Parkdale prophets: “The prophets are the ones I continually tell, ‘You need to be speaking and doing and you need to be active in church, because that’s what prophets do.’”

\textsuperscript{170} United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 581-2.

\textsuperscript{171} United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 581-2.
By holding meaningful theologies that are pregnant with transformational potential for their broader congregations, these children affirm the United Church’s belief that the people on the margins of their denomination ought to be seen as leaders within the church and that theirs are voices worth hearing. Yet just as I intentionally sought to listen to the voices of children and Rev. Lynn makes a point of calling Parkdale’s children prophets, those who have historically held power need to be intentional in receiving the leadership of persons from non-dominant cultures. This commitment has been integrated into the “Transformative Vision” through the diverse Task Group that penned it and the focus groups and consultations that they initiated in order to evaluate past proposals and envision a path toward becoming intercultural.

Overlooking Hybridity

The “Transformative Vision” rests on problematic and narrow understandings of culture, which simplify this broad term by boiling it down to little more than a synonym for ethnicity and, to a lesser degree, race and language. This is clearly demonstrated in the report’s frequent naming of particular cultural contexts: “Aboriginal, Francophone, ethnic minority, and ethnic majority peoples.” By naming particular groups based on these categories, the report simplifies culture from an incredibly broad and complex concept to one that hinges on only three manifestations of human diversity: language, race, and ethnicity.

The research in this dissertation shows that culture is much more complex than the “Transformative Vision” imagines it to be. The children participate in congregations that defy

---

the narrow fourfold classification with which the United Church makes sense of cultural diversity. Ethnicity, race, and language alone fail to capture even a slice of the multifaceted complexity and layers of diversity that are inherent to the identities of these congregations. To demonstrate this, I will allow the reality of life and ministry at Messiah Methodist United Church to critique the one-note vision of congregational culture.

The identity of Messiah and its members is exponentially more complex than simply being a community with roots among one particular cultural group. It is at one and the same time both African and western, Ghanaian and Canadian, United Church and Methodist. In many ways, Messiah’s cultural identity may be best described as hybrid, a mixture of multiple elements stemming from various sources that blend together into a continually-evolving cultural identity that shapes and is shaped by its individual members. Such hybridity is evident at Messiah in at least four ways.

First, the liturgy and structure of Sunday worship services at Messiah reflect a blending of both African and western, Ghanaian and Canadian elements. The relaxed and fluid nature of a start time is reflective of Christian worship in Africa, as are the dancing and boisterous singing that are regular features of musical worship during services. Yet the procession of the choir and, on some Sundays, the procession of flags at the beginning of services, as well as a “Time with Children” are elements stemming from western and North American norms for liturgy and congregational worship. Furthermore, the use of both Akan and English indicates a linguistic hybridity among congregants, for if all members of the congregation spoke either language, then there would be no need for services to include both. Following worship, the community stays together to enjoy tea and light refreshments, a
common practice in congregations in Canada but largely absent in MCG communities in their homeland. These are just some of the ways that the people of Messiah have adapted their worship services to reflect their identity not only as Ghanaians, but also as Canadians.

The hybridity of Messiah’s identity is also evident in its ministry with children through its approach to Sunday school and inclusion in corporate worship. In chapter 2, I explored how Emmanuel, Jemina, and other leaders at Messiah have struggled with their curricular choices for Sunday school. As a hybrid culture, this congregation does not neatly fit into the intended audiences for curricula produced by either Ghanaian or Canadian publishers. Thus, the leaders are continually adapting, re-writing, and creating resources to more adequately suit their unique needs. Additionally, Sunday school has moved away from its traditional role in Ghana as the sole worship and formational experience for children in congregations as Messiah takes steps toward including young people in congregational worship not only for a portion of each service, but also for an entire service once each month. Such a move is reflective of recent conversations among western scholars and practitioners about the importance of including children in corporate worship173 but, as Jemina has said, it moves away from the tendency of churches in Ghana to have separate programs and services for children for the entirety of corporate worship. Formational efforts for children at Messiah

—through Sunday school and partial inclusion in corporate worship—demonstrate the liminal space of the congregation, a space that is both Ghanaian and Canadian.

Third, Messiah's hybridity is also reflected in its dual relationship with both MCG and the United Church. The 2013 “Memorandum of Understanding for Cooperation”—signed by both the moderator of the United Church and the presiding bishop of MCG—holds a place of pride among the people of Messiah. This relationship between two denominations on two continents is held together and embodied in this particular congregation and is reflective of its dual identity as an avid participant in both contexts.

Finally, the hybrid identity of Messiah is not only evident at the congregational level, but also among its children. The five participating children, most of who were born in Canada, are the living embodiment of the blending of Ghanaian and Canadian identities. Their approaches for generating theological insight are reflective of this hybridity. The theological themes I identify in chapter 2—a tendency to draw widely in theological sources; a sense of the interconnectedness and commonalities of theologies; and a view of God as involved in the details of their lives—are all reflective of the broader Ghanaian culture out of which their parents have come. Yet their location within Canada also shapes their theology. For example, in chapter 5 I explore how Dawn generated theology from a few particular dreams she had. While such a practice is common among Christianity in Ghana, Dawn has not found her friends in Canada to be receptive to such experiences. When I asked her why she hadn’t told anyone about one of her dreams, her eyes filled with tears: “Because really, like, people, like... they say, ‘Oh no, you didn’t have this dream.’ And they don’t really

174 Lartey, Pastoral Counselling in Inter-Cultural Perspective, 53. Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy, 229.
believe me because… because, like, if I told my friends they won’t believe me. Because last
time when I told them a story that when I was born I was very little, they didn’t believe me.”
While she has still made theological meaning out of this dream, I cannot help but think that
her experiences of growing up in a context that is not prone to validate such dreams will
influence—and has already influenced—any meaning she continues to generate from it.

Messiah is a congregation that is at once both Canadian and Ghanaian, United Church
and MCG, and these are just four examples of this hybrid cultural identity that is so
intricately woven into its fabric. Yet in classifying cultural contexts in narrow and simplified
ways, the “Transformative Vision” does not envision this sort of identity and its dual
relationships. Thus, this report cannot adequately make room for the complexity that comes
with hybrid cultures, leaving communities like Messiah at risk of being misunderstood as
something that is in reality only one side of its more complex hybrid cultural identity.

Ignoring Intercultures

A third point of critique of the “Transformative Vision” is that it ignores congregations that
are in and of themselves intercultural. Ironically, contexts of interculturalism are not named
in the fourfold categorization repeatedly included in the document, which only views
“mutually reciprocal relationships”175 occurring between different cultural groups rather than
being a prominent feature of a particular culture itself.

Overall, the “Transformative Vision” assumes cultures to be internally consistent
wholes and points of consensus among members. In the introduction to the report, the

authors share that participants in diverse focus groups that led to the document made clear that “a denominational emphasis on intercultural ministries needs to include ethno-specific or language-specific congregations as well as culturally diverse congregations.” Yet this recognition of congregations that are internally diverse, inconsistent, and intercultural does not appear to impact the visions cast and ideas shared within this document. This was most evident in a section that outlined the rationale and history of the re-visioning of the Ethnic Ministries Council. In an effort to “de-construct the benevolent assimilation of minorities into the dominant culture,” the “Transformative Vision” re-defines “multicultural” to include “any congregation or group of people with monocultural similarities” While their goal may be to include groups under the umbrella of multiculturalism that have previously been overlooked, the use of the term *monocultural* conveys the idea that cultures are fundamentally based on uniformity and internal consistency.

The realities of life within the congregations central to this dissertation challenge such assumptions about consistency and consensus among individuals. Each one demonstrates Kathryn Tanner’s assessment that cultures are common points of engagement rather than agreement; internal consistency or, to use the report’s term, “monocultural similarities” are not a requirement for a culture to be considered a culture.

Internal diversity and inconsistency were most obviously apparent among Parkdale United Church, a congregation that holds its identity as an intercultural community at the core of its collective heart. Rev. Lynn ascribes to a very broad view of culture, and her

---

176 United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 582.
178 Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 57.
leadership of Parkdale has helped its layers of diversity—including ethnic, linguistic, national, racial, socio-economic, sexual, generational, and theological diversity—to be perceived not as a burden to overcome, but rather as a mark of distinction to wear with pride. Of course, as stated in chapter 1, such diversity brings significant challenges that the congregation must face, such as expectations for congregational worship and disagreements about theologies and language used to express those theologies. Rather than shying away from such disagreements, Rev. Lynn names them before the congregation, indicating that their community can maintain strong relationships among its members even though the many aspects of this interculture will resonate differently with those who make it up.

The children at Parkdale also demonstrate that the culture of a people group—in this case, a congregation—can include difference, diversity, and disagreement. These children hold what I called in chapter 1 an “open theology”; they expressed their theological ideas and practices in ways that opened them to recognizing that other people—even those within their congregation—may ascribe to very different theological meanings and may even disagree with their thoughts. Not only did the language of some of the children express this openness—through words like “I think” and “maybe”—but so too did the general postures that they brought to the task I offered them—to draw a picture of God and talk freely about their theological ideas. For these children, being part of a congregation that feels more like “a really tight family,” to use Lizzy’s words, need not require that all people think and act alike, proving that diversity and disagreement can be a central hallmark of the culture of a faith community.
Even within the other congregations, where interculturalism was not part of their self-identity, children still demonstrate that their congregational culture can leave room for internal inconsistency and disagreement. For example, in chapter 3 I consider the diversity among the children’s programming at Burke Street, with younger children participating in Godly Play and older children engaging in an approach to Sunday school that diverges from the norms and values inherent in the former program. This inconsistency correlated to the approaches through which the children generated theological insight, with some weaving imaginative ideas freely into their theologies and others focusing on ensuring that they gain knowledge of the ideas that Sunday school presents to them. Yet both of these incredibly different approaches to children’s formation and their own styles of generating theological insight are at home within their congregation, showcasing that culture need not require agreement to be valid.

The theological excursions of children explored in chapters 1-4 are yet another indicator that culture can indeed include difference and diversity. I have demonstrated that, while children’s theological meaning-making is reflective of their congregational cultures, at times their theologies diverge from those of their congregations. Children, as members of the culture of a congregation, showcase disagreement over the theological norms of their broader culture, and some of them are aware of this. For example, in chapter 2 I mentioned that Luke draws from the reality show *Long Island Medium* in creating meaning surrounding the ideas of spirit while cognizant that this diverges from the broader culture of Messiah. Yet such difference and disagreement need not push this boy to the fringes of his congregation. Rather,
it indicates that he can be a vital participant in the community even while holding inconsistent theological ideas.

These examples show that the United Church’s understanding of culture within its “Transformative Vision” is far too narrow and simplistic to include the reality of life within many of its congregations. Not only does it ignore the differences and diversities that exist within congregational cultures, but it actually ignores those congregations in which diversity and even disagreement are a cultural hallmark. How then can the denomination move toward becoming an intercultural church on a large scale when it overlooks the ways that congregations like Parkdale are working out this vision for themselves? In naming four particular categories of culture—Aboriginal, Francophone, ethnic minority, and ethnic majority—the “Transformative Vision” assumes that cultures are internally consistent wholes that engage in relationship with one another. The interpretations of the children and congregations within this dissertation demonstrate that interculturalism must not only include convergence between different congregational cultures, but that such cultural convergence happens within congregations as well.

Maintaining the Centre

The final critique that the children and congregations raise about this report has to do with issues of power and domination inherent within it. The fact that the “Transformative Vision” overlooks cultures that, through hybridity or diversity, are more internally complex than the report imagines leads one to ask questions about who exactly is doing the imagining in the first place.
Ren Ito, in a presentation at the 2013 Toronto School of Theology Graduate Students’ Association Conference, analyzed the “Transformative Vision” and argued that the White, Anglo majority of the United Church is largely absent from it. In his estimation, this signifies a covert view of culture that actually omits “White Nations people,” to use the document’s term, from visions of cultural equality that it imagines. Such an interpretation seems to parallel the assumption of the board member at Burke Street who remarked that it’s a bit odd that I want to include this congregation in research about culture, since it has no particular culture. This whitewashing of what is in fact a very unique congregational culture indicates a tendency among members of a dominant culture to perceive their ways of life to be the norm against which others are seen. For example, the term visible minority, while common among discourse in Canada, assumes that there is an invisible majority who holds the privilege and power to do the seeing and naming of that which is visibly “other.” The power dynamics behind the comment by Burke Street’s board member are also present within the “Transformative Vision” in at least two ways.

First, there are significant moments in which this document uses particular terminology that implicates the United Church in the dominating tendencies of multiculturalism. While Ito believes that White Anglo cultures are largely absent from the report, the language of the “Transformative Vision” not only covertly keeps such cultures within the document, but actually reinforces their power. It implies, for example, that the true core of the denomination consists of “White Nations peoples” who are making the decision

---


180 Ren Ito, “Race, Culture, and Interculturality: A Critique of the United Church of Canada’s ‘Transformative Vision,’” presentation, Toronto School of Theology Graduate Students’ Association Conference, March 8, 2013.
to more fully embrace those non-dominant people who, according to the report, remain on the margins of the United Church. It also uses terms like “us” and “we” in ways that demonstrate a binary distinction between those cultural groups that have historically held power (“us”) and those that have not (an implied—if unnamed—“them”). While this presumption is read between the lines, perhaps it is nowhere clearer than with these words:

White Nations people were also once strangers loved by God. There are now new strangers outside the United Church, loved by God but not by us. There are even those within the United Church, also loved by God, yet whom we consider strangers and do not love. If God indeed ‘shows no partiality’ (Acts 10:34-35), then we are challenged to humble ourselves.

Furthermore, in one instance it goes so far as to ask, “Are we willing to risk letting go of our hold on our cultures to God’s transformation and grieve the passing of old structures and unearned privilege?” It appears as though the “us” in this statement—the perceived recipients of the request to let go of “our hold on our cultures”—are members of dominant cultural groups like the members of Burke Street, for only those who have benefited and continue to benefit from these structures and privileges would grieve their passing. Others, like the members of Parkdale, Messiah, and Colkirk, may actually celebrate it. This implication betrays the very vision of interculturalism that the report is offering by engaging in the practices of “otherizing” that Bannerji unearths within Canadian multiculturalism at

---

182 One example of this use of “we”-language is found in the preamble to the report, where the authors recognize “the primacy of Aboriginal people, who are the First Peoples of the land on which we live, as we strive towards walking together…” United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 580.
large. The very individuals and groups that it calls the church to more fully embrace are set up as a “multiculture” and managed in order to maintain the status quo.\textsuperscript{185}

Power dynamics can also be perceived in the use of the term “inclusive” in various places throughout the report. For example, there are multiple instances in which the authors speak about the decision to become intercultural as “[i]n keeping with the United Church’s justice-seeking and inclusive history.”\textsuperscript{186} At first glance, the United Church’s quest to become inclusive is laudable. But a closer look reveals it to parallel Canadian multiculturalism by legitimizing colonialist power dynamics and allowing those groups who have historically held control to retain it. The United Church’s own resources surrounding interculturalism lend themselves to this criticism. A resource “for educating toward racial justice”\textsuperscript{187} edited by Greer Anne Wenh-In Ng and published two years before the “Transformative Vision” names inclusive as “problematic in that it assumes that one individual or group is in a position to decide whether to ‘include’ or ‘exclude’; marginalization and tokenism often still result.”\textsuperscript{188}

Even though the report is the product of conversations and consultations with voices on the margins, the overall tone of the document is one in which those who have historically held power in the United Church continue to maintain their power, and even reinforce it by choosing to include those who have not traditionally held power. In the end, although the United Church feels as though “God is calling [its members] to transformation,” any changes

\textsuperscript{185} Bannerji, “Geography Lessons,” 78.

\textsuperscript{186} United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 580. See also United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 586.

\textsuperscript{187} Ng, ed., That All May Be One.

\textsuperscript{188} Ng, ed., That All May Be One, 80.
re-inscribe the denomination’s position as an assimilator into the dominant Canadian culture\footnote{Ng, “The United Church of Canada,” 206, 208.} rather than helping it move beyond this historic role.

The four congregations challenge the “Transformative Vision” to de-centre those voices that have traditionally held power within the United Church. While Burke Street aligns with the implied “we” at the centre of the report and Messiah and Colkirk are part of the implied “them” existing “on the margins,”\footnote{United Church of Canada, "Transformative Vision," 580.} Parkdale does not even appear within the purview of the report. Yet the children—and adults—with whom I spoke from these congregations all expressed ideas and practices, hopes and concerns that ought to be heard among their denomination. To do so, however, is to challenge the very foundations of the United Church. Speaking about the depth of change called for when interculturalism is truly sought, Rev. Martha, minister of Colkirk, reminds us that “we don’t know what that would look like. If we truly allowed our church to change and be influenced by different people, none of us can imagine what that church would look like because it would be formed in the formation of it.”

* * *

By interpreting this document through the lens of the children and congregations whose voices form the backbone of this dissertation, four points of critique surface surrounding this report: it gives serious consideration to voices on the margins of the denomination; it does
not leave room for congregations and members who ascribe to hybrid cultural identities; it
ironically overlooks congregations that are charting their own path toward interculturalism;
and it continues to broker power to those who have historically sat at the centre of the
denomination.

This vision may be riddled with problems like those named above, but this
interpretation also shows that it signifies a step toward a more just vision for the
denomination. The children and congregations detailed in previous chapters offer some
important correctives that can help the United Church continue to move further toward the
intercultural church it seeks to become. In the next chapter, I will continue to use data
generated from the ethnographic research I undertook and interpreted in previous chapters,
but this time with an eye toward research in the academic field of children’s spirituality and
theology.
In this chapter I allow the children and congregations that breathed life into this dissertation to critique the bourgeoning field of children’s spirituality and theology. Having been forged from significant studies and partnerships from the last decade of the twentieth century, this field continues to grow and produce significant research into all sorts of topics related to the spiritual and theological lives of children. After offering some conceptual clarity around the parameters of this field, I address four ways in which culture and cultural diversity are or are not attended to by scholars of children’s spirituality and theology. Building on this interpretation, I draw from the research I conducted to pose three critiques to the field: it neglects the processes of children’s theological meaning-making in favour of products; scholars need to consider children’s theologies not only among individual persons, but also as collective and collaborative phenomena; and studies must attend to culture at every stage of research, particularly analysis of knowledge generated through qualitative and ethnographic studies.
Clarifying Blurred Boundaries

Children's spirituality and theologies of childhood are distinct subfields of childhood studies and religion, yet ones marked by blurred boundaries. Contemporary scholarship often overlaps these subfields in its quest to explore the spiritual, theological, and religious lives of children. Thus, for the sake of clarity amidst expanding complexity in these fields, I use *children's spirituality and theology* to denote the shifting scholarly space that these two subfields occupy, both those points of convergence and areas of uniqueness. Despite the significant overlap between these subfields, it is possible to make some clear distinctions between them.

The field of *children's spirituality* has as its focus children’s inner lives. Scholars of children’s spirituality explore children’s quests to connect with that which is beyond themselves and their awareness and consciousness of these searches for connection. It is conceptualized broadly and includes scholars who conduct research from confessional and non-confessional perspectives as it relates to the human spirit as manifested in children. Throughout the 1990s in particular, children’s spirituality gained momentum through the publication of landmark works such as Robert Coles’ *The Spiritual Life of Children*¹⁹¹ and David Hay and Rebecca Nye’s *The Spirit of the Child*.¹⁹² These works, alongside the formation and development of the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, which began publication in 1996, set the stage for how scholars explore the inner lives of children in relation to spirituality.


But what is children’s spirituality? While the breadth of this term makes arriving at any one definition challenging, several scholars have attempted to do just this. The International Association for Children’s Spirituality—which consists of a range of scholars from confessional and non-confessional perspectives—relies on its former president, Jack Priestly, in setting forth an understanding of spirituality. While clearly stating that it cannot be defined, Priestly states that spirituality is “a concept of constant motion or at least of potential motion which can on rare occasions be stilled.” He goes on to note that, although spirituality may intersect with religion, it cannot be contained by religious traditions. It is, thus, something that seems to be universal—if difficult to identify—among human beings. Despite Priestly’s aversion to placing any fences around an understanding of spirituality, Vivienne Mountain, in an article in the organization’s journal, argues that children’s spirituality tends to focus on relationship as a dominant theme. For example, Nye’s groundbreaking research in Britain led her to define children’s spirituality as “relational consciousness.”

As a field of inquiry, children’s spirituality leaves room for confessional and non-confessional perspectives. In confessional circles, more effort has been devoted toward offering further precision and conceptual clarity to definitions of children’s spirituality, perhaps due to scholars’ desire to identify themselves and their research as grounded in

---


194 Priestly, “A Brief Introduction to the Notion of the Spiritual.”


196 In Nye’s words, the spirituality of children in her research “was recognized by a distinctive property of mental activity, profound and intricate enough to be termed ‘consciousness’, and remarkable for its confinement to a broadly relational, inter- and intra-personal domain.” Hay with Nye, The Spirit of the Child, 109.
particular religious and theological traditions. In North America, for example, the Society for Children’s Spirituality: Christian Perspectives defined children’s spirituality as “the child’s development of a conscious relationship with God, in Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit, within the context of a community of believers that fosters that relationship, as well as the child’s understanding of—and response to—that relationship.” The focus on relationship and the child’s consciousness of relationship is shared among both confessional and non-confessional colleagues. But as this definition shows, those who study children’s spirituality from a confessional perspective may place the triune God and the faith community at the centre of these relationships, while acknowledging that children who do not identify as Christian are still spiritual beings.

The area of *theologies of childhood* explores what it means to be a child and to experience childhood in light of scripture, tradition, and experience in relation to a religious tradition, particularly Christianity. In addition to giving thought to children and childhood from confessional perspectives, some scholars of theologies of childhood explore the theological ideas of children and the ways in which they generate and communicate these ideas. Like its sister subfield, theologies of childhood is difficult to pin down. For some, it centres on uncovering historical theological understandings surrounding what it means to be a child and experience childhood, as well as the quest to generate new understandings in

---


light of contemporary contexts.\textsuperscript{199} For others, their area of concern lies with the desire to “examine and reform the themes of Christian faith and doctrine through the eyes of a child.”\textsuperscript{200} Yet whether learning from children’s theological meaning-making, bringing to light historical understandings of childhood, or casting new theological visions about what it means to be a child, theologies of childhood provides a forum for giving concerted attention to the many ways in which theology and children converge.

\textbf{Considering Culture}

Despite exponential growth in research surrounding children’s spirituality and theology, scholars have paid little attention to culture and cultural diversity, and among those who do address these issues, many do not go deep enough in their consideration and analysis. There are four broad ways that scholars of children’s spirituality and theology address culture and cultural diversity: in passing reference and assumptions in discussions that imply unnamed European-American and British dominance in the field; through studies of children and childhood within a particular cultural context; by conducting research into children’s spirituality and theology across multiple cultural contexts; and through critical attention to the importance of cultural context when studying children’s spirituality and theology. I will describe these four general uses of culture in the field of children’s spirituality and theology by introducing one or two primary examples in each category.

\textsuperscript{199} See, for example, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, \textit{Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective} (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).

\textsuperscript{200} Mountain, “Four Links,” 263.
Passing References

The first general way that scholars of children’s spirituality and theology address culture is through passing references. Without placing culture and diversity at the centre of their gaze, these scholars speak of them from time to time and their arguments and ideas are situated within specific, if unnamed, cultural contexts. Two strong examples of this tendency are David Hay and Rebecca Nye’s *The Spirit of the Child* and John Westerhoff’s *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

Hay and Nye, in their 1998 landmark text, speak of culture in relation to their quest to better understand what exactly children's spirituality is. Building on scholars such as Robert Coles, who thematically investigated “the ways in which children sift and sort spiritual matters,” Hay and Nye perceived a lack of details regarding what exactly children’s spirituality looks like. Relying on zoologist Alister Hardy’s arguments about the evolutionary survival value of spirituality to human beings and Nye’s qualitative research among children in British primary schools, Hay and Nye posit that spirituality is an inherently biological phenomenon and they go on to propose a definition of children’s spirituality as “relational consciousness.” Drawing from research in psychology, anthropology, and neurophysiology, Hay demonstrates that spirituality is culturally-mediated

---


202 Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*

203 Coles, *The Spiritual Life,* xvii.


and always exists within particular cultural contexts\textsuperscript{206} that shape how it is expressed,\textsuperscript{207} understood,\textsuperscript{208} attended to,\textsuperscript{209} and manifested,\textsuperscript{210} as well as how it evolves in human beings.\textsuperscript{211} While he regards culture as a variable that affects nearly every node of spiritual life, it is not the primary focus of his arguments. His goal is to “argue that children’s spirituality is rooted in a universal human awareness; that it is ‘really there’ and not just a culturally constructed illusion.”\textsuperscript{212}

Hay and Nye sweep culture under the rug almost to the point of ignoring it completely while discussing Nye’s qualitative research into children’s spirituality. Using Hay’s assumptions about the biological nature of children’s spirituality as a foundation, Nye conducted qualitative research aimed at gaining a sense of the contours of children’s spiritual lives. She met with 38 children (20 children aged 6-7 and 18 children aged 10-11) for up to three one-on-one interviews per child. Despite Hay’s assertions about the influence of culture on spirituality, Nye’s research sample was quite monocultural: all the child participants attended public primary schools in predominantly lower middle class areas of “two large industrial cities in the English Midlands (Nottingham and Birmingham)”\textsuperscript{213}; the authors identify all the children as “Caucasian,” with the exception of one child of “African-

\textsuperscript{206} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 170.
\textsuperscript{207} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 51, 138.
\textsuperscript{208} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 18.
\textsuperscript{209} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 165.
\textsuperscript{210} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 170.
\textsuperscript{211} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 137.
\textsuperscript{212} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 18.
\textsuperscript{213} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 86.
Caribbean origins”\textsuperscript{214}; and 28 of the children had no religious affiliation, with four children identifying with the Church of England, four with Islam, and two with the Roman Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{215} While there are certainly some aspects of cultural diversity represented among this small group, it is predominantly monocultural in socio-economic status, geographic location, race, and religious affiliation. From this culturally-limited sample, Hay and Nye draw conclusions regarding the spirituality of children, naming this phenomenon “relational consciousness.” In Nye’s words, “children’s spirituality was recognized by a distinctive property of mental activity, profound and intricate enough to be termed “consciousness” and remarkable for its confinement to a broadly relational, inter- and intra-personal domain.”\textsuperscript{216}

Another prime example of considering culture in passing is Westerhoff’s now classic 1976 text \textit{Will Our Children Have Faith?} At the core of this book are Westerhoff’s arguments for moving from a view of Christian education based on socialization to one of enculturization, which shifts the process of education from a focus on how individuals are shaped by other members of a community to “the process of interaction between and among persons of all ages… In enculturization one person is not understood as the actor and another the acted upon, but rather both act, both initiate action, and both react.”\textsuperscript{217} Although Westerhoff does not often explicitly speak of culture, he writes about the importance of community, which he argues requires a high degree of consensus of identity in order for

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{214} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 87.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 87.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Hay with Nye, \textit{The Spirit of the Child}, 109.
\item \textsuperscript{217} Westerhoff, \textit{Will Our Children Have Faith?}, 80.
\end{itemize}
diversity and pluralism to be possible.\textsuperscript{218} Community, for him, is at the heart of the formation of children, and he speaks of communities of faith in ways that allude to the fact that they are distinct cultural contexts for formation. In his afterward to the 2000 revised edition of this text, he states that in the quarter-century since the first edition, ethnicity and culture have become more important than race as social categories.\textsuperscript{219} While he does not define any of these terms, he states that “[e]thnicity and culture sometimes overlap, but the culture of the rich and the poor, the literate and the illiterate, the city and the country, the North and the South differentiate persons within any single ethnic group.”\textsuperscript{220}

Westerhoff’s arguments rest firmly on unnamed European-American norms that run throughout the history he traces and the present circumstances he outlines. This normalcy is most clearly evident in his reference to “ethnic churches” as those made up of congregants who are part of particular (non-dominant) cultures.\textsuperscript{221} By having a specific (and brief) section dedicated to speaking about “ethnic churches,” he suffers from the same short-sightedness as the board member at Burke Street who was puzzled as to why I wanted to include their congregation because, in his estimation, it had no culture. Similarly, Westerhoff fails to recognize that all congregations possess the fullness of culture and all those elements that are woven into it—including ethnicity, language, patterns of thinking, etc.

Westerhoff’s updated comments make a case for serious consideration about the ways that children’s spiritual and religious experiences—as well as the meaning they make of these

\textsuperscript{218} Westerhoff, \textit{Will Our Children Have Faith?}, 52.

\textsuperscript{219} Westerhoff, \textit{Will Our Children Have Faith?}, 132-3.

\textsuperscript{220} Westerhoff, \textit{Will Our Children Have Faith?}, 133.

\textsuperscript{221} Westerhoff, \textit{Will Our Children Have Faith?}, 10.
experiences—may differ by cultural context. Even in the first edition, he admits that increasing pluralism among communities leads to competition among different ways of life and understandings, and in the updated publication he names (but does not elaborate upon) the difficulty of maintaining “unity and common mind” while honouring diversity within a community. Despite helping to make the case for research into children’s spirituality and theology that seriously considers culture (as I attempt to do), his text exemplifies those within the field that make passing references to culture without offering critical attention to this topic.

Culture in Context

Some scholars give more concerted attention to culture by studying children’s spirituality and theology within a particular cultural context (often a culture based on a shared national or

\[222\] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 12.

\[223\] Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?*, 133.
geographic context), rather than across different cultures and in contexts of cultural diversity.\(^{224}\)

A notable example of a study within this category is Martin Ubani and Kirsi Tirri’s research into the perceptions of spirituality and religion among preadolescents (12 or 13 years old) in Helsinki, Finland.\(^{225}\) Perceiving that the majority of research into the relationship between spirituality and religion has been theoretical and philosophical, these scholars wished to add empirical data to this discussion.\(^{226}\) To do so, they studied 101 students in grade 6 (12 or 13 years old) at a school for higher-achieving children, asking what meanings these Finish students attribute to spirituality and religion and what differences exist between their understandings of these concepts.\(^{227}\) Their research generated “over 700 written opinions on the concepts of religions and spirituality.”\(^{228}\) After asking groups of

---


\(^{226}\) Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 357.

\(^{227}\) Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 358, 361.

\(^{228}\) Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 357.
students to brainstorm ideas surrounding religion and spirituality (a task offered in an English handbook for religious education\textsuperscript{229}), Ubani and Tirri grouped responses into three broad categories: the institutional dimension, the supernatural dimension, and the humanistic dimension. Under these three dimensions fell 11 categories of responses, most of which belonged to the first and third dimensions, that they analyzed in light of whether the children raised them in reference to religion or spirituality.

This study does not adequately consider cultural context in data analysis, even though Ubani and Tirri explicitly address culture by naming the particular context in which it rests. In their report, the authors note that in a “multicultural world,” spirituality can be expressed and understood in many ways and by many different kinds of people,\textsuperscript{230} and they provide important background information about the cultural context of the children in their research, particularly religious education classes in the Finnish public school system.\textsuperscript{231} Yet while sharing the results of their research, Ubani and Tirri do not place the particularities of the culture of contemporary Finland at the fore of their analysis, instead tending to address in a more broad and a-cultural approach the words that these young people ascribe as important for their understandings of spirituality and religion. For example, while the authors refer to how the grade 6 religious education program and predominance of Lutheranism in Finland may have contributed to the children’s perceptions of religion and spirituality,\textsuperscript{232} much of their analysis ignores the broader cultural context in which these children participate.

\textsuperscript{229} J. Hammond et al., \textit{New Methods in Religious Education Teaching: An Experimental Approach} (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1990).

\textsuperscript{230} Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 358.

\textsuperscript{231} Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 360.

\textsuperscript{232} Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 367, 368.
Additionally, the whole of this study is problematized by a lack of critical consideration of the fact that, as the authors admit, the term “spirituality is all but absent from the Finnish religious education curriculum, and the single time it makes an appearance its counterpart in the Finnish translation is “religious.” Thus, their use of an English-based assignment to inquire about children’s perceptions of religion and spirituality seems to add a degree of confusion based on the sheer fact that the major terms (religion and spirituality) do not clearly translate into a Finnish cultural context.

By failing to consider the dynamics of culture, Ubani and Tirri’s findings are posed in an a-cultural way, which allows the dominant (educated, English-speaking, metropolitan, Lutheran-based) culture to dictate and direct the conversation. Although they admit that “[i]n a pluralistic world it is important to study how different populations perceive religion and spirituality,” they failed to take their own advice by neglecting to attend to a cultural analysis of their findings. All this leads one to wonder if perhaps their stated purpose—“to investigate the meanings given to the concepts of religion and spirituality by Finnish Grade 6 students”—should be rewritten as “to investigate the meanings given to the concepts of religion and spirituality by English-speaking Grade 6 students who happen to be Finnish,” which better reflects that lack of attention to the cultural contexts of these students in their analysis.

This study by Ubani and Tirri is exemplary among those that explore children’s spirituality and theology within a particular cultural context, but do not adequately consider

---

233 Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 368.

234 Ubani and Tirri, “Finnish Pre-Adolescents,” 368.
culture in the analysis and interpretation of research findings. Had they prioritized culture, Ubani and Tirri could have shed new light on their findings. For example, they could interpret the fact that the children gave 65% more expressions to the term *religion* than they did for *spirituality* in light of the lack of usage of the latter term in everyday language in Finland.  

Although they make some brief connections between the knowledge their study generated and the cultural context of the child participants—such as correlating their associations with the term *religion* with the current themes of public religious education classes—the overall framework and interpretation of their study has very little to do with the culture with which it is connected.

**Considering Diversity and Difference**

While the previous subsection speaks of the small number of studies surrounding children’s spirituality and theology within a particular cultural context, here I examine the even fewer that address this topic across multiple cultural contexts and amidst contexts of cultural diversity.

Kelsey Moore, Victoria Talwar, and Sandra Bosacki’s qualitative research into perceptions of spirituality among a diverse group of children residing in a large Canadian

---


city exemplifies this third category. These researchers argue that the majority of studies into spirituality focus on practice, overlook spiritual experience, and—at least among Canadian studies—rely on assumptions and measures based on Christian ideologies. To respond to this, Moore conducted a study that examined perceptions of spirituality among children “across diverse religious and spiritual backgrounds within Canada—a pluralistic society.” Acknowledging that “differences in religious beliefs, practices and affiliations are often interwoven with other cultural features” and that religion and spirituality—and perceptions thereof—are embedded within social contexts, she conducted short interviews (in English) with 64 children belonging to a range of ethnic groups and religious traditions within a single Canadian city. The authors state that a primary goal was to “explore the spiritual experiences of children from different cultural, religious, and spiritual orientations.” As such, the children who participated came from a broad range of ethnic backgrounds and religious affiliations—as well as no religious affiliation. Moore’s analysis of the data generated from this study highlight a number of themes that emerged from the children’s narratives and ideas that were shared across a wide spectrum of this diverse group of children. The six broad themes the authors identify are: positive feelings during prayer, the location of God, perceptions of God as a helper, viewing God as a listener, the human soul

---

237 Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki, “Canadian Children’s Perceptions.”

238 Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki, “Canadian Children’s Perceptions,” 217, 221.

239 Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki, “Canadian Children’s Perceptions,” 222.


242 Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki, “Canadian Children’s Perceptions,” 222.
and spirit, and identifying God as a comforter. In the end, they argue that research needs to be conducted in order to formulate measures of spirituality that consider and reflect “the diversity and breadth of children’s spiritual beliefs within a multicultural context.”

These authors overlook culture and diversity in the analysis of Moore’s findings. Although they name religious affiliation and, to a lesser degree, ethnicity as the most significant markers of cultural diversity among participating children and they design and carry out the study with these distinctive aspects of culture in mind, their analysis is solely focused on the generation of themes that were held in common among this diverse group of children. After explaining each theme, they include two or three quotes by various children that substantiate their findings, and are careful to include the religious affiliation and ethnic heritage of the quoted child. Yet there is little reason for having these identifying features, as they fail to interpret the theme and, more specifically, these quotes in light of these cultural features of the children. Any differences or distinctive features of the children’s perceptions that may be related to their religious or ethnic traditions are omitted from the authors’ discussion, completely glossing over the “diverse views” that they name in the subtitle of this essay. Despite their admission that “[d]efinitions of religion and spirituality are continuously evolving and may be culturally dependent,” the authors make no headway in identifying how this may be so, leaving this task to future studies such as the one I conducted.

The research of Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki is one example of the handful of studies that consider children’s spirituality and theology in multiple cultural contexts and amidst

---

244 Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki, “Canadian Children’s Perceptions,” 232.
contexts of diversity. While scholarship within this category considers culture with more intentionality and complexity than that of categories previously discussed, such studies remain limited by a lack of more critical attention to how children’s spiritual and theological lives are bound up with culture. It is such attention that forms the basis for the fourth and final category I will outline.

Culture Matters

The final way that researchers consider culture in relation to children’s spirituality and theology is through critical attention to the importance of issues surrounding culture.246 This landscape is sparsely populated, but one scholar who exemplifies it both through theoretical and ethnographic research is Joyce Ann Mercer.247

Throughout her book *Welcoming Children*, Mercer keeps a keen watch on surrounding cultural contexts as she explores how to construct a “child-affirming church and theology.”248 Drawing from Pierre Bourdieu’s position that practices form and are shaped by larger *habitus*, or social contexts,249 she assesses how a capitalist consumer society affects practices and beliefs relating to children’s religious education within Christian communities.

---


249 Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 29. *Habitus* are complex milieu made up of elements from multiple cultures, communities, and social groups whose interactions form a way of life into which people are socialized.
of faith.\textsuperscript{250} For example, an assumption that undergirds her book is that mainline churches have often unintentionally adopted practices and beliefs surrounding consumption that affect their ministry with children—and ministry in general.\textsuperscript{251} She writes, “this method will lead me to examine the larger ‘habitus’ in which belief and practice take shape—that wider social and cultural space within which people experience and learn a way of life.”\textsuperscript{252} Unlike Westerhoff and Hay and Nye, who make reference to but do not adequately explore the formative power of culture, Mercer chooses a methodology that seriously considers cultural context and investigates how culture shapes different elements of Christian belief and practice, including perspectives of children and childhood. In fact, she argues that \textit{habitus} is not simply a one-dimensional social context at play in this formative process, but that children—and all human beings, in fact—exist “in multiple and often competing communities exercising formative, shaping influences of the child’s identity.”\textsuperscript{253} Furthermore, these various cultures—or \textit{habitus}, to use her language—vie for formative influence and compete for control of cultural reproduction, which occurs as dominant groups, able to disguise the power relations in such impositions of cultural arbitreries, thereby set the agenda for what other groups aspire to as they seek to alter their status and power positions. In effect, a particular way of doing things comes to be seen as commonsensical, natural, and self-evident.\textsuperscript{254}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{250} Mercer, \textit{Welcoming Children}, 31-2.
\item \textsuperscript{251} Mercer, \textit{Welcoming Children}, 32-6.
\item \textsuperscript{252} Mercer, \textit{Welcoming Children}, 29.
\item \textsuperscript{253} Mercer, \textit{Welcoming Children}, 174.
\item \textsuperscript{254} Mercer, \textit{Welcoming Children}, 98.
\end{itemize}
In this careful attention to the formative power of *habitus*, Mercer sets the stage for considering children’s spirituality and theology in light of a more robust and complex understanding of culture and context.

Through her leadership of the “Children in Congregations” study, Mercer engages in ethnographic research that grounds her theories in the lived realities of faith communities.255 Over nine months, her research team spent between twelve and fifteen hours per week at one of three Presbyterian (U.S.A.) congregations in the San Francisco Bay area, each of which was “distinctive from the other two in terms of size, socio-economic and demographic situation, and theological orientation.”256 Their primary aim was to study congregational practices that nurture children’s faith.257 While not using this terminology, Mercer perceives each congregation to be a distinct cultural context, a site where particular practices are shared among parties as they “create ‘webs of meaning’ and action that form a more comprehensive matrix.”258 She and her colleagues describe each congregation in detail, paying attention to aspects of its history, demographic location, and congregational practices, which weave together to create a unique cultural tapestry. After describing a congregation, they identify and analyze a contextual practice that this congregation engages in for nurturing faith in children.

Mercer’s assumptions about culture demonstrate a more broad and complex understanding than those of scholars described above, one that in many ways aligns with the

---

255 Mercer, Matthews, and Walz, “Children in Congregations.”
assumptions surrounding culture that I laid out in the introduction. For one thing, she holds that the relationship between a culture and its individual members is mutually influential, for not only do congregations shape children, but children also shape congregations.\textsuperscript{259} She also assumes that cultures do not necessarily contain internal consensus, for she admits that within congregations, the experience of and meaning ascribed to practices will vary among members,\textsuperscript{260} and she states that shared practices are sites of resistance.\textsuperscript{261} Furthermore, Mercer reveals a complex and fluid understanding of culture in her thoughts surrounding the multiplicity of communities that are operative in the lives of individuals and the competitive nature of cultural influence. This is also evident in her depiction of each congregation in the “Children in Congregations” study as a distinct culture with attributes shared not only among the congregations, but also among their broader social contexts. Mercer’s critical attention to culture, both theoretically and practically, makes her research unique among the landscape of children’s spirituality and theology.

**Critiquing Children’s Spirituality and Theology**

The ideas and interpretations generated through the ethnographic fieldwork I undertook offer particular points of critique to the field of children’s spirituality and theology. By turning the tables on the field in this way, I create a new interpretive lens that brings into focus three criticisms: that scholars do well to pay attention to the processes of children’s theological meaning-making and not only products; that they need to consider the communal nature of

\textsuperscript{259} Mercer, Matthews, and Walz, “Children in Congregations,” 250.

\textsuperscript{260} Mercer, Matthews, and Walz, “Children in Congregations,” 251.

\textsuperscript{261} Mercer, Matthews, and Walz, “Children in Congregations,” 251.
children’s theologies; and that culture must be critically studied at every step of research into children’s spiritual and theological lives.

**Product and Process**

A significant amount of research into children's spirituality and theology involves a quest to learn about what children think—their theological and spiritual ideas surrounding all sorts of topics—at the expense of learning about *how* children make theological meaning in the first place. Take, for example, Ubani and Tirri’s study into how children in Finland understand religion and spirituality, or Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki’s research into the perceptions of spirituality held by a relatively diverse cross-section of children in Canada. Another recent example is a study by Pamela Caudill Ovwigho and Arnold Cole, who explored the meaning children make of aspects of their spiritual lives—such as their family, peers who don’t self-identify as people of faith, and experiences of Sunday school—and then used the children’s meaning to generate recommendations for ministry leaders and congregations.²⁶² Studies such as these, which aim to generate insight into the content of children’s theological and spiritual ideas, make up a significant portion of contemporary research in the field. Yet while they may open windows into *what* children think—their theological products—many of them fail to explore *how* children think, that is, the processes by which they generate their beliefs. For example, in her research into children’s views of the Sacrament of Reconciliation,

---

Jennifer Beste\textsuperscript{263} seems to overlook the fact that her young participants may be actively making meaning through their interviews with her. Although Beste’s analysis can be seen as evidence for seeing children as “active learners,” her focus on how children “express” themselves in interviews fails to acknowledge the active learning they are engaging in as they create meaning before her very eyes.\textsuperscript{264}

The children who participated in the research on which I have built this dissertation call scholars to study how children construct theological meaning by engaging in generative processes during the research process. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the children may have come to our interviews with pre-constructed and personalized theological ideas tucked under their arms, but they also generated theology right then and there through the interview process. Perhaps this was most evident among the children at Parkdale, who explored ideas and shared opinions as they created meaning in conversation with one another and with my assistant and me.

My discussions with children also allowed me to see ways that they processed and landed on ideas before stepping foot in the interview. For example, in my conversations with Ally, Ethan, Melissa, and Laura, four young members of Colkirk, I noticed that they each possessed a narrative approach to theology, which I fleshed out in chapter 5. By hearing, reflecting on, and telling stories about their experiences at their congregation, they were able to play with and hold particular ideas that they may not have made sense of in other ways.

Had I been focused solely on learning what these children believed, as is common among


some contemporary scholars of children’s spirituality and theology, I may have overlooked the fascinating ways that these young theologians had already processed and created the content of their theological ideas, as well as how they were doing so in that moment.

One of the most interesting dimensions of this critique is that the theological meaning that children make and the processes by which they make such meaning may yield very different insights into their inner lives. This was certainly the case among the children at Burke Street. During my first visit to this congregation, I noticed that both Stephen and Rebecca were Sunday school superstars, the children who Denise could always count on to answer her questions and, for the most part, could offer the responses this volunteer leader was looking for. Both children were willing to talk about their congregation and their ideas, and Stephen in particular displayed both eloquence and a degree of complexity as he shared his theological ideas with me. Yet Stephen and Rebecca both struggled when we pushed them to go deeper in their thinking, with the former going silent and the latter repeating ideas she had already shared, sometime word for word. While the content of their theological ideas seemed to showcase degrees of maturity and thoughtfulness, the processes for creating their own theology were weak and underdeveloped as compared to the ideas of which they spoke.

On the other hand, some children had a difficult time speaking about their theologies, but were engaged in rigorous processes through which they produced meaning—even if uncertain meaning. Nicholas was anything but a Sunday school superstar. He disliked going to Sunday school and at times it was challenging for me to get him to talk about his theological ideas at any length—the polar opposite of Stephen and Rebecca. Yet over halfway through our conversation, this boy began to tell me about the struggles he has to believe
some of the things he hears about in Sunday school and worship services at Burke Street. As I asked him to tell me more about why he believes some things that he hears but not others, he made meaning in a way that demonstrated a desire to engage in deep theological thinking as he formed his own parameters for discerning the level of truth among biblical stories. The content of Nicholas’ theological meaning-making may have been tenuous, but the means by which he generated meaning demonstrated a willingness to think deeply and wrestle with issues inherently wrapped in uncertainty, mystery, and wonder, such as the Resurrection.

Solo and Group Theology

A second critique raised by the participating children is that research into children's spirituality and theology needs to consider not just individual theology, but communal theology as well. Many of the studies mentioned earlier in this chapter—especially those in the second and third categories—rely on methods such as interviews, research activities, or surveys aimed at learning about the spiritual and theological lives of individual children. For example, in exploring perspectives of spirituality held among a diverse sample of Canadian children, Moore relied on brief interviews with children; although she does not explicitly state that she held interviews with individual children, her description of the study gives this impression.  

Another example is Elena Savina’s quest to learn about how Russian children give meaning to the concept of the soul. She conducted individual interviews with 148

---

265 Moore, Talwar, and Bosacki, “Canadian Children’s Perceptions,” 224.
randomly-selected public school children, asking each child a series of seventeen questions.\footnote{Savina, “Soul,” 56-7.}

The children on whom this dissertation relies demonstrate that theological meaning-making can be a highly collaborative and communal process. As mentioned in chapter 5, those children who were interviewed in pairs or small groups engaged in theological meaning-making through conversations with one another, challenging, affrming, and questioning one another’s ideas and perspectives on issues such as God, sin, and creation. Yet I also demonstrated that even those children who were interviewed individually at times generated theology through dialogue with me and, when present, my research assistant. In fact, such a conversational approach to theology was the most frequent and obvious commonality among the processes by which all children made theological meaning.

The collaborative and communal nature of the children’s theologies was most clearly evident among the five young participants from Parkdale. Not only did they engage in conversation as a key process by which they each generated theological thinking—as exemplified in the exchange between Enoch and Jacob in chapter 1—but at times I had a hunch that the meaning they generated was actually communal meaning, created collaboratively through discussion with one another. For example, during my conversation with Lizzy, Angela, and Grace, the three of them theologically riffed off of each other, finishing one another’s thoughts and responding to questions I posed to their peers. Such a communal theological process didn’t simply involve the mining of past experiences and
individual ideas; it was a shared and communal experience that unfolded in that very moment—and it must be interpreted as such.

These young theologians challenge scholars to study children’s theological meaning-making as a communal endeavour. They can not only be seen as solo performances, but also as jazz improvisation, a highly relational enterprise.267 Yes, each child brings her or his own particular ideas and questions and slants to the process of creating theology; but as they put their heads together new sounds are formed that cannot be heard fully apart from what their peers bring to the music. Theirs is a call for researchers to take seriously Nye’s finding that children’s spirituality is inherently relational,268 so it ought to be studied as such. To do any less would be to impose particular cultural norms surrounding epistemology on children—such as prizing the individual over the community—even though their approaches for making theological meaning may not fully fit such norms and assumptions.

Considering Culture at Every Stage

This brings us to the final critique that the child participants pose to the field of children’s spirituality and theology: culture needs to be critically attended to at every stage of research. As mentioned, Mercer’s research, in building on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, stands as a rare example of scholarship that carefully considers the role of culture in the organization and method of research as well as in the analysis of knowledge generated about the spiritual and theological lives of children. Yet many of the studies cited in the first three of the four


categories I describe earlier in this chapter ignore how culture is bound up with children’s meaning-making of theological and spiritual issues. For example, in bringing together independent studies in Canada and the United Kingdom, Sandra Bosacki and Cathy Ota wished to find answers to questions surrounding “the emotional, spiritual, and cultural aspects of preadolescent [9-11 years old] development.”269 After making a case for the necessity of research into how culture influences children’s perceptions of spirituality and their sense of self—which they name as a significant dimension of spirituality among older children—the authors interpret findings of their respective qualitative studies. While their studies were organized and carried out in ways that considered the cultural contexts in which they were being conducted (for example, by using “self-esteem” in interviews with Canadian children, who were accustomed to this term by both middle-school teachers and social studies curricula270), the authors neglected to consider the cultural dynamics at play within the knowledge generated by their research studies.

If, as I have demonstrated, children’s theologies are in many ways reflective of their broader cultural contexts (in the case of this dissertation, their congregational culture), then researchers cannot afford to ignore this at any stage of study. In particular, scholars like those cited above must engage culture in the analysis and interpretation of knowledge generated through qualitative and ethnographic studies. To do otherwise is to risk missing crucial meaning embedded in children’s theologies by relying on either a de-contextualized analysis

---

269 Bosacki and Ota, “Preadolescents’ Voices,” 204.
270 Bosacki and Ota, “Preadolescents’ Voices,” 213.
or one that is covertly rooted with the assumptions, norms, and epistemologies of the researcher.

This critique became especially clear through my interpretation of the interviews with the children from Colkirk and the narrative style of their theologies, which I explored in chapter 5. As I reviewed transcripts of my conversations with these four children, I had the sense that the stories they were telling were more than just sources of generating and means for conveying theological insights. I wondered if perhaps the stories were the very stuff of their theology. Yet I struggled to make sense of this emerging interpretation, for my preexisting assumptions surrounding theology caused me to see theology as inherently factual, that is, as something best expressed through propositions and arguments. If, for instance, someone was to ask me about what I learned from my research, I might respond with, “The theological meaning-making that children generate seems to be related in many ways to their congregational cultures.” This is a fact that can be proposed and debated based on the results of my ethnographic research.

The narrative nature of the theology of the children at Colkirk challenges this epistemological assumption. For these children, theology is inherently storied, and it needed to be interpreted in a manner that aligned with this reality. Thus, to more fully and accurately make sense of the theological meaning these children generated, I had to attempt to interpret them not through my own epistemological assumptions, but through those that they were offering to me. In such a paradigm shift (which I am only partially able to make), my response to the question about my research might consist not in an argument or thesis statement, but in telling a story about my time among these children and their congregations.
The story would not demand analysis or explanation, nor would it be a mere example or description of a particular idea. The story itself would be the response, one left open to those receiving it to do with it what they must.

Scholarship into children’s spirituality and theology must attend to culture at every stage of research—from organizing a study to conducting it, interpreting knowledge and communicating it to audiences. To honour and more accurately hear the voices of the children who participated in this research, I had to keep culture in my sights as I pieced together interpretive lenses that reflected their broader cultural contexts—in the case of the children from Colkirk, a narrative epistemology characteristic of Aboriginal knowledge. Yet such critical attention to culture is riddled with difficulties, for the field of children’s spirituality and theology developed from and rests on research and assumptions within western contexts. The theologies of these children are a call to action, a call to peer behind our embedded presuppositions and see the field through their eyes.

* * *

In this chapter, I have allowed the knowledge generated from my fieldwork to shed new light on the growing field of children’s spirituality and theology, an academic arena that tends to neglect issues of culture and cultural diversity. When interpreted in this way, three significant critiques emerge: a focus on the products of children’s theologies rather than processes; overlooking communal theologies for the sake of individual meaning-making; and a lack of

---
271 Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions of Knowledge.”
critical attention to culture at every stage of research, particularly analysis of findings.

Clearly, the knowledge created through this dissertation has significant implications for children’s spirituality and theology as an academic field of inquiry. But what implications does it hold for practitioners engaged in formation with children in congregations? What limitations does this research carry with it? And what questions for further research spring forth from it? It is to these matters that I turn in the next and final chapter.
This concluding chapter examines the limitations, questions, and implications that arise out of this dissertation. I begin by considering limitations of this research that are embedded in my use of particular methods and my power and positionality. Next I raise broad sets of questions that can be launched from this study, which surround different levels and experiences of congregational involvement among children, the effect of parents, the influences of multiple cultural contexts in children’s lives, and how theological meaning-making shifts and changes in children over time. I conclude with three significant implications that this dissertation raises for the practice of spiritual formation with children in congregations, which involve equipping children to engage in deep theological meaning-making, assessing congruence between broader congregational culture and formational practices with children, and offering children opportunities to speak theologically.

I began this dissertation by asking questions about how children generate theology in ways that reflect the particularities of their congregation’s culture, and how they draw from other experiences and ideas as they make theology their own. My search for adequate answers to such questions led me to pursue ethnographic research at congregations that self-identify culturally in styles and approaches that are distinct from one another.
This three-year process of formulating the study, participating in the lives of the congregations, and interpreting the data generated has been a deeply personal journey, one marked by challenges and blessings, laughter and sorrow. It has been a sacramental sojourn, one that has caused me to catch glimpses of God in the lives of the children and congregations that opened themselves to me. I resonate with Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that “the interview can be considered a sort of spiritual exercise that, through forgetfulness of self, aims at a true conversion of the way we look at other people in the ordinary circumstances of life.”272 These congregations have plunged me deep into the waters of their lives and I arise from them forever changed.

The geographical contexts in which I have resided during this journey have been intertwined with the research process. I began by dividing my time between a city of incredible cultural diversity and one that was becoming more pluralistic through a recent surge in immigration. Only weeks after completing my participation in the four congregations, I moved thousands of kilometres to Halifax, a small urban centre that is much more culturally homogenous than where I had been living for the past four or five years. Living here, in the city that houses the Canadian Museum of Immigration, I am continually struck by the irony of writing a dissertation about cultural diversity and difference in a place where such conversations are less common and given less priority. Without the obvious and everyday experiences of diversity that are impossible to escape in the cities from which I had moved, the culture of Halifax is one with deep historical roots embedded in a particular dominant culture. And yet here I sit in my top-floor apartment overlooking the west end of

Halifax, and I am reminded of the cultures that are swept under the rug by British-Canadian hegemony: the Acadian people who were exiled by the British in the Great Expulsion in the middle of the eighteenth century; the ongoing struggles of Black Nova Scotians who keep their stories of hope and survival alive against continued racism; the thousands of students who make their temporary homes in Halifax to study at one of the city’s six universities, and the generation of young adults who leave the province because of a lack of adequate employment opportunities.

By placing cultural diversity at the centre of my vision, I have been able to demonstrate that the content, sources, and methods of children’s theological meaning-making are in many ways reflective of the broader cultures of their congregations. Even so, they are not mirror images of their congregations, for they put their own unique touches on theology by generating it in ways that are particular to their own experiences, perceptions, and additional cultures in which they participate. This knowledge generated offers challenges to the United Church’s vision for becoming intercultural as well as research within the field of children’s spirituality and theology. But the influence does not end there; this study is pregnant with questions for further research and implications for the practice of ministry with children. Before outlining such questions and implications, it is imperative that I identify limitations of this dissertation.

**Limitations**

This dissertation is fraught with limitations that arise based on methods—especially the size, context, and demographics of the participants—as well as my own power and positionality.
These limitations, which are inherent to ethnographic research, are perhaps felt more strongly in this study, which engages children as the key participants and crosses cultural boundaries. In this section, I will unpack ways that the participants and I both give rise to research limitations.

The first set of limitations is related to research methods and, in particular, the nature of participant involvement. For one thing, this research is a practice of portraiture rather than a full congregational study. The time constraints and realities of the relationships with which I worked precluded any sort of in-depth and longitudinal research that could examine and interpret several aspects of these four congregations. Rather, what I offer are portraits, snapshots with camera lenses focused on the particular aspects of the participating congregations that are relevant to my central research questions.

Furthermore, the congregations and persons who participated in this research exist within the particularities of time and space; each congregation is located within the same broad region of the province, in urban, suburban, and rural communities, in neighbourhoods of diversity and relative homogeneity. Some congregations have roots spanning the better part of two centuries while others are younger than most of their members. And all of this research was undertaken in 2013 and 2014, when the participants were at particular stages on their faith journeys and congregations were undergoing specific shifts in various aspects of their ongoing lives. At a different time and in a different place, these congregations and persons therein may have expressed their theologies in very different ways, and even the theologies they expressed would likely have been distinct from those that I had the privilege of witnessing.
My decision to conduct all aspects of this research in English offers additional limitations related to methodology. Since each of the participants had excellent comprehension of the English language, it seemed appropriate to conduct this study in English so as to avoid the myriad of methodological challenges that arise when conducting research across multiple languages or in languages that are not one’s own. Nevertheless, there are still ways that language holds limitations over this research. Children, especially younger children like Jeremy and Jacob, often possess a limited vocabulary through which they can express themselves. This may be even more pronounced when it comes to theological language. In their national study of spirituality and religion among adolescents in the United States, Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton found that while teens may be astonishingly articulate about several subjects, when it comes to matters of faith, many of them struggle to put language to their views. This was especially true for mainline Protestant teens. This challenge may be compounded by the idiosyncrasies of language among children. Not only do their vocabularies differ, but so too do their grammar and use of words. This was particularly evident when Jeremy told me his grandfather has never visited Burke Street United Church. Seeing this as an opportunity to have Jeremy share about his congregation, I asked, “So if Grandpy said, ‘Jeremy, can you tell me about the church?’ what would you say?” Immediately the young boy responded, “Then I would say ‘Okay.’”

---


this instance, his incredibly literal use of language was quite different than what I had expected.

Aware of the challenges of language, I relied on drawing as an alternative form of communication, which in turn brings further limitations. Children can only create an image based on their aptitude for this expressive medium. The nineteen young participants expressed a wide range of artistic ability when it came to their drawings, some making simple pencil sketches that are as true-to-life as they could make them and others adding bursts of colour on the page as they drew fantastical and imaginative depictions of God. Children’s drawings are never perfect representations of their ideas. Therefore, I engaged all the children in discussion as they drew and/or after they completed their pictures in order to better understand what they were conveying to me through them. The process of drawing was often a means for having children begin to share their inner thoughts, for launching us into conversations that were firmly based on their ideas rather than mine. So not only is this method limited by artistic ability, but as it also relies on verbal communication, it is likewise limited by the children’s linguistic abilities to adequately convey their thoughts to me. In all these ways, language “barriers” between the children and me limit our ability to speak to one another about theological matters and my ability to interpret their words with complete accuracy.

Another set of limitations is related to my power and positionality. I have attempted to be cognizant of this at every stage of the research through practices of reflexivity, that is,

---

“the need and necessity for researchers to not only acknowledge but also examine their location and how that location permeates their inquiry at every level.”

One way that my position limits this research is through the power that I brought to it. Not only did I, as an adult, hold power in my relationship with the children, but social and cultural factors such as race, gender, and education bestowed me with power in my relationships with many of the adult participants as well. This power was not something that could be removed from the equation, nor could it be disguised or ignored. Rather, it was negotiated in many different ways with the various participating congregations and individuals. For example, in my interviews with children, I occupied particular de facto positions of power due to my age in relation to theirs. Yet I was able to attend to this by conducting the interviews in their congregations, where they were familiar members and I was an invited guest, and by responding to their thoughts with phrases and questions that continually gave them control over what we would discuss together. While at times I was able to divest myself of certain aspects of my power, particularly by taking on the role of the invited outsider, the far-reaching arms of power worked their way into every nook and cranny of this research.

---


Another way that my power and positionality limit this research is in my inconsistent relationship with participants. I had a prior relationship with at least one leader at each congregation—some through my involvement at Emmanuel College and others through a chance meeting at the United Church’s 2013 Behold! intercultural conference in Halifax. These gatekeepers graciously opened their communities to me, but the paths they asked me to take were quite different from one another. For example, as a predominantly White congregation, Burke Street had no hesitation with having me participate in their community based on the plan outlined in my dissertation and ethics proposals. Colkirk was a different story altogether. Since, as Rev. Martha told me, Aboriginal communities are the most researched in Canada yet benefit the least from the results, she and Arlene asked me to spend time building a relationship with the congregation and its children before they could feel good about participating in this project. In her words, “we put you through all kinds of hoops in order for you to get to this moment here, to this interview, so you would have a relationship with us.” Within each context, I took my cue from the local members, at times working with the congregation’s secretary to book a room one evening when a child would meet for an interview, and at other times enjoying conversation over curry soup after Sunday services. Such flexibility was necessary for me to build and maintain trust among the congregations. Yet such inconsistency surely played a role in shaping my interpretations. For example, I noticed that at times my emotional investment in the congregations that I had

---

281 Pranee Liamputtong writes about the importance of building trust, saying that it may take a considerable amount of time to build trust among research participants. She states that accepting invitations to share meals with participants is important to the building of trust, a statement that certainly rings true from my experience. Pranee Liamputtong, “Doing Research in a Cross-Cultural Context: Methodological and Ethical Challenges,” in Doing Cross-Cultural Research: Ethical and Methodological Perspectives, ed. Pranee Liamputtong (Netherlands: Springer, 2008).
come to know quite well made me feel like I had a stake in the well-being of their children. Additionally, the longer periods of time I spent at particular congregations gave me a much more complex and multifaceted sense of their culture.

The final aspect of my power and positionality that affects—and limits—this research consists of the biases I carried and developed along the way. At several times throughout the research, I noticed that my feelings toward the individuals and congregations were affecting my interviews and subsequent interpretations. For example, the intentional ways that Rev. Lynn includes children in nearly every aspect of life at Parkdale spoke directly to my strong personal bias for empowering young people in congregational worship. Worshipping with this community revived and restored my soul. Additionally, after spending months and months getting to know the folks at Colkirk, they came to hold a special place in my heart (and I suspect that I came to be an important part of their community as well, being written into a chapter of its life). More so than at any other point in the writing of this dissertation, I was overwhelmed with the task of writing chapter 4 in a way that represented the congregation accurately and in a positive light. I knew that many other studies portray Aboriginal communities inaccurately and in negative light, and I wanted to ensure that I interpreted my friends within this community in a manner that reflected what Shawn Wilson considers vital to Indigenous research paradigms:

rather than the goals of validity and reliability, research from an Indigenous paradigm should aim to be authentic and credible. By that I mean that the research must accurately reflect and build upon the relationships between the ideas and participants.

282 After completing the research and moving to Halifax, I received a hand-made card from Rev. Martha, Arlene, and the children, that said in big letters, “Thank you for everything.” A few months later I visited the congregation for Sunday worship on a trip from Halifax and was warmly greeted by the community. One elder even acknowledged my special relationship with the congregation by looking me in the eye and saying “Welcome home.”
The analysis must be true to the voices of all the participants and reflect an understanding of the topic that is shared by the researcher and participants alike.283

In several ways, the methods I chose for this study and the power and positionality I brought to it limit the interpretations I offer throughout. As much as I customized my method to my research question and the people who participated, the best that I—or any other researcher for that matter—can achieve is a partial glimpse into their religious and spiritual lives. To paraphrase Robert Coles, the child’s house is filled with many rooms.284 The most any of us can do is peer through a window.

Questions for Further Study

Although I began this dissertation research with a particular set of questions for which I sought answers, it has also proved itself pregnant with even more questions that identify pathways for further study. In this section I will discuss four sets of questions that serve as avenues for further inquiry.

Congregational Involvement

A first set of questions involves exploration into the effect of children’s involvement in congregations on their theological meaning-making. In chapter 3, I posited that the different congregational experiences that children at Burke Street engaged in—such as children who attend with great frequency and those who attend on occasion, or the older children who participate in Sunday school and the younger ones who are part of Godly Play—were related


to the ways they reflect the theological ethos of their congregation. I am curious, however, as to what could be learned about children’s theologies by placing this phenomenon at the centre of study. Thus, fascinating questions raised by this dissertation surround how and to what extent congregational involvement affects the degree to which and the ways that children reflect the theological ethos of their broader congregation.

While each of the children involved in this research was a participant in her or his congregation’s life, they were all involved with a great degree of variance, which offers avenues for further research. While this was most clear at Burke Street, it was evident at each site. The children at Messiah, for example, ranged from lifetime members to those who made the change to Messiah from a Roman Catholic parish only a few months earlier. And while, as I demonstrated, it is possible to interpret the theologies of all the children to find reflections of their congregation’s theology, had I framed this research differently, I could have generated interesting insights about how congregational involvement affects parallels between the theologies of children and their congregations. Such research could examine correlations between children’s theologies and not only the level of participation (such as the frequency with which children participate in their congregations), but also the type of involvement (such as worship services, Sunday school, service projects, vacation Bible school, or intergenerational activities). The knowledge generated by such research would offer fascinating insights into whether or not and how congregational involvement matters to the development of children’s theologies. It would also shed light on implications for how congregational leaders can invite children to participate in the life of congregations to foster the generation of theological insight.
Second, this dissertation raises interesting questions about the influence of parents on the production of theological knowledge in children. In summarizing the findings of the National Study of Youth and Religion, Smith and Denton argue that “the single most important social influence on the religious and spiritual lives of adolescents is their parents… [W]hen it comes to the religious outcomes of youth, parents and adults ‘will get what they are.’”

They also posit that a similar assertion can be made for religious communities, meaning that the more a congregation or another faith community invests in the lives of their teens, the more likely their teens are to make an investment in their faith. As is evidenced in this dissertation, children are indeed capable of reflecting—and in many ways do reflect—the faith espoused and practised by their broader congregation. But if what Smith and Denton argue about teenagers in the United States is at least partially true for children in Canada, then another set of questions arising from this dissertation revolves around parental influence in the lives of children’s faith: How do the theologies of parents—espoused and implied—influence those of their children? Does parental involvement in congregations (i.e., if one or both parents do not participate in a congregation) affect the degree to which children reflect their congregational theologies? What about when parental theologies and congregational theologies conflict with one another—how would this phenomenon be reflected in children’s theologies?

---


286 Reginald Bibby’s most recent research into adolescents in Canada demonstrates that the shifts in religious affiliation and participation are, in fact, not so much the result of adolescents, but of their parents’ generation. One can surmise that Canadian adolescents, like their counterparts to the south, are following their parents’ examples. Reginald W. Bibby with Sarah Russell and Ron Rolheiser, *The Emerging Millennials: How Canada’s Newest Generation is Responding to Change and Choice* (Lethbridge, AB: Project Canada, 2009).
Although I cannot make any grounded assertions about parental involvement from this study since the methods I employed were not organized with such issues in mind, it opens up a number of avenues for research into this topic. For example, one could conduct a similar ethnographic study yet make the addition of having interviews with parents of the child participants and talking with the children about their perceptions of the faith lives of their parents and families. This would add a further layer of complexity and insight into the theologies of children, which could lead to knowledge about how family acts as a cultural context in which children’s theological ideas and practices take shape.

Multiple Cultures

A third set of questions revolves around the fact that children live and participate in multiple cultural contexts. Throughout this dissertation, I have held to the broad and multifaceted view of culture that I outlined in the introduction, one that admits, along with Mercer, that children exist and participate in multiple cultures that intermingle and even compete for formative influence. Using the knowledge generated in this research, further study could expand such knowledge by considering the multiple cultural contexts in which children exist. Such research could go far in answering questions such as: How do children draw not only from congregations, but also from the culture of social media, the broader cultures of their neighbourhoods and cities, and even other faith communities as they generate theology? To what degree do varying levels of involvement in multiple cultural contexts shape children’s

---

theological meaning-making? What subtle theological messages are embedded in non-congregational cultural contexts that are reflected in children’s theologies?

Further in-depth ethnographic studies could explore children from one congregation who participate in multiple additional cultural contexts. A series of interviews with children could be arranged, each of which focuses on a particular cultural context under investigation. Another avenue for further research could be to explore the phenomenon considered in chapter 2, in which children from a congregation belonging to one Christian tradition attend a school of another Christian tradition. Juxtaposing multiple cultural contexts in this way would surely lead to new learnings about the cultural nature of children’s theological meaning-making, which would in turn offer even more rigorous critiques of the United Church’s vision for becoming intercultural and of research within the field of children’s spirituality and theology.

The Long View

Finally, further research could engage in longitudinal studies in order to explore how children’s theological meaning-making changes as they grow older. The interpretations I offer in this dissertation rely on research that was conducted over a relatively brief period of time. Depending on the requests of and my relationships with the various congregations, my time within these communities varied from a few months to over a year. With this in mind, a final series of questions for further study centre on a shift toward longitudinal research: How do children’s theologies change over time? Do the ways they reflect and depart from the theological ethos of their congregation in the content, sources, and methods of theological
meaning-making shift as they pass through childhood and move into adolescence? Are there 
particular features of their theologies that are more salient at a particular stage of childhood? 
Do important life events—both planned and unexpected, both joyful and sorrowful—impact 
the ways their theologies change over time? And what of congregational cultures? As they 
shift and adapt over time, what impact do they have on children’s theologies?

The quest for answers to these sorts of questions requires research conducted over 
several years. One possible avenue for further study would be to select a number of questions 
and/or exercises (such as drawing) meant to investigate the theological lives of children that 
could then be utilized in a series of interviews with a set of children who meet for group or 
individual interviews at various points in childhood (for example, when they are six, nine, 
and twelve). Alternatively, a small group of children could participate in a study that has a 
researcher meeting with them every year from the ages of six to thirteen. Such longitudinal 
studies certainly give rise to a number of challenges (such as relocation of the children, 
financial viability, shifts in congregational involvement, etc.), but when organized with these 
challenges in mind, they could lead to ground-breaking insights into how children do 
theology in light of congregational culture as they and their congregations both change over 
the years.

**Implications**

In this, the final section of this dissertation, I propose three broad implications for 
congregational practices with children. Chapters 6 and 7 have already raised implications for 
two fields of inquiry that have influenced this research. But what of those for practitioners
engaged in the spiritual formation and religious education of children? What insights does this research offer for congregations, clergy, and practitioners who are seeking to better engage and form children in communities of faith? There are at least three implications that this research gives rise to: helping children develop capacities for engaging in theological meaning-making; examining consistency between congregational culture and formational practices with children; and giving children opportunities to speak openly about their theologies.

**Equipping for Theological Meaning-Making**

First, congregations and ministry practitioners do well to put primary emphasis on equipping children to make their own theological meaning. In the world of children’s ministry, there is a tendency for resources, programs, and curricula to focus on giving children particular nuggets of theological content. For example, Group Publishing’s VBS curriculum, which is incredibly popular among evangelical congregations but also used in mainline Protestant congregations, seeks to use games, crafts, and skits to impart a particular “Bible point” to the children each day, such as “God has the power to provide” and “God has the power to forgive.” Programs such as this are designed to help children learn a pre-determined point or fact.

The interpretations of children’s theologies that I offer in the preceding chapters challenge this instructional style of children’s ministry. Each of the participating children demonstrated that theology is not simply something that children learn through what Paulo
Freire names as a “banking” approach to education. Rather, theology is produced as they engage in and reflect on their congregations, life experiences, and theological ideas shared by others in their lives. Yet at some congregations, children’s ministry seemed to focus on imparting specific points or facts to children, and within these congregations children struggled to engage in their own processes of generating theology. Children’s ministry can move away from attempts to teach children particular facts or points and toward approaches that provide children with tools for and practice in active theological reflection. Such resources can include a wide variety of sources for theology (such as films, music, stories, etc.) and a number of different approaches (such as storytelling and conversation) for creating theology.

Congregational Congruency

Second, this research calls practitioners to more closely examine their curricula and models for children’s ministry—whether Sunday school, VBS, or other initiatives—in light of their broader congregational culture. There were moments during the research process when I perceived congregations to be engaging in children’s formation in a way that contradicted—or even undermined—the broader cultural ethos of their community. This was most clearly evident at Burke Street, where their model of Sunday school promoted a style of theology that was different than that which the leaders espoused as vital to the wider congregation. Perhaps this phenomenon is intertwined with the Burke Street’s identity as a “mainstream” (read: White) United Church congregation. Since they struggled to articulate

---

what makes their congregational culture distinct, maybe these leaders are like fish in water whose surrounding culture and theological ethos are implicit and unchecked. Contrasting this situation is Messiah, a congregation keenly aware of its position as a Ghanaian community on Canadian soil. With a clearer vision for how their culture guides their community, Messiah’s leaders place a great deal of energy on questions surrounding how to adapt programs and curriculum to make them fit their unique context.

It is incumbent on leaders, especially among congregations that self-identify as part of the dominant surrounding culture, to become researchers in their own communities and study the multifaceted and complex culture of the entire congregation. Inconsistencies between children’s ministry and the wider congregation do not create a terribly hospitable environment in which children can flourish as young theologians. Armed with a thick description of their congregation, practitioners can become better equipped to examine their existing and proposed ministries with children and adapt them to better reflect their wider community. Such examinations need to consider not only the explicit curriculum, that is, the overt and clearly-stated ideas and practices, but also the covert, often unintentional messages of the implicit curriculum, and even the null curriculum, which is the information conveyed through what is not taught or practised. This can go a long way in helping practitioners adapt their initiatives to better align with those of the whole congregation. This is not to say, of course, that this is a one-way street. The broader congregation can—and I believe should—be changed by the presence of children as well. But no party—children’s ministry or the

wider faith community—can shift in light of one another unless there is clarity as to the culture of both.

Something to Talk About

Finally, since I have shown that a primary means through which these nineteen children engaged in theological meaning-making is conversation, congregations should provide children with opportunities to talk about their views. Whether with one another or with me, being able to discuss their views and experiences gave the children who participated in this research space to reflect and build theology for themselves. Unfortunately, as I mentioned in chapter 5, several of the young participants expressed that they do not often speak about their deep theological ideas and experiences with others. And even among those who have shared with others, some, such as Dawn, told me that their thoughts were not always taken seriously. Again, this finding aligns with those of Smith and Denton. Writing about teens in the U.S., they stated that “it was our distinct sense that for many of the teens we interviewed, our interview was the first time that any adult had ever asked them what they believed and how it mattered in their life.”

If children generate theology by talking it through with trusted companions, then congregations ought to be placing primary emphasis on providing opportunities for them to do just this.

There are countless possibilities that could be unleashed if congregational leaders encouraged children not only to learn stories and hear theology, but to tell their own stories and talk about their beliefs together. At times, this could mean that adults model processes of

---

290 Smith with Denton, Soul Searching, 133. Emphasis original.
generating theology by talking about their own ideas and experiences, while in other instances they can make space for children to talk with one another about their theological presuppositions. Further still, adults can do what I did in this study, simply meeting with children to ask them their opinions about what matters to them.

As adults engage in such conversational practices with children, they would do well to remember a few ground rules that emerge from this research. First, we must take children’s thoughts seriously and be careful not to judge their theologies as more or less correct, as Dawn’s experience of feeling unheard and disbelieved caused her to keep subsequent faith experiences to herself. Second, we must be cautious to trust that, even if it is difficult to perceive, children will make their own theological connections and insights, so we need not push our own tendencies and assumptions onto them. Third, sometimes children need a bit of encouragement to engage in a conversational approach to the production of theology. The fact that Laura and Melissa were very quiet at the outset of our interview yet afterwards asked to talk with me more reminds us that children may not dive right into the process of doing theology and they may simply need some time to become comfortable with it. Children’s ministry leaders—and parents too!—do not need seminary degrees or the best curriculum to help children make theological meaning. All we need is a listening ear… and maybe a few questions to get things rolling.
**TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT**
An Exploration of Children and Culture in the United Church of Canada

**INVESTIGATOR INFORMATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title (e.g., Dr., Ms., etc.): Mr.</th>
<th>Name: David Csinos</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department (or organization if not affiliated with U of T): Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing address:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional e-mail:</td>
<td><a href="mailto:dave.csinos@mail.utoronto.ca">dave.csinos@mail.utoronto.ca</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Level of Project:**
Student Research: Doctoral [✓] Masters [ ]
Post-Doctoral Research [ ] Visiting professor/researcher [ ] Course Based [ ]
CBR/CBPR [ ] Other [ ] (specify: )

**Faculty Supervisor/Sponsor:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title: Dr.</th>
<th>Name: Pamela Couture (supervisor) and Natalie Wigg-Stevenson (acting supervisor, May 2013 – August 2014)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department (or organization if not affiliated with U of T): Emmanuel College, Toronto School of Theology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing address: Pamela Couture, Emmanuel College, 75 Queen’s Park Crescent, Toronto, Ontario, M5S 1K7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone: Dr. Couture: 416-585-4588</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Wigg-Stevenson: 416-585-4548</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional e-mail: <a href="mailto:pamela.couture@utoronto.ca">pamela.couture@utoronto.ca</a> <a href="mailto:natalie.wigg@utoronto.ca">natalie.wigg@utoronto.ca</a></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Co-Investigators:**
Are co-investigators involved? Yes [ ] No [x]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title:</th>
<th>Name:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department (or organization if not affiliated with U of T):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mailing address:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone:</td>
<td>Institutional e-mail:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Title: 
Name: 
Department (or organization if not affiliated with U of T): 
Mailing address: 
Phone: 
Institutional e-mail: 

Please append additional pages with co-investigators’ names if necessary.

3. UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD:

Health Sciences □ Social Sciences, Humanities and Education ☒ HIV/AIDS □

To determine which Research Ethics Board (REB) your protocol should be submitted, please consult: http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers-administrators/ethics/human/boards-committees/.

4. LOCATION(S) WHERE THE RESEARCH WILL BE CONDUCTED:

If the research is to be conducted at a site requiring administrative approval/consent (e.g., in a school), please include all administrative consent letters. It is the responsibility of the researcher to determine what other means of approval are required, and to obtain approval prior to starting the project.

University of Toronto □
Hospital □ specify site(s)
School board or community agency □ specify site(s)
Community within the GTA ☒ specify site(s)
International □ specify site(s)
Other ☒ specify site(s) United Church of Canada Congregations

The University of Toronto has an agreement with the Toronto Academic Health Sciences Network (TAHSN) hospitals regarding ethics review of hospital-based research where the University plays a peripheral role. Based on this agreement, certain hospital-based research may not require ethics review at the University of Toronto. If your research is based at a TAHSN hospital please consult the following document to determine whether or not your research requires review at the University of Toronto, http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers-administrators/ethics/human/at-a-glance/where-to-apply-tahsn-institutions/.

5. OTHER RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL(S)

(a) Does the research involve another institution or site? Yes ☒ No □
(b) Has any other REB approved this project? Yes □ No ☒
If Yes, please provide a copy of the approval letter upon submission of this application.
If No, will any other REB be asked for approval?
Yes □ (please specify which REB) No ☒
Please note that REB approvals from other sites must be submitted to the ORE at U of T

6. FUNDING OF THIS PROJECT

(a)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Funding Status</th>
<th>Source and Type</th>
<th>Details</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funded □</td>
<td>Agency:</td>
<td>Fund #: 4 (6 digits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency:</td>
<td>Fund #: 4 (6 digits)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied for funding □</td>
<td>Agency:</td>
<td>Submission date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Agency:</td>
<td>Submission date:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Unfunded ☒
If unfunded, please explain why no funding is needed: All research will be conducted in the area of [Redacted], so no travel expenses are necessary. Because I have conducted qualitative research of this nature in the past, I already own all necessary equipment, such as audio recording devices.
(b) If one protocol is to cover more than one grant, please include all fund numbers:

7. CONTRACTS

Is this research to be carried out as a contract? Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, is there a University of Toronto funding or non-funded agreement associated with the research? Yes ☐ No ☒

If Yes, please append a copy of the agreement with this application.

Is there any aspect of the contract that could put any member of the research team in a potential conflict of interest? Yes ☐ No ☒

If yes, please elaborate under #10.

8. PROJECT START AND END DATES

Estimated start date for the component of this project that involves human participants or data: June 2013
Estimated completion date of involvement of human participants or data for this project: April 2014

9. SCHOLARLY REVIEW:

(Please note: for submissions to the HIV REB from community investigators, scientific review is a pre-requisite for ethics review. If your study is unfunded, please contact the OHTN to arrange a scientific review prior to completing your ethics submission.)

(a) Please check one:

I. ☒ The research has undergone scholarly review by thesis committee, departmental review committee, peer review committee or some other equivalent (Specify review type – e.g., departmental research committee, supervisor, CIHR, SSHRC, OHTN, etc.): Supervisory committee

II. ☐ The research will undergo scholarly review prior to funding (Specify review committee – e.g., departmental research committee, SSHRC, CIHR peer-review committee, etc.): Departmental research committee

III. ☐ The research will not undergo scholarly review (Please note that all research greater than minimal risk requires scholarly review)

(b) If box I or II above was checked, please specify if:

☒ The review was/will be specific to this protocol

☐ The review was/will be part of a larger grant

10. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

(a) Will the researcher(s), members of the research team, and/or their partners or immediate family members:

(i) Receive any personal benefits (e.g., financial benefit such as remuneration, intellectual property rights, rights of employment, consultancies, board membership, share ownership, stock options, etc.) as a result of or in connection with this study? Yes ☐ No ☒

(ii) If Yes, please describe the benefits below. (Do not include conference and travel expense coverage, or other benefits which are considered standard for the conduct of research.)
(b) Describe any restrictions regarding access to or disclosure of information (during or at the end of the study) that have been placed on the investigator(s). These restrictions include controls placed by the sponsor, funding body, advisory or steering committee.

N/A

(c) Where relevant, please explain any pre-existing relationship between the researcher(s) and the researched (e.g., instructor-student; manager-employee; clinician-patient; minister-congregant). Please pay special attention to relationships in which there may be a power differential — actual or perceived.

The minister of [__________________________], an Aboriginal congregation on the [__________________________] reserve, is [__________________________]. This prior relationship is a necessary requirement for me to pursue research at this congregation.

(d) Please describe the decision-making processes for collaborative research studies. If Terms of Reference exist, attach them. Collaborative research studies include those where a number of sites (e.g. other universities, non-TAHSN hospitals, etc.) are involved, as well as those that involve community agencies.

All decisions regarding this research study will be made by me in consultation with leaders of participating congregations. Throughout the study, I will strive to make decisions that are respectful of participants and congregations and are made and communicated in respectful ways.

SECTION B – SUMMARY OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

11. RATIONALE

Describe the purpose and scholarly rationale for the proposed project. State the hypotheses/research questions to be examined. The rationale for doing the study must be clear. Please include references in this section.

How do children make theological meaning in different cultural contexts? It is this broad question that I wish to explore in my doctoral dissertation. Within this question lie a number of sub-questions: Do differences exist in how children make theological meaning in congregations of different cultural contexts? If so, in what ways does this meaning differ? Do differences extend beyond particularities of children’s interpretations of a certain topic or story (for example, the meaning of the crucifixion of Jesus or understandings of the account of Noah and the flood)? Do differences exist in the underlying structures of children’s theological understandings (such as the topics and ideas to which they ascribe importance, the manners by which they form and articulate theological knowledge, and the sources they use for generating such knowledge) among children who attend churches of different cultural compositions? Does the "cultural grammar" of a congregation appear in children’s theological understandings? How are the theological ideas of children in different cultural contexts analogous to one another? Are these similarities nuanced by the particularities of the cultures of their congregations?

In recent decades, there has been a surge in academic scholarship in the field of childhood studies that focuses on the spirituality of children and theologies of childhood. With the launch of resources and organizations such as the International Journal of Children's Spirituality in 1996, the International Conference on Children's Spirituality in 2000, the Society for Children's Spirituality: Christian Perspectives in 2003, and the Childhood Studies and Religion Group at the American Academy of Religion in 2003, scholars and theologians have made concerted efforts toward researching children’s spirituality and studying children and childhood from theological perspectives.

However, little attention has been paid to culture within children’s spirituality and theologies of childhood and even less attention has been given to issues of cultural difference. Many key texts present research and theories from Euro-American and British perspectives and neglect cultural context and distinctiveness (see,
for example, Bunge 2001, Miller-McLemore 2003) and several scholars who do refer to culture in relation to children’s spirituality and theology do so only in passing and do not address the differences by which culture shapes children’s spiritual experiences and theological meaning making. For example, in his well-known text, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (2012), Westerhoff states that ethnicity and diversity are vital to children’s spiritual formation in western society in the twenty-first century, but he does not engage in serious consideration about how they impact children’s spiritual and religious lives. Additionally, the few scholars who do address culture tend to focus on children’s spirituality and theology in a particular cultural context rather than across different cultures and in contexts of cultural difference. For example, Tolbert and Brownlee (2008) use a case study approach to explore how activities in African American churches promote spiritual growth in children. However, they overlook ways in which these activities (such as Bible classes and after-school tutoring programs) are used to impart a particular cultural identity; rather, their study focuses on activities in African American churches, but does not explore the relationship of these activities to the cultural distinctives of these churches or its children.

In response to the lack of scholarship regarding culture and cultural diversity in children’s spirituality and theology, my dissertation will offer an original contribution as I engage in qualitative research to explore children’s theological meaning making in congregations of different cultural compositions in Canada. At its thirty-ninth General Council, the United Church of Canada put forth “A Transformative Vision of the United Church of Canada” (2006), a document outlining a commitment to becoming an intercultural church. As it is used in this document, *intercultural* refers to “mutually reciprocal relationships among and between cultures” (137). I will seek to learn about how children within this denomination make theological meaning by conducting research with approximately 25 children who are part of one of five congregations (one congregation will serve as a pilot project through which I can test my methodology and predictions before embarking on further field research). The cultural composition of these congregations will be distinct from one another, with three congregations consisting of cultural groups identified by the United Church in its “Transformative Vision” (2006)—Aboriginal, ethnic minority, and ethnic majority—and one congregation that is culturally diverse. The cultural composition of the pilot congregation may fall within any one of these categories. Through this qualitative research, I will seek to learn about how children make theological meaning in different cultural contexts.

References


12. METHODS

(a) Please describe all formal and informal procedures to be used. Describe the data to be collected, where and how they will be obtained and how they will be analyzed.

I will conduct research in five United Church of Canada congregations (one of which will be a pilot congregation), each of which will represent a cultural composition identified by the United Church’s commitment to becoming intercultural (Executive of the General Council 2006)—ethnic minority, ethnic majority, Aboriginal—and one that is culturally diverse. All congregations will be located in [location].
Although research with each congregation will be tailored to fit its particular circumstances and variables—such as participants’ schedules, congregational events, and cultural protocol—I will conduct research using the following guidelines:

**Observation.** Aided by a research assistant, I will begin research at each location by being a participant-observer in the church’s religious education program for children. The goal of this is threefold. First, it will allow me to gain a sense of how culture implicitly and explicitly shapes the congregation’s current ministry with children. Second, acting as participant-observers will help the children to become familiar with me and my research assistant and see us in a “softened role” (Clark 2011) so that when we interview child participants, we will have already built a degree of rapport with them (Liamputtong 2010, 102). Third, it will allow me to reciprocate the assistance of the congregation in my research by offering it the presence of two adult leaders at their programs. After completing all interviews with children and conducting a focus group with particular adults in the congregation, my assistant and I will once again act as participant-observers in the congregation’s religious education program for children (however, this may not be possible if said program is time-limited, such as a week-long vacation Bible school). The data generated throughout the interviews and focus group will assist me in observing with deeper awareness the extent to which the cultural composition of the congregation affects the congregation’s ministry initiatives with children. In both of these visits, my assistant and I will lead a short exercise that is part of the church’s regular religious education programming in order to have a chance for the children to get to know us within the regular flow of their ministry programs.

**Semi-structured focus groups with relevant adults.** At each congregation, I will conduct one semi-structured focus group conversation with clergy, staff, lay leaders, and parents involved in congregational leadership and/or ministry with children. Focus groups may range in size from four to six participants depending on the location and size of the congregation. Using open-ended questions (Appendix F), I will engage focus group participants in conversation about their perceptions of the church and its ministry with children in order to generate insight about the culture(s) of the congregation and its ministry with children as well as the ways in which participants make meaning of culture. By answering and discussing questions that I pose, focus group participants may share stories and play off one another’s responses and narratives to construct a group story or picture of their congregation, one that may be made up of multiple perspectives interacting and working alongside one another (Thumma 1998, 207). Additionally, these focus groups will allow me to observe interpersonal dynamics among participants, such as who speaks often and who does not seem to speak, who prompts others to speak and who speaks without prompting, where participants focus their attention when speaking and listening, and who seems to correct or challenge the stories and thoughts of others.

**Interviews with children.** The heart of my field research will be interviews with approximately five children at each congregation. These interviews may be conducted individually or in small groups of children, depending on the context and culture of the congregation. I will begin each interview (about one hour in length) by explaining the purpose of my research and how the child can help me, as Coles did in his conversations with children (Coles 1990), which will also allow me to gain the child’s verbal assent to participate. However, so the children do not become biased in their comments, I will state that I want to learn about their views of God generally rather than naming culture as the key variable under investigation. Following this, I will ask the child to draw a picture of God. Not only does drawing build rapport between a child and a researcher, but it also provides a means for conversing about a child’s experiences and perceptions (Clark 2011). According to Boyatzis and Newman (2004), children’s drawings provide two kinds of data: “one is the actual drawing itself, and the other is children’s verbalizations about the artwork produced while they are drawing and after they have finished drawing” (172-3). Thus, rather than acting as direct representations of children’s views, their drawings will springboard further discussion by allowing me to see what theological themes matter to the child and lead forth a conversation based on their drawings (Hood 2004). Throughout the interview, I will seek to give the children a degree of freedom to discuss topics and issues that matter to them. This will allow the children to become more active in the research process (Boyatzis and Newman 2004, Westcott and Littleton, 2005) and it will help me to learn about what theological concepts and themes matter to them and the structures, processes, and sources of their understandings of these concepts. By using the child’s drawing of God as a springboard for conversation, I allow the child’s ideas and interests to guide the interview. Throughout the interview process, I will not only pay attention to the words that children use, but also how they communicate non-verbally through attitudes, gestures, facial expressions, and body language.
I want to offer children a degree of freedom throughout the interview. However, if children do not make use of the freedom they have in the interview process, I will guide them by asking particular questions about their drawings (see Appendix G) while attempting to avoid making the interview into an oral survey. Through these interviews, it is my intention to gently guide the participants, prompting the children for answers as little as possible and only when it is necessary.

**Analysis of Data**

After collecting data through field research, I will code it to identify themes emerging from children’s experiences, perceptions, and understandings. I will then analyze these themes by correlating them with particular congregational contexts and searching for similarities and differences across cultural contexts—both in terms of which themes tended to emerge and how children in particular cultural contexts nuanced common themes in different ways.

**References**


(b) Attach a copy of all questionnaires, interview guides and/or any other instruments.

(c) Include a list of appendices here for all additional materials submitted (e.g., Appendix A – Informed Consent; Appendix B – Interview Guide, etc.):

| Appendix A – Telephone scripts for recruitment |
| Appendix B – Email message to be sent from ministers to parents/guardians |
| Appendix C – Informed consent letter and form for adult participants |
| Appendix D – Informed consent letter and form for parent/guardian of child participants |
| Appendix E – Assent script for child participants |
| Appendix F – Interview guide for adult focus groups |
| Appendix G – Interview guide for interviews with children |
| Appendix H – Letter of support from United Church of Canada |
| Appendix I – Letter of support from |  
| Appendix J – Organizational Consent Document |
(a) Describe the participants to be recruited, or the individuals about whom personally identifiable information will be collected. List the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Where the research involves extraction or collection of personally identifiable information, please describe from whom the information will be obtained, what it will include, and how permission to access the data is being sought. (Strategies for recruitment are to be described in section #15.) Where applicable, justify the sample size.

The main participants of this research will be 25 children between the ages of six and 12 who attend one of five United Church of Canada congregations (five children from each congregation). Including five children from each congregation allows this sample size to be manageable for the in-depth and time-limited field research (due to travel in ) and leaves me with an adequate number participants should a child at any or all congregations choose to withdraw throughout the research process.

Additional participants of this research include clergy, staff, and lay ministry leaders who are involved in the congregation’s ministry with children. The total number of adult participants is dependent on the size and leadership of congregations involved in this study, as participants from larger churches may include (but are not limited to) senior ministers, children’s ministers, directors of Christian education, volunteer Sunday school teachers, and church board members, while participants from smaller churches may be limited to a minister, a volunteer Sunday school teacher, and a few parents. Each congregation will include no fewer than four and no more than six relevant adult participants.

A third group of participants consists of children, leaders, and volunteers who are part of the churches’ Sunday morning children’s programming in which I will act as a participant-observer. At each congregation, I will visit its children’s programming in order to observe the ways in which its work with children reflects or does not reflect the wider congregational culture. I will observe explicit data (such as lessons taught to children) as well as implicit data (how children respond to visitors, how leaders interact with children, how children’s programming is organized, etc.). While visiting these programs, I will take field notes about my observations using pseudonyms for the congregation and all participants in the program (leaders, teachers, children, etc.). The data collected by acting as a participant-observer in churches’ programming for children will help me understand how culture shapes the congregation’s current ministry with children in implicit and explicit ways and will aid me in analyzing information collected through interviews by allowing me to study it in light of each congregation’s wider ethos and practices for children’s religious education.

(b) Is there any group or individual-level vulnerability related to the research that needs to be mitigated (for example, difficulties understanding informed consent, history of exploitation by researchers, power differential between the researcher and the potential participant)?

There are two types of vulnerability that need to be mitigated:

1. Child Participants
   The key research participants are children between the ages of six and 12. Since these participants are not at the age of legal majority and will not reach this age during the course of this study, I will follow TCPS guidelines and debrief and obtain consent from the children’s parents, guardians, or authorized third parties. I will, however, explain the research project and their involvement to the child participants at the outset of each interview (see Appendix E) and seek their verbal assent.

2. Aboriginal Participants
   My study includes research at a congregation within the reserve and a member church of the United Church of Canada’s All Native Circle Conference. I have received support (Appendix I) from this congregation to pursue this research and will collaborate with congregational leaders in designing and amending particulars of field research at this congregation as well as analyzing data and disseminating results in ways that are respectful of Aboriginal perspectives. If deemed appropriate by leaders, I will offer a gift of tobacco to the congregation. While conducting research at this
14. EXPERIENCE OF INVESTIGATORS WITH THIS TYPE OF RESEARCH

(a) Please provide a brief description of previous experience with this type of research by (i) the principal investigator/supervisor or sponsor, (ii) the research team and (iii) the people who will have direct contact with the participants. If there has not been previous experience, please describe how the principal investigator/research team will be prepared.

My Master of Theological Studies thesis (through McMaster University Divinity College) involved conducting a qualitative study of children’s spiritual experiences at three churches over a period of six months. Fourteen children were involved with this research, which has subsequently been published as essays in academic journals and as a book. This research involved conducting a series of five focus groups with child participants in which I asked them questions about their spiritual experiences and asked them to draw pictures, take photographs, and perform a social mapping exercise. During all interviews, I was aided by a research assistant who I prepared through telephone and in-person communication. I received training for this research through a graduate level course on qualitative research and children’s spirituality at Wheaton College Graduate School in Wheaton, IL.

(b) For projects that will involve community members (e.g., peer researchers) in the collection and/or analysis of data, please describe their status within the research team (e.g., are they considered employees, volunteers or participants?) and what kind of training they will receive?

At each research location, I will be aided by a research assistant from the respective cultural context of the church with which I am conducting research. Recruitment of research assistants will be carried out in collaboration from the United Church of Canada and congregational leaders within each community. Additionally, these research assistants can, when necessary, act as language assistants who can facilitate parts of the interview in a child’s first language and can aid in the reading of body language, visual cues, and other non-verbal communication. Each research assistant will be involved in every aspect of research at a respective congregation and before conducting research, I will train each assistant through online, telephone, and in-person conversations. Training will include purposes and goals of the research, ethical guidelines and conduct, and research methods. These research assistants will participate on a volunteer basis and will not receive remuneration for their involvement.

15. RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS

- Where there is recruitment, please describe how, by whom, and from where the participants will be recruited.
- Where participant observation is to be used, please explain the form of insertion of the researcher into the research setting (e.g., living in a community, visiting on a bi-weekly basis, attending organized functions).
- If relevant, describe any translation of recruitment materials, how this will occur and whether or not those people responsible for recruitment will speak the language of the participants.
- Attach a copy of all posters, advertisements, flyers, letters, e-mail text, or telephone scripts to be used for recruitment.

Recruitment will happen in a number of stages:
1. I will use material provided by the United Church of Canada and consult with appropriate denominational leaders in order to compile a list of congregations that match the congregational compositions included in this research (ethnic majority, ethnic minority, Aboriginal, and culturally diverse).
2. After identifying ideal congregations in each category, I will contact their lead ministers by telephone and seek permission to conduct this study at their church and permission to ask them and appropriate clergy and staff to participate in a focus group interview as part of this study (see Appendix A for telephone script).
3. Appropriate congregational leaders (minister, children’s director, Christian education director, etc.) will then distribute information about my study through emails to families with children between the ages of 6 and 12.
and ask interested parents to respond to them or to contact me directly if they are willing to have their children participate in this study (see Appendix B).

Participant observation in this study will occur as my research assistant and I visit each church’s religious education programs for children for a minimum of two consecutive Sundays. Our roles in these programs will be fairly minimal, but we will, in consultation with ministry leaders, co-lead a portion of the regular program (tell a story, read a book, lead a song, etc.). For the remainder of our time at the program, we will observe the children and leaders while offering assistance with simple tasks (serving a snack, passing out workbooks, etc) if deemed necessary and appropriate by leaders.

All recruitment materials will be in English unless the minister of a particular congregation recommends translation. This being the case, I will work with the minister to find a person capable of translating information about this study.

16. COMPENSATION

Please see U of T’s Compensation and Reimbursement Guidelines.

(a) Will participants receive compensation for participation?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-kind</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) If Yes, please provide details and justification for the amount or the value of the compensation offered.

I will consult with the minister of [Name of Church] in order to determine whether or not (and how) tobacco should be given as a gift to the adult participants in this congregation.

I will give each child participant a new package of 24 coloured pencils (value is approximately $5.00) with which to draw their picture of God. As a token of my appreciation, each child may keep the package of coloured pencils I provide for them. I will give each adult participant and the consenting parent/guardian of each child participant a pen the bears the logo of Emmanuel College when I meet with them and ask them to sign a consent document.

(c) If No, please explain why compensation is not possible or appropriate.

N/A

d) Where there is a withdrawal clause in the research procedure, if participants choose to withdraw, how will compensation be affected?

All gifts (coloured pencils, pens, tobacco), once given, will not be affected by the withdrawal of any participants.

SECTION C – DESCRIPTION OF THE RISKS AND BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

17. POSSIBLE RISKS

(a) Please indicate all potential risks to participants as individuals or as members of a community that may arise from this research:

(i) Physical risks (e.g., any bodily contact or administration of any substance): Yes ☒ No ☐

(ii) Psychological/emotional risks (e.g., feeling uncomfortable, embarrassed, or upset): Yes ☒ No ☐

(iii) Social risks (e.g., loss of status, privacy and/or reputation): Yes ☒ No ☐
Legal risks (e.g., apprehension or arrest, subpoena): Yes ☐ No ☒

(b) Please briefly describe each of the risks noted above and outline the steps that will be taken to manage and/or minimize them.

Any risks associated with this research are minimal. When interviewing children about personal matters such as religion, spirituality, and culture, there is always a possibility of psychological/emotional risks, such as embarrassment and discomfort. I will attempt to alleviate and minimize these risks by creating a positive, encouraging environment in which children can safely speak about personal matters. I will also have a research assistant at each interview that shares the cultural background of the child participant, so that the child will feel more comfortable.

My research will comply with the United Church of Canada’s Duty of Care with children’s ministries. In keeping with Duty of Care practices, I will submit to the General Council of the United Church of Canada a written police records check that has been produced not more than six months prior to the start of my field research. Additionally, the presence of research assistant will help to ensure that my research practices comply with the United Church’s Duty of Care, which states that, whenever possible, two adults should supervise any program for children.

18. POSSIBLE BENEFITS

- Describe any potential direct benefits to participants from their involvement in the project
- Describe any potential direct benefits to the community (e.g., capacity building)
- Comment on the potential benefits to the scientific/scholarly community or society that would justify involvement of participants in this study

A potential benefit to the participants in this research is an opportunity to speak about their religious ideas and ultimate concerns in a safe environment. Children will have their voices heard about issues that matter to them. Congregations (particularly those within the United Church of Canada) can benefit by being able to adapt ministry programs in order to be more welcoming of cultural diversity and children within these programs can in turn be offered opportunities to engage in positive intercultural experiences within their faith communities. Since there is a lack of research into children’s spirituality and theology that considers the influence of cultural contexts, theologians and children’s spirituality scholars can benefit by having a clearer understanding of children’s theological meaning making in particular cultural contexts and can nuance and clarify conceptions of children’s spirituality and theological capacities in ways that more fully consider culture and context.

Another benefit is the assistance the congregation will receive from the presence of my research assistant and me in their children’s programs. Some congregations struggle to recruit volunteers for children’s programming, so having two additional adults at their programs, if only for at limited time, can provide a time of assistance and respite to well-worn volunteers.

The minister of ________ and I have agreed that I will reciprocate this congregation’s assistance in my research by volunteering to help with its week-long summer children’s program.

SECTION D – INFORMED CONSENT

19. CONSENT PROCESS

(a) Describe the process that will be used to obtain informed consent and explain how it will be recorded. Please note that it is the quality of the consent, not the form that is important. The goal is to ensure that potential participants understand to what they are consenting.

(b) If the research involves extraction or collection of personally identifiable information from or about a research participant, please describe how consent from the individuals or authorization from the data
All participating congregations will be informed about this study according to the telephone script documented in Appendix A and through ongoing conversation. After a congregation agrees to participate in this study, I will request a letter from its leaders in which they grant written permission for me to conduct research at their congregation and document their commitment to support my research (similar to the letters from the United Church of Canada and [insert church name], Appendices H and I).

I will initially explain my research and the process of consent to adults who participate in semi-structured focus groups according to the recruitment script outlined in Appendix A. I will inform potential participants about the goals and methods for my research, their potential involvement in the project, and when and how they may withdraw. I will begin the focus group by explaining the research and consent process again, this time through the letter outlined in Appendix C, and asking participants if they have any questions. Before asking any research questions at these focus groups, I will give each participant a copy of the information letter and invite them to sign the consent form (Appendix C).

Parents of child participants will be informed about my research and the process of consent through a telephone conversation outlined in Appendix A. Before conducting interviews with their children, I will ask them to read a copy of an information letter (Appendix D), which will be given to them through email or in person while acting as a participant-observer at their congregation. This letter outlines the research project, their child’s involvement, and how their child can withdraw and how they can withdraw their child from the research. I will provide parents with an opportunity to ask any questions about the research or consent process and ask them to sign and return the consent form (Appendix D).

I will explain the study to child participants at the beginning of their interviews with me according to the assent script in Appendix E. Before moving into the process of data collection in these interviews, I will provide the children opportunities to ask questions and seek their verbal assent by asking them if they would like to participate by drawing a picture and talking with me about their picture. I will document children’s oral assent in field notes and by a digital voice recorder.

Cultural norms make it appropriate for me to seek oral and implied consent rather than written consent from adult participants and parents of children within the Aboriginal congregation. I will inform participants of the adult focus group about the research study, their involvement, and how they can exercise their right to withdraw in the same way that I have outlined above (telephone conversation and further explanation at the beginning of the focus group meeting), but information will be conveyed orally through conversation, rather than through an information letter. I will ask them if they have any questions about their involvement in the research and whether or not they would like to participate in the focus group. Oral consent will be documented in field notes but will not be recorded by voice recorder. Parents of child participants will be informed of the research process, their children’s involvement, and the right to withdraw their child and their child’s right to withdraw through conversation with my research assistant (who will be a member of the congregation). Their consent will be documented through field notes. Assent from child participants at this congregation will be obtained in the same way as in other congregations, as outlined above. [insert name], minister of [insert church name], has affirmed that these are the most appropriate ways to gain informed consent and assent from members of this congregation.

20 CONSENT DOCUMENTS

(a) Attach a copy of the Information Letter/Consent Form.

Additional documentation regarding consent should be provided such as:
- screening materials, introductory letters, letters of administrative consent or authorization
(b) If any of the information collected in the screening process - prior to full informed consent to participate in the study - is to be retained from those who are later excluded or refuse to participate in the study, please state how potential participants will be informed of this course of action and whether they will have the right to refuse to allow this information to be kept.

N/A

21. COMMUNITY AND/OR ORGANIZATIONAL CONSENT, OR CONSENT BY AN AUTHORIZED PARTY

(a) If the research is taking place within a community or an organization which requires that formal consent be sought prior to the involvement of individual participants, describe how consent will be obtained and attach any relevant documentation. If consent will not be sought, please provide a justification and describe any alternative forms of consultation that may take place.

I have already obtained permission to conduct this research from the United Church of Canada and [redacted], as documented in letters of support (Appendices H and I). Additionally, I will consult with leadership within the United Church in order to appropriately obtain consent from each congregation involved in this research. (See Appendix J for an organizational consent document.)

(b) If any or all of the participants are children and/or others who are not competent to consent, describe the process by which capacity/competency will be assessed, and the proposed alternate source of consent.

   i) Submit a copy of the permission/information letter to be provided to the person(s) providing the alternative consent

   ii) Describe the assent process for participants and attach the assent letter.

All child participants must provide verbal assent to their involvement in this study and at least one parent, guardian, or authorized third party must read and sign a consent form allowing their child’s involvement. I will coordinate with leadership from each congregation in order to determine the best way to inform parents of this study and have them sign the consent form (telephone conversation, email, in person on the day of the first observation, etc.). Children will be informed about the study at the beginning of their interview with me, at which time they will be asked to provide assent. See Appendix D for permission/information letters for parents of child participants and Appendix E for the assent script that I will use to explain my research to the children who will participate in it.

22. DEBRIEFING and DISSEMINATION

(a) If deception or intentional non-disclosure will be used in the study, provide justification. Please consult the Guidelines for the Use of Deception and Debriefing in Research

N/A

(b) Please provide a copy of the written debriefing form, if applicable.

N/A

(c) If participants and/or communities will be given the option of withdrawing their data following the debriefing, please describe this process.

N/A
(d) Please describe what information/feedback will be provided to participants and/or communities after their participation in the project is complete (e.g., report, poster presentation, pamphlet, etc.) and note how participants will be able to access this information.

All consent letters (for adult participants and parents of child participants) will include an anticipated end date to this study as well as contact information they can use to obtain access to research findings. A summary of research findings will be available by request and can be sent by post or email to interested participants.

23. PARTICIPANT WITHDRAWAL

(a) Where applicable, please describe how participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the project and outline the procedures that will be followed to allow them to exercise this right.

Adult participants will be informed of their right to withdraw through the information letter and consent form that they will be given and will sign before beginning their involvement in this research (Appendix C). They will be reminded of their right to withdraw at the beginning of the adult semi-structured focus groups. Should a participant exercise this right, they can leave the focus group immediately.

Parents or guardians of child participants will be informed of their child’s right to withdraw through the information letter and consent form that they will be given and will sign in order to grant permission for the child to be involved in this research (Appendix D).

Child participants will be informed of their right to withdraw at the beginning of their individual interview with me and my research assistant (see Appendix E).

(b) Indicate what will be done with the participant’s data and any consequences which withdrawal may have on the participant.

The informed consent letters that will be distributed to and signed by adult participants (Appendix C) and parents/guardians of child participants (Appendix D) indicate that all data collected prior to the withdrawal of a participant shall be used as part of this study.

(c) If participants will not have the right to withdraw from the project at all, or beyond a certain point, please explain. Ensure this information is included in the consent process and consent form.

N/A

SECTION E – CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

24. CONFIDENTIALITY

Data security measures must be consistent with UT’s Data Security Standards for Personally Identifiable and Other Confidential Data in Research. All identifiable electronic data that is being kept outside of a secure server environment must be encrypted, consistent with the standards described at: http://www.utoronto.ca/security/UTORprotect/encryption_guidelines.htm:

(a) Will the data be treated as confidential? Yes ☒ No ☐

(b) Describe the procedures to be used to protect the confidentiality of participants or informants, where applicable

Throughout the course of this study, confidentiality will be strictly maintained.
- All digital files will be encrypted and password protected.
- Hard copies of notes, transcripts, drawings, and other material will be contained in a locked box in a secure location. I will be the only person with a key to this box.
Participants in the adult focus group and any interviews with more than one child will be reminded that what is said in the group should remain in the group, but confidentiality on the part of all group members cannot be guaranteed. Pseudonyms will be given to each participant in any data that I share through dissertation writing, publication, or presentation in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

NOTE: Confidentiality can be broken for legal purposes, such as if a child reports that she or he is being abused.

(c) Describe any limitations to protecting the confidentiality of participants whether due to the law, the methods used, or other reasons (e.g., a duty to report)

Confidentiality can be broken for legal purposes, such as if a child reports that he or she is being abused. While pseudonyms will be given to all participants, there are limitations to the confidentiality for congregations as a whole, as the congregations in this study will be selected because of their cultural composition and the cultural context of the community in which they are situated. For example, there are only so many Aboriginal congregations in any one city or region. Thus, congregational anonymity will be attempted, but will be more difficult to maintain.

25. DATA SECURITY,RETENTION AND ACCESS

(a) Describe how data (including written records, video/audio recordings, artifacts and questionnaires) will be protected during the conduct of the research and dissemination of results.

During the course of this study:
- digital data (audio files, transcripts) will be encrypted and password protected
- all physical documentation (field notes, hard copies of transcripts, children’s drawings) will be secured in a locked box and stored in a secure location and I will be the only person possessing a key to this box
- documentation needed and collected in field research will be transported and stored in a locked briefcase to which I will have sole access
- data provided in interviews will be held in confidence. Participants in the adult focus group interview will be reminded that what is said in the group should remain in the group, but this cannot be guaranteed.
- the identity of all participants will be protected through pseudonyms for individuals and congregations.

(b) Explain how long data will be retained. (If applicable, referring to the standard data retention practice for your discipline) Provide details of their final disposal or storage. Provide a justification if you intend to store your data for an indefinite length of time. If the data may have archival value, discuss how participants will be informed of this possibility during the consent process.

Data will be retained until it is no longer needed for ongoing research. I will retain data beyond the length of this research study in order to continue to analyze and draw on it in potential future studies, as is common within my discipline. Retention of data is not problematic because the nature of this data is not of a terribly sensitive nature and pseudonyms will be used in data documentation (in field notes, interview transcripts, etc). When it is no longer needed for ongoing research, documents will be placed in the United Church of Canada archives so they may contribute to future studies and research.

(c) If participant anonymity or confidentiality is not appropriate to this research project, please explain.

N/A

(d) If data will be shared with other researchers or users, please describe how and where the data will be stored and any restrictions that will be made regarding access.

N/A
26. RISK MATRIX: REVIEW TYPE BY GROUP VULNERABILITY and RESEARCH RISK

(a) Indicate the Risk Level for this project by checking the intersecting box

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Vulnerability</th>
<th>Research Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medium 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(b) Explain/justify the level of research risk and group vulnerability reported above:

I have determined the research risk level to be low because the research topic and methods are not very invasive. Asking adults to share about their churches and asking children to draw pictures of God and then speak of these pictures allows me to research children’s theological understandings without expecting participants to speak about controversial or invasive topics. While some children and adults may become uncomfortable speaking about these matters in interviews and focus groups, it is highly unlikely that they will become upset or embarrassed. Should a child or adult become uncomfortable, I can guide the interview and focus group in a way that lessens this discomfort. There are no physical, social, or legal risks associated with this research.

The group vulnerability level is determined to be medium because my research involves child participants who are under the legal age of majority, but who are not in precarious or complicated situations (for example, they are not hospitalized, in a juvenile detention centre, or struggling with issues such as suicide or violent aggression).

(Please note that the final determination of Review Type and level of monitoring will be made by the reviewing University of Toronto REB)

Based on the level of risk, these are the types of review that a protocol may receive:

Risk level 1: Delegated Review; Risk level 2 or 3: Full Board Review

For both delegated and full reviews (SSH&E, HS, or HIV), please submit one electronic copy of your protocol and all appendices (e.g., recruitment, information/consent and debriefing materials, and study instruments) as a single Word document or a pdf. Do not submit your entire research proposal. Please ensure that the electronic signatures are in place and e-mail to new.ethics.protocols@utoronto.ca

The deadline for delegated review (SSH&E or HS) is EVERY Monday, or first business day of the week, by 4 pm. Information about full REB meeting and submission due dates are posted on our website (SSH&E, HS or HIV).

HIV REB reviews all protocols at full board level but applies proportionate review based on the level of risk.

All other submissions (e.g., amendments, adverse events, and continuing review submissions) should be sent to ethics.review@utoronto.ca
27. PRIVACY REGULATIONS

My signature as Principal Investigator, in Section G of this protocol form, confirms that I am aware of, understand, and will comply with all relevant laws governing the collection and use of personally identifiable information in research. I understand that for research involving extraction or collection of personally identifiable information, provincial, national and/or international laws may apply and that any apparent mishandling of personally identifiable information must be reported to the Office of Research Ethics.

For U of T student researchers, my signature confirms that I am a registered student in good standing with the University of Toronto. My project has been reviewed and approved by my advisory committee or equivalent (where applicable). If my status as a student changes, I will inform the Office of Research Ethics.

Signature of Investigator: [Signature] Date: May 2, 2013

***For Graduate Students, the signature of the Faculty Supervisor is required. For Post-Doctoral Fellows and Visiting Professors or Researchers, the signature of the Faculty Sponsor is required. In addition to the supervisor/sponsor, the chair or the dean of the department is required to approve and sign the form***

As the Faculty Supervisor of this project, my signature confirms that I have reviewed and approve the scientific merit of the research project and this ethics protocol submission. I will provide the necessary supervision to the student researcher throughout the project, to ensure that all procedures performed under the research project will be conducted in accordance with relevant University, provincial, national or international policies and regulations that govern research involving human subjects. This includes ensuring that the level of risk inherent to the project is managed by the level of research experience that the student has, combined with the extent of oversight that will be provided by the Faculty Supervisor and/or On-site Supervisor.

As the Faculty Sponsor for this project, my signature confirms that I have reviewed and approve of the research project and will assume responsibility, as the University representative, for this research project. I will ensure that all procedures performed under the project will be conducted in accordance with all relevant University, provincial, national or international policies and regulations that govern research involving human participants.

Signature of Faculty Supervisor/Sponsor: [Signature] Date:

As the Departmental Chair/Dean, my signature confirms that I am aware of the requirements for scholarly review and that the ethics protocol for this research has received appropriate review prior to submission.

In addition, my administrative unit will follow guidelines and procedures to ensure compliance with all relevant University, provincial, national or international policies and regulations that govern research involving human participants. My signature also reflects the willingness of the department, faculty or division to administer the research funds, if there are any, in accordance with University, regulatory agency and sponsor agency policies.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Print Name of Departmental Chair/Dean (or designate): Michael Bourgeois</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signature of Departmental Chair/Dean: Michael Bourgeois</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date: 14 May 2013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX A

Telephone Scripts for Recruitment

The following scripts will be used to guide conversations with leaders of potential congregations, with potential adult participants, and with parents/guardians of potential child participants.

Leaders of Potential Congregations
Hello. My name is David Csinos and I’m a doctoral candidate at Emmanuel College in Toronto. With the support of the United Church, I am conducting research for my dissertation about culture and children. In particular, I’m interested in learning about how children make theological meaning in churches of different cultural compositions. In addition to a pilot congregation that will let me test my research methods, I’m planning on conducting research at four different churches, with each one fitting into a cultural composition defined by the United Church (ethnic majority, ethnic minority, Aboriginal) as well as one church that is culturally diverse.

My research will consist of a number of different components that I will carry out with the aid of a research assistant. First, we will visit the church’s religious education program for children, where we hope to lead the children in part of their regular program so that they get to know us. This will also allow us to observe your congregation’s typical children’s ministry initiatives in order to gain information that will assist us in acquiring a fuller and more accurate understanding of the culture and context of your church. Next, we will hold a focus group interview with relevant clergy and lay leaders in order to understand their perceptions of how the cultural composition of their church shapes it and its ministry with children. We will then conduct individual interviews with five children in which we will ask them to draw a picture and discuss their ideas about God and church with us. Finally, we’ll visit the church’s children’s program once again and wrap up our time at each congregation.

Dr. Janet Ross, the United Church’s Program Coordinator for Intercultural Education and Engagement, recommended that I contact you because she felt as though your church would be a helpful congregation for my project. In looking for churches to assist me, I am hoping to find congregations that will allow me to be involved in their children’s program and to help recruit leaders and families to participate in this study. Does this sound like something you’d be willing to do?

Potential Adult Participants
Hello. My name is David Csinos and I’m a doctoral candidate at Emmanuel College in Toronto. With the help of the United Church, I am conducting research for my dissertation about culture and children. In particular, I’m interested in learning about how children make theological meaning in churches of different cultural compositions. [Minister] and I have been discussing this project and she/he has agreed to have your church be part of this project, which means that I’ll be visiting your church in order to have conversations and interviews and to observe your church’s children’s ministry program.

One of the components of this project is a focus group conversation that my assistant and I will have with a few folks who are clergy, leaders, and parents at your church. This would be a somewhat informal conversation that will help my assistant and I get a sense of your church and its particular culture. As a leader at your church, I’d like to invite you to be part of this conversation, which should last between one and two hours. Does this sound like something you’d be willing to consider? If so, I’d like to email you an information letter and I’d be happy to answer any questions you may have—now or after you read over the letter.

Parent/Guardian of Potential Child Participants
Hello. My name is David Csinos and I’m a doctoral candidate at Emmanuel College in Toronto. With the help of the United Church, I am conducting research for my dissertation about culture and children. In particular, I’m interested in learning about how children make theological meaning in churches of different cultural compositions. [Minister] and I have been discussing this project and she/he has agreed to have your church be part of this project. [Minister or children’s leader] told me that you responded to her/his email about my project and you’re considering allowing your child to be involved in it. I’m thrilled to hear this.
Let me tell you a little more about the project. I'll be visiting your church to spend some time observing your church’s program with children and to have some one-on-one conversations with about five children from your church about their views of God, church, and other religious and spiritual matters. The conversation should last between 45 and 90 minutes and will begin by my assistant and me explaining my project to the children and how they can help us. Then I’ll ask you’re the children to draw a picture of God and we’ll spend some time talking with them about their drawings and about any other subjects that come up in our conversation. If your child participates in this project, he/she doesn’t need to answer any questions or share anything that makes her/him uncomfortable and he/she can stop participating at any time.

I’ll be recording this interview and taking notes, but privacy will be highly respected. All children will be given fictional names and any notes and recordings will all be kept in a locked box and protected on computers by passwords.

Does this sound like something you’d be interested in having your son/daughter do? If so, I’d like to email you an information letter and I’d be happy to answer any questions you may have—now or after you read over the letter.
Subject: A Study at Our Church

David Csinos, a doctoral student at Emmanuel College (University of Toronto and Toronto School of Theology) is conducting research about children’s theological ideas and culture. [Minister] and the church board have invited him to come to our church to conduct part of his project, which is supported by the United Church.

While at our church, David and his assistant will be sitting in on a children’s Sunday school class for a couple Sundays and they’ll be meeting with leaders at our church for an interview. An important component of this project is individual conversations with children from our church who are between the ages of six and 12. David and his assistant would like to meet with children to talk with them about their ideas about God, church, and other religious and spiritual matters. They are hoping to meet with about five children for one conversation with each child.

Our church supports this project and we want to help David get in touch with possible people to be involved in it. If you're interested in having your child be part of this project by sitting down with him and his assistant for a conversation, please respond to this email and I'll pass your contact information on to David.
Informed Consent Letter and Form for Adult Participants*

*Where verbal assent is more appropriate than formal written assent (for example, an Aboriginal congregation), I will present the material in this letter in conversation with potential adult participants.

May 1, 2013

Dear _________,

I am inviting you to participate in a study that I am conducting to learn about how children make theological meaning (their understandings of God, church, and other religious and spiritual matters) in churches of different cultural compositions. Through this study, which is supported by the United Church of Canada, I hope to gain insight that will be useful for churches as they plan children’s ministry in contexts of different cultures and of cultural diversity.

I will be visiting your congregation to speak with leaders at your church, participate in its Sunday morning children's program, and have conversations with approximately five children. I am inviting you to participate in this research because you are a leader at your congregation and I am interested in learning about your perspective about the cultural make-up of your church and its ministry with children.

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to meet with me and a research assistant for a conversation with other leaders of your church, which will last between one and two hours. During this conversation, you will be asked to share about your church, its culture, and its ministry with children.

It is unlikely that you will be subject to any harm or discomfort by participating. You may be uncomfortable discussing some personal views, but confidentiality will be strongly implemented and you have the right to not answer any questions that you don’t want to answer or share anything with the group that you do not wish to share. To keep things confidential, I'll be giving each person a fictitious name and your name will not appear on any transcripts, research notes, or reports of findings. All material will be kept in a locked box to which I will have sole access and all digital files will be password protected.

Should you choose to participate, your involvement can help churches to better adapt programs and ministries to meet children’s needs and can better understand how to nurture positive views of cultural diversity.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are the only person who can make a decision about participation. If you do not want to be involved, you simply need to decline from participation. If you decide that you would like to participate, you can choose to stop participating at any time with no consequences to you. In the event that you choose to withdraw, any information you share as part of this project until the point of withdrawal will be used in my research.

I am conducting this study to fulfill requirements for the Doctor of Theology program at Emmanuel College (University of Toronto) and the Toronto School of Theology. I will write results up as a dissertation report that will be distributed to faculty supervisors and made available electronically via the University of Toronto library. If appropriate, I plan on writing and presenting about the findings of this research in publications and conferences. Additionally, as a supporting organization, the United Church of Canada will have access to the results of this research. In all cases, your name will not appear in any of this material. You may obtain information about the results of the study by contacting me after it is completed (spring 2015) at dave.csinos@mail.utoronto.ca.

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Pamela Couture:
This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for considering being part of this study.

Sincerely,

David Csinos
CONSENT

I have read the information presented in the invitation to participate in the study being conducted by David Csinos, of Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I agree to participate in this study and I understand that I may withdraw at any time.

___________________________   ___________________________   ________________
Name of Participant   Signature of Participant  Date

In my opinion, the person who has signed above is agreeing to participate in this study voluntarily and understands the nature of the study and the results of participation.

______________________________  ________________________
Signature of Researcher    Date
May 1, 2013

Dear __________,

I am inviting you to participate in a study that I am conducting to learn about how children make theological meaning (their understandings of God, church, and other religious and spiritual matters) in churches of different cultural compositions. Through this study, which is supported by the United Church of Canada, I hope to gain insight that will be useful for churches as they plan children’s ministry in contexts of different cultures and of cultural diversity.

I will be visiting your congregation to speak with leaders at your church, participate in one of its children’s programs, and have conversations with approximately five children. I am inviting your child to participate in this research because I am interested in learning about her/his ideas about God, church, and religious and spiritual matters.

If your child agrees to participate in this study and you allow your child to be involved, your child will be asked to meet with me and a research assistant for a conversation that will last between 45 and 90 minutes in length. During this conversation, I will ask your child to draw a picture and talk about matters related to the purpose of this study. I will ask your child questions about his or her religious views and talk with your child about her/his drawing.

It is unlikely that your child will be subject to any harm or discomfort by participating. Your child may be uncomfortable discussing religious and spiritual matters, but confidentiality will be strongly implemented and your child will not need to answer particular questions that she/he does not wish to answer or share anything that makes her/him uncomfortable. Your child will be given a fictitious name and her/his name will not appear on any transcripts, research notes, or reports of findings. All material will be kept in a locked box to which I will have sole access and all digital files will be password protected.

Should you choose to allow your child to participate, her/his involvement can help churches to better adapt programs and ministries to meet children’s needs and can better understand how to nurture positive views of cultural diversity.

Your child’s participation in this study is voluntary. You and your child are the only people who can make a decision about participation. If your child does not want to be involved or if you do not want your child to be involved, either of you simply need to decline from participation. If you and your child agree to participate, your child can choose to stop participating at any time and you may choose to have your child withdraw at any time with no consequences to you or your child. In the event that your child withdraws or you choose to withdraw your child, any information your child shares as part of this project until the point of withdrawal will be used in my research.

I am conducting this study to fulfill requirements for the Doctor of Theology program at Emmanuel College (University of Toronto) and the Toronto School of Theology. I will write results up as a dissertation report that will be distributed to faculty supervisors and made available electronically via the University of Toronto library. If appropriate, I plan on writing and presenting about the findings of this research in publications and conferences. Additionally, as a supporting organization, the United Church of Canada will have access to the results of this research. In all cases, your child’s name will not appear in any of this material. You may obtain

* Where verbal assent is more appropriate than formal written assent (for example, an Aboriginal congregation), I will present the material in this letter in conversation with the parents/guardians of potential child participants.
information about the results of the study by contacting me after it is completed (spring 2015) at [redacted] or dave.csinos@mail.utoronto.ca.

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Pamela Couture:

David Csinos  
dave.csinos@mail.utoronto.ca  
Dr. Pamela Couture  
pamela.couture@utoronto.ca

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics. If you have concerns or questions about your child’s rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for considering allowing your child to be part of this study.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

David Csinos
I have read the information presented in the invitation to participate in the study being conducted by David Csinos, of Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my child’s involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I agree to allow my child to participate in this study and I understand that I may withdraw my child at any time.

___________________________  ___________________________   ________________  
Name of Participant   Signature of Participant  Date  

In my opinion, the person who has signed above is voluntarily agreeing to allow her/his child to participate in this study and understands the nature of the study and the results of participation.

______________________________  ________________________  
Signature of Researcher    Date  


APPENDIX E

Assent Script for Child Participants

The following script will be used as a guideline to receive assent from children at the beginning of their individual interviews.

My name is Dave and I go to school at Emmanuel College in Toronto. This is my helper, [research assistant]. The reason we’re here together today is because we want to learn from you about what you think about God, church, and other religious topics. I’m doing a project to learn about how children like you think about God and church and other things having to do with religion. I’ll be visiting different churches to talk with children like you. I’m hoping that by talking with me, you will teach me about what you think about church and God and that what I learn can help other churches to teach and work with children in better ways.

In our conversation today, [research assistant] and I would like to ask you to draw a picture of God because we want to learn about how you see God and what you think about God. We want to spend some time talking to you about your drawing and about any other subjects that come up, but you will not need to answer particular questions that you don’t want to answer or talk about things that you don’t want to talk about.

You and your parents are the only ones who can make a decision about talking with us today and being involved in our project. If you don’t want to be involved, all you need to do is tell us. And if you agree to be involved, you can choose to stop at any time. So if you’re okay with talking with us and helping us with this project, then let’s keep talking together. In fact, why don’t we begin with that drawing I mentioned?
APPENDIX F

Interview Guide for Adult Focus Groups

Each focus group with adult participants will be unique due to variances in number of participants and their roles at their congregations. The following questions will guide the focus groups and foster conversation and storytelling that can generate insight into the culture of the congregation and its ministry with children.

1. How would you describe your church and the people who make up your church to somebody who knows nothing about your congregation?

2. Tell me about the history of your congregation. What were significant events, people, and challenges throughout the years?

3. In what ways has your congregation changed over the years?

4. How do you understand the culture or cultures of your congregation?

5. In the past few years, the United Church of Canada has been talking about culture and interculturalism. How does this conversation reflect the life of your congregation? (I will hand out my working definition of culture so that participants can discuss their congregation in light of this definition.)

6. Using broad brush strokes, tell me about your church’s ministry with children.

7. What are the most important things your church does to nurture faith in children?

8. What are the greatest success and challenges your church faces when it comes to children’s ministry?

9. If you could change one thing about your church’s ministry with children, what would it be and why?
Each interview with child participants will be unique due to variances in age, cultural context, and interests of the child. Rather than asking children a series of predetermined questions or guiding interviews based on a predetermined structure, my aim is to allow the child a large degree of control over shaping the interview process. This will allow me to study not only children’s theological views of particular topics, but also the underlying structures of children’s theological meaning making, such as the sources they use for generating theological insights and the ideas and topics to which they ascribe importance. While I will give children control to shape the interview, each interview will be guided by the following broad outline.

I will begin by explaining the purpose of my research and their involvement in the research process, including their right to withdraw at any time and I will obtain the child’s verbal assent. While describing my research to the children (see Appendix E), I will not state that my primary interest involves the culture and the cultural compositions of churches so that the children to not become biased in their comments and do not automatically move to discussing matters directly related to culture.

After explaining the research study and obtaining assent, I will ask children to draw a picture of God using a new package of coloured pencils (which they may keep after the interview) and white paper that I will provide. I will ask the children questions about their pictures of God (such as why they drew God with big hands or why they gave God blue eyes) as they are drawing, which will help them to verbalize the thought processes behind their visual portrayals of God. For the remaining duration of the interview, I will have an open conversation with children in which I will ask them questions that help me to learn about their perceptions of God, how they constructed these perceptions, and why their view of God matters to them. For example, if a child draws God with big hands, I will ask her why she did this. If the child states that God controls everything in the world and so God needs big hand to do many things at the same time, then I will ask the child what sorts of things God does in the world. If the child says that God makes the earth spin and makes people do certain things, then I will ask the child if people can choose whether or not they do certain things and what happens when they don’t want to do what God wants them to do. This hypothetical interaction describes the general approach I will take in my conversations with children.
March 22, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

I am writing to acknowledge that the General Council Office of The United Church of Canada is aware of and supports the dissertation research proposed by Mr. Dave Csinos, which will involve studying children in five United Church of Canada congregations.

These five congregations will be representative of racial/ethnic minority, ethnic majority, Aboriginal, Francophone, and multicultural United churches. The title of Mr. Csinos’ study is “The Culture Effect: An Exploration of Children and Culture in The United Church of Canada”. This research is scheduled to be carried out between September 2013 and April 2014. The intent of this research is to discover how cultural contexts shape children’s theological understanding.

Because Mr. Csinos will be working directly with children, The United Church of Canada requires a written police records check be submitted to the General Council Office before he will be given access to working in any United Church congregation. Once this Duty of Care requirement has been satisfied, then the General Council Office of The United Church of Canada is willing to help Mr. Csinos in connecting with the relevant churches and participants as defined above.

It is our hope that in addition to sharing research results, Mr. Csinos will be able to work with The United Church of Canada on possible ways the research might be most productive.

Please let me know if you have any other questions, or need additional information.

Sincerely,

The Rev. Dr. Bruce Gregersen
General Council Officer, Programs
The United Church of Canada

---

*Since requesting this letter, I removed the Francophone congregation from my list of participants and revised the title of my research proposal.
Appendix I

Letter of Support from [Redacted] *

March 21, 2013

To Whom It May Concern:

This is to acknowledge that I am aware of the research proposed by David Csinos that will involve studying children in congregations to discover how children make theological meaning in different cultural contexts. The title of his study is "The Culture Effect: An Exploration of Children and Culture in The United Church of Canada" and it will be carried out between September 2013 and April 2014.

As minister of [Redacted], a congregation in the All Native Circle Conference of the United Church of Canada, I support David’s research and am committed to engaging in ongoing discussion about the possibility of conducting research at our congregation.

David was quite clear that this letter needed to be on letterhead. We are a poor congregation and have no such luxury. Please be aware that [Redacted] has been in continuous operation at our present location since 1846 (when it was a Methodist Mission prior to Union) and our congregation is keenly aware of the great need for continued spiritual support in this community. I pray you will not hold our economic disadvantages as First Nation’s people against David in your deliberations.

Should you require any further information please do not hesitate to contact me at [Redacted] or via email at [Redacted].

In spirit,

[Redacted]

*Since requesting this letter, I revised the title of my research proposal.
Appendix J
Organizational Consent Document

*Where verbal assent is more appropriate than formal written assent (for example, an Aboriginal congregation), I will present the material in this letter in conversation with potential congregational leaders.

May 1, 2013

Dear ___________,

I am requesting that your congregation participates in a study that I am conducting to learn about how children make theological meaning (their understandings of God, church, and other religious and spiritual matters) in churches of different cultural compositions. Through this study, which is supported by the United Church of Canada, I hope to gain insight that will be useful for churches as they plan children’s ministry in contexts of different cultures and of cultural diversity.

As part of this study, I would like to visit four congregations in order to speak with leaders at each church, observe and participate in their Sunday morning children’s programs, and have conversations with approximately five children from each congregation. I am inviting your church to participate in this research because the United Church’s Program Coordinator for Intercultural Ministries thought that your congregation might be interested in being involved.

If you agree to allow me to conduct research at your congregation, I will visit your congregation a few times (likely between two and five times) in order to observe and participate in your church’s Sunday morning children’s ministry programming. As part of my research, I will ask you and other leaders in your congregation (such as board members, Christian education committee members, Sunday school teachers, or parents) to meet with me and a research assistant for a conversation that will last between one and two hours. During this conversation, participants will be asked to share about your church, its culture, and its ministry with children. My research assistant and I would also need to meet with approximately five children (between the ages of six and 12) who are part of your congregation for individual interviews that will last between 45 and 90 minutes. During these conversations, I will ask the children to draw pictures and talk about matters related to the purpose of this study. I will ask the children questions about their religious views and talk with them about their drawings.

While there is a possibility that some participants may feel uncomfortable discussing some personal views, it is unlikely that your congregation and any of its members will experience discomfort or harm by participating in this study. It will be clearly explained to participants that they are not obligated to answer any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Confidentiality will be strongly implemented and it will be clearly explained to participants that they have the right to not answer any questions that they don’t want to answer or share anything that they do not wish to share. To keep things confidential, I’ll give each church and each participant a fictitious name. All research material will be kept in a locked box to which I will have sole access and all digital files will be password protected.

Should you choose to have your congregation participate in this study, your church’s involvement can help congregations better adapt programs and ministries to meet children’s needs and better understand how to nurture positive views of cultural diversity.

The participation of your church and of each participant in this study is voluntary. If any person does not want to be involved, they simply need to decline from participation. If a person decides that she/he would like to participate, this person can choose to stop participating at any time with no
consequences. Additionally, if you decide to allow me to conduct research at your congregation, you may choose to have your church stop participating at any time throughout the process. In the event that you choose to withdraw your church, or in the event that an individual participant chooses to withdraw, any information that I learn as part of this project until the point of withdrawal can still be used in my research.

I am conducting this study to fulfill requirements for the Doctor of Theology program at Emmanuel College (University of Toronto) and the Toronto School of Theology. I will write results up as a dissertation report that will be distributed to faculty supervisors and made available electronically via the University of Toronto library. If appropriate, I plan on writing and presenting about the findings of this research in further publications and at conferences. Additionally, as a supporting organization, the United Church of Canada will have access to the results of this research. In all cases, your name, the name of your church, and the name of all other participants from your congregation will not appear in any of this material. You may obtain information about the results of the study by contacting me after it is completed (spring 2015) at 519-458-4021 or dave.csinos@mail.utoronto.ca.

If you have questions or require more information about the study, please contact me or my supervisor, Dr. Pamela Couture:

David Csinos
dave.csinos@mail.utoronto.ca

Dr. Pamela Couture
pamela.couture@utoronto.ca

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Toronto Office of Research Ethics. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact the Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca.

Thank you for considering having your congregation participate in this study.

Sincerely,

David Csinos
CONSENT

On behalf of my congregation, I have read the information presented in the request to participate in the study being conducted by David Csinos, of Emmanuel College of Victoria University in the University of Toronto. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the congregation’s involvement in this study, and to receive any additional details I wanted to know about the study. I agree to allow my congregation to participate in this study and I understand that the congregation—along with individual participants—may withdraw at any time.

____________________________  _____________________________     ________________
Name of Congregational Leader   Signature of Congregational Leader   Date

In my opinion, the person who has signed above is voluntarily agreeing to allow her/his congregation to participate in this study and understands the nature of the study and the results of participation.

______________________________  ________________________
Signature of Researcher   Date
PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 28990

June 11, 2013

Dr. Pamela Couture and Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Mr. David Csinos
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Dear Dr. Pamela Couture, Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson and Mr. David Csinos,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "An exploration of children and culture in the United Church of Canada"

Ethics Approval
Original Approval Date: June 11, 2013
Expiry Date: June 10, 2014
Continuing Review Level: 1

We are writing to advise you that the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Education Research Ethics B has granted approval to the above-named research protocol under the REB's delegated review process. Your protocol has been approved for a period of one year and ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events in the research should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your current ethics approval. Note that annual renewals for studies cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry.

If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager
APPENDIX 3

PROTOCOL REFERENCE # 28990

June 4, 2014

Dr. Pamela Couture and Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson  Mr. David Csinos
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY  VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Dear Dr. Pamela Couture, Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson and Mr. David Csinos,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "An exploration of children and culture in the United Church of Canada"

ETHICS APPROVAL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Original Approval Date: June 11, 2013</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Expiry Date: June 10, 2015</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continuing Review Level: 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Renewal: 1 of 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research protocol through the Research Ethics Board (REB) delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your protocol. Note that annual renewals for protocols cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager

OFFICE OF RESEARCH ETHICS
McMurrich Building, 12 Queen’s Park Crescent West, 2nd Floor, Toronto, ON M5S 1S8 Canada
Tel: +1 416 946-3273  Fax: +1 416 946-5763  ethics.review@utoronto.ca  http://www.research.utoronto.ca/for-researchers-administrators/ethics/
Dear Dr. Pamela Couture, Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson and Mr. David Csinos,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "An exploration of children and culture in the United Church of Canada"

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research protocol through the Research Ethics Board (REB) delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your protocol. Note that annual renewals for protocols cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Sarah Wakefield, Ph.D.
REB Chair

Dean Sharpe
REB Manager
May 27, 2016

Dr. Pamela Couture and Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Mr. David Csinos
VICTORIA UNIVERSITY

Dear Dr. Pamela Couture, Dr. Natalie Wigg-Stevenson and Mr. David Csinos,

Re: Your research protocol entitled, "An exploration of children and culture in the United Church of Canada"

We are writing to advise you that you have been granted annual renewal of ethics approval to the above-referenced research protocol through the Research Ethics Board (REB) delegated process. Please note that all protocols involving ongoing data collection or interaction with human participants are subject to re-evaluation after 5 years. Ongoing research under this protocol must be renewed prior to the expiry date.

Please ensure that you submit an Annual Renewal Form or a Study Completion Report 15 to 30 days prior to the expiry date of your protocol. Note that annual renewals for protocols cannot be accepted more than 30 days prior to the date of expiry as per our guidelines.

Any changes to the approved protocol or consent materials must be reviewed and approved through the amendment process prior to its implementation. Any adverse or unanticipated events should be reported to the Office of Research Ethics as soon as possible. If your research is funded by a third party, please contact the assigned Research Funding Officer in Research Services to ensure that your funds are released.

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research.

Yours sincerely,

Matthew Brower, Ph.D.
REB Chair


———. *Children's Ministry that Fits: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Nurturing Children's Spirituality*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011.


Mattis, Jacqueline S., Muninder K. Ahluwalia, Sheri-Ann E. Cowie, and Aria M. Kirkland-Harris. “Ethnicity, Culture, and Spiritual Development.” In The Handbook of


