

Forms of Parental Involvement in the Spiritual Development of Children: Lessons from Grace Community Christian Ministries Church in Kitengela.

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the forms through which parents are involved in developing the spiritual welfare of their children. The study utilised a case study design to focus on Grace Community Christian Ministries Church (GCCM) in Kitengela. Data collection methods involved the use of interviews. A small group of nine parents - participants - from GCCM church membership was selected. The collected data was further analyzed thematically. The following themes were generated: teaching, Bible stories, family activities, prayer, modelling, Church attendance, choice of school, exhaustion and lack of time, lack of support from spouse, inexperience and, information gap. It was revealed that some of the ways parents got involved in nurturing their children spiritually included: teaching, Bible stories, family activities, prayer, modelling, Church attendance and choice of school for the children. However, the most common methods used were Church attendance and Sunday school. The paper thus recommends that GCCM church should train parents on how to empower their children spiritually at home so that they do not only rely on the activities in Sunday school.

Key Terms: Church, parental involvement, spiritual development, nurture, children, early age

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Introduction

Christian children should go through Christian enculturation so that even after they are far from home, they will maintain the Christian discipline instilled in them at their tender age by their parents. God took no chance when it came to children's education. God commanded the parents to teach their children diligently (Deuteronomy 6:6-9). The parents, on the other hand, seem to have relinquished their God-given assignment to schools and the church. The result of training a child in the path of life that he should walk through is that even in old age, the child will not turn from what they have been taught (Proverbs 22:6). The child does not remain a child. He/she grows into an adult but what was imparted into the child's life determines what kind of an adult one will become. Nurturing at a young age makes the spiritual aspect of the child. Therefore, childhood is a window of opportunity for training a child; once the window has closed, the opportunity is lost.

This study was informed by Fowler's theory of faith development in children. According to Ratcliff (2008), James Fowler's theory is one of the stage theories related to spiritual and religious development that has been most enduring. The second and the third stages of this theory discuss the children between ages 2-11, and since the author's focus was on assessing the spiritual nurture of children of ages 3-10, then this theory would be considered relevant to the study. According to Dirks (2001), Fowler, the founder of faith development theory, describes six stages of development in faith at different age groups. These stages are intuitive-projective faith (2-7 years.), Mythical-Literal Faith (8-11 years), Synthetic-Conventional Faith (12-22 years.), Individuative-Reflective Faith (young adulthood), Conjunctive Faith (middle adulthood and beyond), and Universalizing. For the purpose of this paper, however, only the first and the second stages are adopted as they fall between 2 – 12 years, a relative age to what this paper (3-10 years) concentrates on. With respect to a child's faith development, as explained by the triadic pattern, the child has the parents' trust as a power centre, and as a

result, the parents are the best placed to introduce the child to God as a "centre of value". The parents can take advantage of this relationship between them and their child and introduce them to God. In the real sense, children become friends with their parents' friends because they often visit one another. In the case of the child's spiritual development, having family devotions and telling the child about God, as well as the child observing the parents spiritual behaviour at home, makes the child familiar with a godly environment at home.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Before the Jews were taken into exile, they are seen to be a tribe that was determined to bring up their children in the ways of God. Jewish education is as old as the Jewish nation. One would say that at the conception of the Jewish nation (which at that time was known by the name Hebrew) also was the conception of their education. This can be supported by Genesis 18:19, which states that "For I have chosen him (Abraham) so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what He has promised." At the time, that God was speaking in Genesis 18:19, Abraham had not yet borne Isaac. The birth of Isaac is in Genesis 21. What Abraham was to do with his son Isaac was expected to continue from generation to generation – it was long term.

Abraham and the other Hebrew patriarchs were nomads. Education at the time of the Hebrew patriarchs was natural and informal, and it included all aspects of life. It is also noted that the children were taught by example while watching their parents perform their daily duties, either religious or domestic. As the parents built altars and sacrificed to Yahweh, the children watched and learned why and how these rituals were done (Reed & Ronnie, 1993). Taking the example of Passover, this ritual was to be repeated every year after the Israelites settled in Canaan. They were to tell their children the genesis of

the Passover. God had told the Israelites way before that as they practiced the Passover and their sons ask them the meaning of the ceremony, they were to tell them of the great deliverance of the Lord while they were in Egypt (Exodus 13:14).

According to Reed and Ronnie (1993), there were three main teachers in the Hebrew community; the mother, the father and the priest. The mother was to teach the children while performing her house chores. They could tell their children stories of the patriarchs and other Hebraic heroes related to the acts of God in Hebrew history. For Hebrew fathers, their most important task was to teach their children the Mosaic Law and oral traditions of the people of God. The Children were to learn the Mosaic Law by memorization. Other than religious education, the father was to teach their male sons how to trade. Other than the parents, the priestly tribe of Levi was the nation's educators. The Levites were to train both the priests and the people in the Law concerning worship, sacrifices, festivals and other religious duties. They were to teach people about beliefs and concepts about God. The priests remained the primary public educators of the nation until the exile (Reed & Ronnie, 1993). In addition, a child reached the priest when he/she had received education from his parents. Thus, the primary educators of the children around the family were the parents. The teaching of the children in the Hebrew family was not without expectations – there were demands placed on the child – change of behaviour. Though there were no formal schools, there is a possibility that the priests had a particular place in the temple or a tent where they taught about the Mosaic Law and other subjects on ethics and civil duties.

Even in exile, the Jewish people were so keen on the education of their children regarding spiritual matters. According to Schoeman (1997), the post-exilic period is between 586BC-135AD (p. 408). Reed and Ronnie (1993) posit that Jewish education retained many of the components of pre-exilic education. All teaching still began at home, and the religious festivals of the Jews

continued to serve education functions. After the exile, the Jews were scattered in areas with both strong Hellenism and a large Jewish population, such as Alexandria in Egypt, where the Jews tended to adopt Greek educational practices (pp 51). As for Schoeman, Babylon, which was at the time the centre for culture and learning in the world, made the Hebrews understand the importance of the school. This influence made the Hebrew people establish schools even after the Babylonian exile (Schoeman, 1997).

Reed and Ronnie (1993) say that after the Jews were exiled, synagogues developed as a place of worship and study. In the temples, the scribes and the Rabbis did the education. After instruction at home until age six, the children received instruction at the synagogue. By A.D. 64, Joshua Ben Gamala, a high priest during the last days of the Temple, ordered that education be compulsory. He made it a requirement for the Jewish parents to send their boys to a synagogue school for religious education. The education was free, making it available to all regardless of economic standing. There was a synagogue in every city with at least ten Jewish males – this indicates how important the synagogue education was. Teaching in the synagogue was through repetition and memorization, and the boys learnt how to read. Some students could also learn how to write. The students mastered the Shema, a series of psalms, the creation story and the Levitical law. Besides, the boys learnt agricultural rules, festivals and feasts, marriage and divorce, civil and criminal law, the temple, and laws of purity and impurity. The scribes devoted themselves to scholarly pursuits and often made legal judgments with reference to the Torah, as they understood it. The term Rabbi originated from the Hebrew word and is typically used to refer to great Teacher. The Rabbis were therefore influential, and they eventually took over from the priests.

As the child develops physically, so should he/she also develop spiritually. This should be expected, especially of the children who are fortunate enough to possess a Christian background. Using examples from the Bible,

Inchley (1976) explains that both physical and spiritual development should happen concurrently. Samuel's conscious, dramatic call by God and his subsequent response can be attributed to his days of growing up as a child who had been given in faith to the Lord by his godly mother. Samuel grew in his boyhood in the presence of the Lord, and he grew both in favour and in stature with both the men and Lord (2 Sam 2:21, 26). Samuel had not yet known the Lord; he was in favour of the Lord (1 Samuel 3:7). According to Inchley (1976, pp. 18-19), the way Samuel grew is a scriptural pattern for every Christian child growing up happily in a godly environment. In such an environment, the child is likely to make a successful move towards responding the way Samuel did; "Speak Lord for your servant hears". Jesus' growth seems to mimic that of Samuel: Jesus grew in wisdom, stature, and in favour with God and man (Luke 2:52). Jesus grew up like other children, and yet he was the son of God, increasing in wisdom and favour with God at the same time as his physical growth. In Luke 1:80, the child John is described as growing and becoming strong in spirit.

The study of Samuel, Jesus and John shows that as the child develops physically and mentally to suit his environmental needs and relationships in a favourable environment, he grows and progresses spiritually in his developing relationship with God. Before Samson was conceived, God had already told the parents what he would become. Zechariah was told who John the Baptist would become. Hannah was to bring up Samuel to become a priest of God. The angel appeared to Mary and told him that he was to conceive a child who would be called the Son of the Most Highest God. All this time, God is appearing to parents and charging them with the responsibility of bringing up their children according to His will – so that these children can fulfil their purposes, which God has purposed for them. For this reason, every parent should bring up their children "in fear and trembling," knowing that they are just stewards of God in parenting ministry. Failure to bring up the child in God's will might make the child not be what God purposed him/her to be.

Ways through which Parents can Nurture their Children in the Contemporary Society

Bible Stories

Children between three to six years are often endowed with the capacity to think concretely and believe almost everything they are told. Due to concrete thinking, a child at this age makes a great deal of meaning from stories about Jesus and some of the little children in the Bible (Meier, 1977). For a child thinking as solidly at this age, everything is taken as it is told or explained to them by the parent. Therefore, the parents should take advantage of the childhood years and say to the child about Jesus in a language that the child will understand. There are children's storybooks, both religious and otherwise, that are tailor-made for the child's development by age. The parents should also make use of the Christian children's books to develop their children spiritually. As an observation, the parents are very keen while buying children's books for formal education – they should additionally be aware that spiritual development of the child is not an option but should be incorporated with the rest of learning. As it was for children of the Bible as Jesus and Samuel, being strong in spirit was co-existent with their growing in strength in the body.

Modeling

When the spiritual instruction of the child is woven into daily life, the child can observe the parent's day-to-day life. The child is influenced by the parent, how they live, communicate and do things. For example, if parents do not attend church but encourage their children to attend Sunday school with their neighbours, this may not go on for long since they will start wondering why their parents do not go to church. In addition, for those Sundays that the child may not feel like joining the neighbours to church, the parent will not have authority to coerce the child to attend church, as they are not practising the same. This is what Cline and Fay (2017) has to say about kids and learning from their parents;

Kids are born with a great capacity to learn to do things the way big people do. They

attempt to observe and imitate what they see. Their primary interest is to learn and do things the way their parents does (p. 42)

Parents are God's agents of influence; therefore, they should take the opportunity and direct their children to God. Richards (1983) says that learning in children takes place by observation and imitation of the behaviour of social models. The factors that encourage a child to model on another person are a long-term close relationship marked by warmth and affection and the opportunity to observe the model in a variety of life situations. In a live situation, the model is in a position to explain his or her behaviour and reveal the beliefs, values and feelings associated with behaviour. To understand this modelling effect further, Nemme (2008) gives an example of modelling that a child who observes the parent meditating is likely to show interest in meditation. He further explains that a child who sees the parent getting ready for the church will be eager to dress up and attend church. I agree with Richards, he is also in tandem with the Word of God where the Israelite parents were to commemorate Passover every year, and on their children's request, they were to explain why they were doing it. Parents' spirituality is essential for modelling because the parents cannot give what they do not have. Due to the decline of the extended family, the isolated nuclear family is solely responsible for spiritual formation. The family is indispensable in building character among family members – how parents live their faith in the context of the family relationship has an enormous impact (Balswick & Jack, 2007, pp. 145-146). Cline and Fay (2006) say, "The most responsible children come from families in which parents rarely use the word responsibility. It's a fact: responsibility cannot be taught; it must be caught". This explains well the concept of modelling.

Teaching

Newheiser and Elyse (2010) in their book, *You Never Stop Being a Parent*, have something important to say to parents. Some parents understand that childhood was

intended for a temporary season of training when children are equipped to live as wise, independent adults once that time comes; for this reason, many parents labour and pray for years. Newheiser and Elyse (2010) further state that that, though one does not stop being a parent even after the children are grown up, this season of parenting when the children are young is so significant that the entire book of the Bible is written about it. Proverbs is a training manual for parents to equip their children to live wisely and responsibly in the world. The parent's goal should be to bring up the child to maturity to become self-governing to be responsible adults in the world (Newheiser & Elyse, 2010).

Pelfrey (1988) discusses the meaning of Deuteronomy 11:19; "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." God knew that parents would spend more time with their children in routine activities than in a formal worship activity. God's intention was that our worship of Him should not be limited only to the time of formal activities of worship in church or at home. Pelfrey (1988) says that God should be made a regular participant in one's everyday life. Whether at home, away from home, when observing or talking about nature, during vocation seasons, celebrations, in new experiences or even in sad moments, a parent can take that opportunity and tell the children about God. They can pick an appropriate Bible story or averse to talk about God (Meier, 1988). The teaching should be natural and spontaneous. According to Leslie Shirley (1982, p. 13), children under seven years accept things on authority. At this stage, the child has little power to question the basis of any statements made to him.

For this reason, the parents should take advantage of this age to teach the child about God. Most of the things that children learn have a permanent effect on them. By the time, the child turns 11; the parents think or prepare the child for boarding school. They are also getting into teenage life where peer influence is a factor. As a result, the foundation that was laid on the child in their earlier

years by their parents has a significant effect on the child (Meier, 1988). Kotsonis (2018 pp. 22-23) explains that parents are so concerned with their children's worldly success other than being zealous in bringing them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord. The parents' task is educating themselves and their children in godliness – this is the most important task of parents, and it has profound spiritual benefits for all parties involved.

Prayer

Prayer is communicating with God. The disciples of Jesus had known that John the Baptist used to pray and had taught his disciples. They observed the same culture of prayer from their master and requested Him to teach them how to pray. No one would be asking to be taught something that is not important to life. As the children are taught other things at an early age, they should also be taught how to pray. For them to get interested and desire to pray then the children must observe the parents praying – this calls for Christian parents to be prayerful if teaching their children on prayer will at all bear fruits. Hance (1986) notes that prayer is an experience that is easily grasped when "caught" rather than when it is "taught". She recounts that, "fortunate is the child who from his earliest years hears sincere prayer in understandable words about significant concerns." A parent can use pictures and other visuals to heighten the desire in a child to pray; images either of people praying individually or in a group.

Choice of School

Studies have also indicated the choice of school by the parents as a mode through which spiritual nurturing of children can be enhanced. Other than the child achieving academic goals in school, the parents need to be concerned with the continued spiritual growth of their children. For this matter, the parent should be worried about the kind of school that he/she is taking the child for their academic growth. Looking for a school that, other than offering formal education, the school also promotes spiritual nourishment of the child is essential. According

to Lowrie and David (1986), the educational philosophy and purpose of the school should be based on the revelation of God and not on the reason of the natural man. Other than having objectives that are common to all schools, in addition, a Christian school should have distinctive objectives that have a biblical perspective. This is common in Christian or Missionary schools. One of the essentials for quality education for a Christian school is a primary desire to see God honoured through education offered to children and young people. Other than academic qualifications, teachers in Christian schools should be spiritually qualified - those that God has given the gift of teaching who find their natural place in the classroom with children. Such a teacher will ensure that the child is empowered spiritually. When it comes to curriculum, the difference in Christian schools is not so much in the subjects offered, but in how these subjects are taught from the Christian perspective (pp. 606-613). It is, therefore, the parent's responsibility to ensure that they get a Christian school for their children with the full awareness that the school is not going to take the parents' responsibility of nurturing their children spiritually but will just supplement the responsibility.

Church Attendance

There is a relationship between the church and the home. The parents' church attendance influences the child's spiritual growth in two ways. Firstly, by virtue of the parents going to church, the child is influenced to attend the church. The child grows knowing that attending church is part of life and develops a long-life habit that has a positive impact on her/him. It is by attending a church that the child gets an opportunity to take part in Sunday school activities and also make friends from the church who assumingly will influence his/her life towards godliness. Secondly, by the parents attending church, they get an opportunity to be empowered both for their children and for their own sake. This is what Feucht and Clark (1986) describe as follows:

The home is responsible for training children,
but the church is responsible for equipping

parents on training their children. For this to be effective, the church program must be attractive and motivating to influence children and encourage them to participate meaningfully (p. 33).

Caldwell (2000) also notes that "It is within the community of faith that a person's journey in faith is both supported and challenged and so grows and evolves." She continues to say that the church supports and educates adults in ways that enable them to set tables of faith in their homes. With that, parents are able to read Bible stories for their children listen to their questions and, with God's help, make efforts to answer these questions together. The word from the pulpit, sharing experiences and ideas with other parents, making friendships and praying together will make parents strong and empower them to minister to their children.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the respondents knew their general responsibilities to their children that included attending to their basic needs like shelter, food, clothing, discipline, schooling, ensuring they attended church and teaching their children about God. The following are the various ways that parents in GCCM used to develop their children spiritually.

Teaching

Most of the respondents involved themselves in teaching their children the word of God. From the collected data, five out of nine respondents taught their children the word of God, though, to some, this exercise was sporadic in how and when it was done. One of the respondents said that the child is so young (three and a half years), making it hard for her to teach the word of God. However, she had come up with a way of teaching where after reading a Bible verse to her daughter, she would come up with a simple song on the theme of the scripture and teach it to the child. Another respondent said that though she had taught the child how to pray, she had not engaged in reading the Bible or helping the

child do a memory verse. One of the respondents said, "I teach the child about God and His power and also help the child say memory verses together with my husband."

Modeling

Some of the activities that the participants said that they would want their children to take after them are; prayer, attending church, being a good parent, studying the Bible, working hard and serving in the church. These activities varied from parent to parent. On the other hand, in stating the things that the parents do that they wouldn't want their children to take after them, the parents mentioned things like being angered easily, not tithing, lack of involvement in church and, not studying the Bible. The parents who had difficulty in tithing said "let me tell you the truth pastor, I have tried to tithe but I am not able to, and I know it's wrong." Two of the participants also said that they often quarrelled with their spouses in the presence of their children. One of the parents owned up that she has been taking alcohol, and she would not want her daughter to take after her.

Prayer

On prayer, only one parent did not teach about prayer or prayed with her child. She admitted that due to her not taking time to build herself up spiritually, she was not able to empower her children. She was not also keen on attending church service but was very keen to ensure that her children attended Sunday school. However, some of the eight respondents that involved their children in prayer did not go beyond praying for meals. Some parents explained that they were good at praying for their children but not actually teaching them about prayers or allowing them actually to pray. One of them said the children are usually taught in Sunday school. One respondent who was keen on praying with her children said that "we have a time of prayer in our house; we share prayer request amongst ourselves as a family even among the children. We pray for the sick, financial challenges, and the children's education, amongst other needs. This makes the children know God as their provider."

Bible Stories

From the findings, not many participants utilized Bible stories as a way of developing their children spiritually. Six out of nine participants never told their children Bible stories and the three participants that did not do it regularly. Regarding this issue, one of the respondents asked which kind of stories was supposed to be told to the child. This is indicative that most of the participants never used this method simply because they did not know it was effective. On the other hand, for one to tell a Bible story, he or she must have read the Bible, so the failure to do so was probably due to parents' inability to read the Bible. One of the participants said that this interview was a revelation to her as she learnt some ways to empower her children that she did not know before.

Family Activities

Seven parents did activities together with their children. These activities ranged from family fellowship, celebrating Easter and Christmas festivals, praise and worship in the house, attending Christian wedding, and celebrating birthdays as a family. Other than eating and drinking during a birthday party, the parent who mentioned this activity explained that she ensured that she always prayed for the child celebrating the birthday. Five parents did more than one activity with their children. Some parents never explained to their children why they practiced these religious activities, while others did explain. Other than religious activities, three respondents said that they also engaged their children in other general activities like doing house chores together and playing together as a family. One of the respondents gave a detail of the activities she did together with her children, including her spouse. This is what she said, "we do praise and worship once a week, cook together, watch movies and clean the house together with the children. We also celebrate birthdays for children together as a family." Two respondents acknowledged that they never did activities together with their children because they have never known that this was important for the child.

Church Attendance

This is one of the activities that parents used to empower their children. Even on the Sundays that the parent would not attend church due to work, sickness, being away from home or due to other reasons, the parent ensured that the child attended Sunday school as long as a bigger child or another family accompanied her or him. For big children aged 8 to 10 years, they were able to find their way to church even in the absence of their parents. One of the parents said that the reason she took her two children to Sunday school (aged 5 and 8 years) was so that the child can learn about God and, from that knowledge, be able to defend their spiritual space. She further explained that she ensured that the children attended Sunday school to get used to it and therefore take church attendance as part of their lives. Most of the parents made sure that their children attended Sunday school to get spiritual nourishment and socialize with other children in the church. One of the participants said that the child goes to church only when she attends herself, but this is because she is less than four years of age and she does not have elder siblings to accompany her. Another respondent said, "I send my child to Sunday school because as a parent I am limited in one way or another on how and what to teach the child on spiritual matters."

Choice of School

When selecting schools for their children, the parents considered the following factors; security of the school, the teacher/pupil relationship, the distance of the school from home, school fees-affordability, teacher/pupil ratio, the hygiene of the school, especially the ablution, quality of education, discipline and the religious background and commitment of the school to the child's excellence. While one of the parents expressed that the spirituality of the school was not a factor, the remaining eight parents said that it was a top priority when choosing a school for their children. However, a few said that there has to be equilibrium; that is, other than the spiritual aspect, the school should perform well academically and

its environment is conducive for children wellbeing. One of the respondents said, "as much as the spirituality of the school is very important, one has to consider other factors as well, and so you cannot make a decision based on religion alone."

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusion: The spiritual wellbeing and religious life of children is a complex practice that requires parental involvement to bring up holistic and God-fearing adults. As depicted in this paper, every parent ensured that their children attended Sunday school as a way of empowering them spiritually. First, there are parents who nurtured their children spiritually at home and were keen to make sure that they attended Sunday school. Secondly, even those who attended church randomly and those who did not take up their responsibility thoughtfully ensured that their children attended Sunday school. While some parents did that so that the church can supplement what they were already doing at home, others probably did this to compensate for the gaps that they created by their failure to nurture their children spiritually as expected of them. No participant was able to utilize all the seven methods that included; teaching, modelling, and use of Bible stories, prayer, family activities, Church attendance and choice of school for the spiritual nurture of their children. The most utilized forms were teaching children about prayer and attending Sunday school but still, about prayer, some parents could only teach their child on the meal grace. The study also indicated that while choosing a Christian school for their children, parents had to look at other factors like performance, school security and financial affordability, among others.

Recommendation

With reference to Fowler's Theory of "Stages of Faith Development" GCCM Church should communicate to the parents that the spiritual nurture for the child is critical at the first and the second stages of faith development – the Intuitive-Projective faith and the Mythical- Literal faith stages. These are formative years of the child of which the child tends to be with the parents most of the

time before they get to the age where peer influence plays a great role in their lives. The church should plan for a course on how parents should nurture their children spiritually. The course should be based on the content and the process of how to do it. The church should also communicate to parents that a child's spiritual need is a basic need and therefore they should be able to integrate it with other household chores. As the family engages in household activities, the parents can take that opportunity to communicate Christian principles appropriately. Spiritual activities like Christmas and Easter can be a good opportunity to tell the children why these activities are commemorated every year. For some children, church is the only place they receive spiritual nurture. This calls for the GCCM Sunday school department to continue teaching the children with due diligence. The church should also look to ways on how to bring the male parent on board for those who are married: mothers are more involved with spiritual nurture of their children than fathers are. The church should encourage the parents to build themselves spiritually for their own sake and for the sake of their children. Other than attending church services in GCCM, they should engage in personal Bible study and prayer at home. This is the only way they would be able to teach their children the things about God. The church should look for ways on how to be close to parents so that at the time of need these parents can freely share the challenges they go through as they nurture their children spiritually. This would create an opportunity for counselling or referral if need be. Fatigue and exhaustion are part of life because working is necessary if parents are to put food on the table. Other than providing for physical needs like shelter, food and clothing, every parent should know that spiritual need is part of basic provision in order for the development of the child to be holistic. Therefore, in the midst of many activities that the parents engage in, they should also make their children to be part of their daily business.

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