

**Spiritual formation in secondary education:  
An investigation into how children use  
collective worship within secondary education**

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by

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# **Spiritual formation in secondary education: An investigation into how children use collective worship within secondary education**

**Stephen Birkinshaw**

## Abstract

The past thirty years has witnessed significant changes in the practice of collective worship in UK schools, although the statutory requirements relating to collective worship have not changed since 1988. Predominantly, collective worship in schools is managed and delivered by adults. However I became aware, from my professional context and practice as a chaplain in a faith-based urban secondary school, little attention has been given to the ways children actually experience and make use of collective worship. The aim of my research has therefore been to gain a more child-centred perspective on collective worship, and to generate a deeper understanding of how children might use collective worship to reflect on their relationships and life experiences.

My research methods reflect the aim to privilege the children's voices: the primary data source comes from children's own accounts of participating in collective worship, using a longitudinal qualitative method across four years. Using a definition drawn from Hay and Nye (1996, 2006) and Hyde (2008), the study employs thematic analysis to interpret the data using the framework of spirituality as relationship with God (or Transcendent), self and other (including people and the world).

The results revealed in this study show that children construct collective worship as a sacred space in which they are able to reflect on their own understandings of God, faith and the world. Crucial to this process is an emerging sense of self and its connection with these relationships. Through critical reflection within collective worship children encounter a particular dynamic that I have identified as reluctance-permission-opportunity. I therefore argue this dynamic underpins a child's evolving sense and

awareness of faith and relationship with God, other and self, and represents aspects of a three-dimensional model of spiritual reflection and maturity. The study concludes that the sacred space of collective worship is actively constructed by the children, building on the established frameworks offered by the statutory provision of school-based collective worship. The constructed sacred space of collective worship is – for the children – precious, set apart, revelatory, special and life-changing. As such there is a sense of ownership by the children of this sacred space.

This thesis suggests new approaches to researching and understanding children's spirituality as well as implications for professional practice. It represents a contribution to knowledge by advancing a more nuanced understanding of children's spiritual development than currently exists. The notion of a three-dimensional dynamic also offers a contribution to theoretical understandings of the concepts of spiritual formation. The findings of the research are seen as having implications for professional practice in collective worship by arguing for a child-centred approach to critical spiritual exploration and reflection, and therefore to the design and provision of collective worship.

## Summary of Portfolio

The four assignments in the portfolio preceding this thesis chart the evolution of my thinking during the first stage of the professional doctorate programme. The initial questions emerged from my personal experience as a school chaplain in an urban high school in the North-West of England. I commenced this research in order to focus on children's experiences of collective worship, and to investigate how engaging in collective worship might support spiritual formation and be an expression of their spirituality.

I used my Literature Review in year one to critically reflect on literature concerning children and spirituality and to gain a clearer understanding of how spirituality is formed and developed in the secondary school environment. I considered three key voices – Kate Adams, Brendan Hyde, and David Hay (alongside Rebecca Nye) – to craft a working definition of children's spirituality and to investigate researching spirituality in children. Additionally, I drew on the work of Richard Osmer to establish how practical theology could contribute to this task. From the literature I identified several gaps in existing knowledge: how and when changes come about in children's spirituality, and what prompts these; how relationship with family, friends and the wider world affects children's spirituality and spiritual formation; and how children's understanding of and relationship with self influences spirituality. These questions served to guide my research journey as I move forward into the data collection phase.

In order to investigate how children's spirituality changes across high school, and the influence of collective worship on spirituality, I designed a longitudinal qualitative research project. As this project would extend over four years, I commenced data collection early in the second year of my doctorate with twelve children who had just begun high school. For my Publishable Article in year two, I used data from the first year of my research to focus on the connection between friendship and children's spirituality. I argued that, for children, friendships have significant impact on both the formation and development of spirituality. Specifically, friendships have substantial influence on children's understanding of self and other which are key to their

spirituality, and that social media and technology have a principal role in sustaining these friendships.

I used the Reflection on Practice piece in year three to investigate the role of journalling as a method in my own research practice, and in particular the development of reflexivity in my journalling. I argued critical incidents or patterns of observed behaviour triggered greater critical awareness and reflexivity in journalling, which informed my ongoing practice as a researching practitioner. My Research Proposal in year four outlined the case for a longitudinal qualitative project which seeks the child voice in comprehending how engaging in collective worship helps children understand, develop, explore and express themselves, their spirituality and relationships. The results of this research are presented in this Thesis, and offer exciting contributions to the practice and future of collective worship.

## Introduction

The research within this thesis originates in my experiences of collective school worship as a chaplain in a Church of England High School in an urban area of the north of England. In this thesis, I will present the results of my research and the critical questions which have arisen from this. I designed a longitudinal qualitative research project to privilege the children's voices in investigating their experiences of collective worship over four years. I set out to ask, how does collective worship help children understand, explore and express their spirituality? How does collective worship help children better understand their relationship to God, the people and world around them, and ultimately themselves? What is the current place of collective worship in secondary education? What is its purpose? The issue is problematized as this: the practice of collective worship is often not child-centred, extant research and scholarship shows collective worship to be adult-focused ('top-down'), based on pedagogical praxis, and often politically/religiously influenced. I argue collective worship should have greater focus on the spiritual exploration, expression and life-experiences of the child in order to nurture spirituality.

Collective worship is a legal requirement in UK schools and has been enshrined in law since the 1944 Education Act. Children are obliged to daily attend collective worship, which is intended to be broadly Christian in nature (Department for Education, 1944). In reality, collective worship takes various forms. The value and consistency varies across the educational landscape, and in England there are significant differences in collective worship practice between primary and secondary schools, and between faith-based and non-faith-based schools. The purpose of collective worship is to provide worship which is special to the child as well as separate from ordinary school life, and for children to pay 'reverence or veneration' to God or a divine being (Department for Education, 1994). Collective worship is intended to be a spiritual and sacred experience, however children have not been consulted as to how (if at all) they find collective worship a spiritual experience, and if they find collective worship to be sacred.

My experience of collective worship, anecdotally, was that it was planned, presented and managed by the senior leaders and teachers in the school. I became concerned about the lack of the child's voice both in the content and structure of collective worship and, more significantly, in understanding how children find collective worship to be sacred and special along with relevant to their current spiritual experiences. Were the topics and issues discussed in collective worship pertinent to children's lived experience, their relationships and their sense of spirituality? Was there a difference, a disconnect, between what the adults and children considered 'relevant' to the children's lives? I committed myself to researching collective worship from the child's perspective by designing a child-centred methodology, detailed in chapter two, in which I would be seeking to hear the child's voice and paying careful attention to the children's reflections on their collective worship experiences.

Collective worship has received some research attention in recent years, from which I was able to build a more comprehensive understanding of collective worship practice. I discovered the form, frequency and content of collective worship has been examined (AHRC, 2015; CYPNow, 2016), but this has chiefly been investigating the adult's perspective by surveying school leaders and teachers about the preparation, delivery and management of collective worship. This provided insight into adult's struggles with the religious nature of collective worship being 'broadly Christian (Inglis, 2012), or in selecting content which valued individuality as well as the 'collective' nature of collective worship (Cheetham, 2000), However the research does not consider children's experiences of engaging in collective worship, leading me perceive a disconnect between those who lead collective worship and the children who receive it. Research which has been undertaken to ascertain the children's experiences either focusses on children's sense of opposition to the provision of collective worship, or on an identified variation in approaches from the primary to secondary phase (Gill, 2004; Thanissaro, 2018). My perception was an absence in existing research of children's perspectives of their experiences of collective worship – what it actually felt like to participate in and engage with collective worship, the

reasons children engaged or disengaged in collective worship, how engaging in collective worship may or may not have shaped and formed their spirituality or helped them explore current or past life experiences.

Therefore, in response to my perception, I resolved to research collective worship from the children's point of view. I formed my research objectives: to intentionally seek out the child's voice regarding their experiences of engaging with and participating in collective worship; to ask how engaging in collective worship helps children understand, develop, explore and express themselves, their spirituality and relationships. My research was not attempting to find out which collective worship topics or themes would best communicate the church's or school's religious rules or values. Neither was my intention to argue for the value or place of collective worship in schools, or to support those who consider collective worship a valuable part of children's education. My research, instead, focussed on seeking understanding of how children experience collective worship, about ascertaining a view from their position about their engagement in collective worship, if in any way children find collective worship to be sacred, and how children might value engaging in collective worship.

My understanding of children's spirituality derives from the work of David Hay and Rebecca Nye, Robert Coles and Brandan Hyde (Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2003, 2008; Nye & Hay, 1996). From their work I constructed a working definition of spirituality which acted as a theoretical framework: spirituality relates to a person's understanding or experiences of a relationship with God (or Transcendent), humanity and the natural world, and the connection of self to these relationships. But from this, I was concerned to consider how collective worship influenced children's spiritual development over a number of years, therefore adopting a longitudinal approach and privileging the child's voice.

To achieve my research objectives I selected qualitative methods to seek a deep and rich understanding of the children's responses (to collective worship) and the significance of these reflections. I drew on Jennifer Mason, Colin Robson and David Silverman's research to design a qualitative

methodology in order to gain a deep and nuanced understanding of the children's experiences in collective worship (J. Mason, 2002; Robson, 2002; Silverman, 2010). Sarah Dunlop's work was pertinent to me, as she used visual methods followed by interviews to understand children's religious views in Central and Eastern Europe (Dunlop, 2008, 2010). Adopting Dunlop's pattern of collecting visual then interview data, I asked the children to construct a relationship map and interviewed each child about their beliefs, practices and relationships. After this I used group interviews to collect data, following David Hay and Rebecca Nye's use of interviews to research children's spirituality. I then employed thematic analysis (Joffe & Yardley, 2003) to interpret the data, and from this constructed my thesis argument. (See chapter two for a fuller discussion of my methodology). In employing a longitudinal aspect, I identified changes over time in how the children engaged with collective worship across their high school lives.

This thesis argues that, from my context and practice, children use collective worship to construct a 'sacred space' to critically reflect on understanding of faith, the world, God, and connection of self to these relationships. I demonstrate how children's understanding, development, exploration and expression of themselves, their spirituality and relationships through collective worship is underpinned by a dynamic of what I term 'reluctance-permission-opportunity'. This dynamic is experienced in different ways at different times, through engagement with the themes and issues presented in collective worship.

I consider my thesis to be important for a number of reasons. As this project stems from my professional experiences, I seek to shape practice by better understanding how the children in my school might experience collective worship. Additionally, in order to inform other collective worship practitioners, the insights gained from the research will allow me to contribute to others' professional knowledge and practice about the performance of collective worship. Finally, I hope to offer valuable insight to collective worship policy makers into how collective worship is received by children, in order to better shape future legislation.

In the first chapter of this thesis, I outline the professional experiences and my context and practice that led to the establishment of the research project. I describe current practices and policies of collective worship, and the need for the 'child's voice' in the research. Chapter two details the methodology of the project as a longitudinal qualitative research project. I also outline the ethical dimensions of the research, as well as the practical issues of data collection and analysis. In chapters three, four, and five I use the data to suggest a new understanding of *how* and *why* children engage with collective worship and what they experience. I argue that children experience a three-fold dynamic of reluctance, permission and opportunity in engaging with collective worship, and that this underpins children's evolving sense and awareness of faith, God, other (relationships) and self (identity). These chapters provide the evidence for my thesis argument, which is that children construct collective worship as sacred, a special and meaningful experience in which they critically reflect on understanding of faith, the world and God, and the connection of self to these relationships. In chapter six, I offer constructive reflections on my research by discussing the implications, applications and limitations of the study. Finally in this chapter, I consider lessons learned from my project and suggest areas for further research.

I hope this thesis will be of benefit in several ways. It is offered as a distinctive contribution to knowledge in the area of secondary school collective worship. For collective worship practitioners, this thesis will provide greater insight into collective worship and in particular how children engage in and experience collective worship. It is proposed as a contribution to knowledge in terms of furthering understanding of children's spirituality, and in the methods used to research with children.

# **Chapter 1: *The context and practice of collective worship in the UK***

## **Introduction**

In this thesis I argue that children use collective worship to construct a sacred space, to critically reflect on their understanding of faith, the world, God, and connection of self with these relationships. This qualitative research project privileges the child's voice, and in so doing develops an understanding of how engaging in collective worship helps children understand, develop, explore and express themselves, their spirituality and relationships. In focusing on the child's voice, I have discovered children experience a three-dimensional dynamic which underpins their engagement with collective worship. This dynamic enables children to construct their experience of collective worship as sacred and offers insights into the practice of leading and managing of collective worship for a professional audience.

As part of my role as School Chaplain within a Church of England High School, I am involved in caring for the spiritual needs of those within the school community – primarily the children, but also adults. A significant part of my responsibility is to organise, deliver, review and direct collective worship. My research project arose from this very involvement in delivering collective worship – sometimes referred to as 'assemblies' (in the UK 'collective worship' is the term given to describe the act of children assembling for religious worship – in my context Christian – within the school).<sup>1</sup> In my school collective worship takes place at the start of the day, at 8:30am, also the traditional model. The children usually gather in the school hall or other appropriately sized space. Collective worship is led by adults, often the senior staff, and comprises stories or readings from the

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<sup>1</sup> In the UK there is a legal requirement for all school to provide a 'daily act of collective worship which is broadly Christian in nature' (Department for Education, 1994). I will more fully outline the policy of collective worship in the UK in the next section of this chapter.

Bible, an explanation and application of the readings, the children singing a hymn or song, and a time of prayer or personal reflection. The children meet for collective worship in this way two or three times a week, and at special times (Remembrance, Christmas, Easter, and at the end of the school year) additional gatherings occur.

Although I came to the role of chaplain with some experience of delivering and shaping school-based collective worship, I had not been in post long before I began to question the significance of children's experiences of collective worship. What did the children consider the purpose of collective worship – did they find it useful to their lives? Was their perception of its usefulness connected to their desire to engage or disengage with collective worship? Opinions I heard from children about collective worship were mixed – ranging from those who found it very interesting, helpful and enjoyable, to others for whom it appeared wholly irrelevant and barely tolerable. A desire to further investigate emerged.

### **1.1 Emerging questions about collective worship**

In addition to questioning the effectiveness and practice of collective worship itself, I also experienced a growing unease regarding the 'top-down' nature of collective worship. Did this 'top-down' nature feed children's sense of disengagement in collective worship? I was troubled by the power dynamics I perceived as present in delivering and directing collective worship: important decisions regarding themes or materials were in the hands of a few powerful adults and not discussed or challenged. In fact the hierarchy in the leadership structure of the school was replicated in the management of collective worship. It was assumed that the senior staff were sufficiently experienced and educated to be able to lead and oversee meaningful collective worship. Led by senior figures in the school, such as the Headteacher, Deputy Heads, Assistant Heads and Heads of Year, the children approached assemblies in an attentive and respectful manner – they sat and listened to whatever was being presented. However, I had concerns regarding content – including factual accuracy as I witnessed errors (for

example, in historical context when explaining Jewish and Roman customs in Jesus' time), and I was uneasy with the possible use (or abuse) of collective worship for instruction without balance. Some leaders had a pedagogical approach to collective worship, teaching children their particular theological understandings (and that of their faith traditions) and using Bible verses often removed from context, while others used Biblical excerpts didactically to teach about selected themes such as creation or salvation.

I began to ask where the children's voice was found in the content and structure of collective worship. Within fulfilling legal obligations of collective worship, would children have a different view of what was relevant at a particular stage in their life, and what Biblical principles or faith practices they would consider important to their spiritual development and their life experiences? Was there room for a more collaborative approach to collective worship, or had 'it always been like this' and so was unchangeable? I was becoming troubled about these structures and dynamics, and more committed to testing my questions through my research.

### ***A personal interest in researching collective worship***

I confess a personal drive for this research project in the professional and practical as well as theological aspects. As a practitioner I enjoy leading collective worship, being 'on the ground' and 'in the mix' of reflection and exploration. I enjoy critically exploring Biblical stories and faith practices alongside current national and international events to help the children engage with spirituality and their own spiritual practices – making this research project into collective worship theological in nature. I consider reflecting on the relationships and experiences of life – both those considered spiritual and not – to be valuable to children, and people of all ages. Similarly, the effects on the children of engaging with collective worship greatly matter to me. I want to know how participation helps children with the situations they face in life, and how relevant the topics discussed are to the children's own experiences. I want to know how children use collective worship to help with the challenges of adolescence; if collective worship feels

spiritual or sacred in any way; what they bring in to collective worship ‘from the outside’; how this experience feels from the perspective of someone ‘sitting amongst their school colleagues’; if and how they are changed; what is taken away from the experience; what effect collective worship has on their spiritual understanding, their beliefs, their relationships with other people and how they perceive themselves. These questions lie at the heart of this research project.

I sought to identify and focus questions arising from children’s experiences of collective worship, to explore these questions through qualitative and academic research, and finally communicate the findings and suggestions back, in order to inform and shape the practice of school-based collective worship and my practice as school chaplain. This research process and methodology follows the pattern of practical theology as one which moves from practice to theory to practice (Browning, 1991) and frames my thesis and research narrative, and will be expanded later in this chapter.

Finally, I recognise as school chaplain and research practitioner I am woven in to the research project. I have a clear and vested interest in it and in the relationship between the theory and practice of collective worship. Whilst allowing me crucial access and credibility within the school, being the ‘School Chaplain’ and a teacher in school and researching children within that same school also brings ethical challenges. These will be discussed in chapter two.

## **1.2 Current policy and practice on collective worship**

Collective worship in the UK schools is bound in law. Nevertheless, the tension between policy and practice produces a challenging landscape for collective worship. In this section, I explore the legalities, opinions and assessment of collective worship, and what shape collective worship takes in my context.

### ***The legal requirement for collective worship***

Collective worship is the gathering of children during the school day with the intention, according to a UK Government Circular in 1994, of providing the opportunity for pupils to ‘worship God, consider spiritual and moral issues’ and ‘explore their own beliefs’ (Department for Education, 1994, p. 20). Additionally, collective worship is intended to ‘develop community spirit’, provide ‘common ethos and shared values’, and to ‘reinforce positive attitudes.’ Though the character of collective worship can differ from school to school, its intended meaning is to reflect something special or separate from ordinary school activities and be concerned with ‘reverence or veneration paid to a divine power or being’ (p. 21).

Historically, the obligation for collective worship was established in the UK in the 1944 Education Act which required each county and voluntary school<sup>2</sup> to start its day with an act of collective worship (Department of Education, 1944). At this time the law was not specific about what constituted collective worship. Over the next 40 years, however, this was not adhered to, and in 1988 collective worship again featured in law. The 1988 Education Reform Act, as a response to the neglect of daily collective worship, reinforced that all pupils should take part in collective worship each school day which is of ‘wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character’ (Department of Education and Science, 1988, p. 17). The act, which still guides collective worship law today, was enhanced by guidance in 1994 which collective worship to ‘promote the spiritual, moral, cultural development’ of pupils (Department for Education, 1994, p. 1). Education of the whole person is paramount, rather than education focussed on only the cognitive sphere, such as book-based learning or the ability to pass exams. Further acts, for example the 2002 Education Act, affirm school curriculum should be both broadly-based and balanced in preparing children for the opportunities, experiences and responsibilities of life (Department for Education, 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> County schools were fully under the control of the local authority, whilst voluntary schools retained limited powers under the management of school governors. This is in contrast to independent schools over which the local authority held no control.

### ***Support and opposition to collective worship in schools***

Legal issues notwithstanding, opinion on the value and place of collective worship in schools is divided. Defending the inclusion of collective worship in school, Ron Best argues that collective worship supports the broader development of children's humanity, beyond simply intellectual or academic development (1996). He claims that children need opportunities to connect with the awareness of transcendent, beyond the 'here and now', in order to develop and enhance the child as a 'whole person' (Best, 2007, p. 9). Also supporting collective worship, Andrew Wright suggests education that is critically engaged with religion is more desirable than provision that does not because this reflects the multi-religious world in which we live (2000).

Researching connections between religious practices and education, Wright argues that collective worship, which pervades the life of the school and is practised with dignity and respect, enables education to support a healthier society. Both Best and Wright offer perspectives on collective worship which concerns the place, value and practice of collective worship in schools, suggesting education which only concerns academic advancement misses holistic development and issues in the wider world. Absent from their argument for including collective worship is evidence attributed to children's experiences. This highlights the need for a developed understanding of children's perspectives on collective worship.

Some organisations and researchers raise concerns about the inclusion of any form of religious engagement by children in schools. For example, the British Humanist Association (BHA) opposes the practice of collective worship on the grounds that children cannot yet fully understand spiritual practice. Their position is that, without mature consideration, collective worship can be a form of indoctrination for children into religious beliefs and practices (BHA, 2012). The BHA also campaigns for a re-scripting of Religious Education (RE) in education, arguing for RE to be an 'inclusive, impartial, objective, fair, balanced and relevant subject allowing pupils to explore a variety of religions and non-religious worldviews' (BHA, 2014). Researching with children from across the primary and secondary school divide, Jeanette Gill argues children oppose collective worship due to

rejecting adult authority and regarding religion as 'part of the private domain' (Gill, 2004, p. 6). Experiences of children's resistance and reluctance to be subjected to power and authority are faced in collective worship, as this thesis shows. However, I suggest the language of 'reluctance' and 'resistance' should not always be assumed to be negative, as a nuanced understanding of these experiences emerges in my research and demonstrates reluctance and resistance as productive and valuable emotions.

Arguably, collective worship is still assumed to be relevant and useful to society as the UK Government has not made changes to collective worship law for almost thirty years. However, in 1975, John Hull suggested collective worship has reached the end of its functional relevance. He argued that the rationale for mandatory collective worship in schools has changed as religious practices in society, as well as traditional religious beliefs, were beginning to diminish. This meant collective worship was no longer adequate as it was historically conceived as addressing the spiritual and moral needs of children in society. Writing in 1995, Hull changed his argument to support the presence of 'multi-faith worship' in schools. Citing a 1989 SACRE decision from the London Borough of Ealing that permitted four schools to have collective worship consisting of content which was not distinctive to any one religion, he posited the possibility of a new understanding of collective worship as multi-faith: one which emphasises 'educational collectivity' (Hull, 1995, p. 8). While Hull highlights the changing nature of the religious practice in the UK, he does not take into account the views and experiences of the children participating in collective worship. This leaves open the need to question the children themselves.

In his research with young people's spiritual experiences, Pink Dandelion directs particular criticism at worship in the British Quaker tradition (2010). Worship takes place under a conformist and conservative behavioural creed, he argues, which supports a double culture where reflective and formative spiritual practices are evident in gathered worship, but liberal and permissive belief structures beyond in society. For the children, this double standard is confusing and results in a disengagement with worship.

Whilst Dandelion levels an important criticism at the behavioural dynamics and power structures present in worship, the child's voice is lacking in each of these debates.

### ***Statutory attempts to hear the child's voice***

There are legal requirements which support hearing the child's voice about collective worship. All schools in the UK (whether state or independent, faith-based or not), undergo inspections, although inspection law differs across the four countries of the UK. In England,<sup>3</sup> the Government's Inspectorate of Schools, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED), is charged with monitoring all aspects of school life, including adherence to the 1988 Education Reform Act relating to collective worship. OFSTED, although it encourages some questions be directed towards children about school life, doesn't offer clear guidance in soliciting their views about collective worship.

In addition to OFSTED inspections, there is also a statutory requirement that faith-based schools are scrutinised by a religious inspection. Church of England schools are overseen by The National Society for Promoting Religious Education – part of the Church of England – and inspected by the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS).<sup>4</sup> SIAMS examines the quality and effectiveness of collective worship, amongst other aspects of school life. One of its four key inspection criteria is to ascertain 'the impact of collective worship on the school community' (The National Society, 2012, p. 6). It therefore attempts to probe more deeply than OFSTED into the children's views and experiences of collective worship (The National Society, 2013). Although this goes some way towards understanding the impact of collective worship, it is of limited value in terms of understanding the child's voice. Inspections traditionally last two days and, although inspectors meet with a group of children, enquiries about collective

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<sup>3</sup> I will be focussing primarily on collective worship in England as the school in which the research is based is in the north-west of England.

<sup>4</sup> The Church of England schools inspection is run in collaboration with the Methodist Church, hence SIAMS.

worship are limited and are within broader questions about the Christian character, impact of RE and the impact of the school's leadership on the children. SIAMS reports contain limited and summative narratives on the children's thoughts on collective worship, and in my experience this is often generated from children personally chosen by the head teacher for their support and appreciation of the school. Crucially, my research takes a more open approach to participants, seeking to glean significant understandings of children's experiences of collective worship by hearing children's own voices.

### ***Current collective worship practice***

In current collective worship practice there are significant differences across the countries of the UK. A 1994 UK Government circular, intended to clarify the legal requirements about collective worship, caused confusion, principally as it was advisory rather than legally binding. Additionally, an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) report, *Collective Worship and Religious Observance in Schools*, also raises questions of how closely schools are adhering to collective worship law, and uncertainties schools face about abiding by the 1994 Government circular (AHRC, 2015). The report cites the finding by the Chief Inspector of Schools in 2004 that '76% of schools were breaking the law' in failing to provide a daily act of collective worship (p. 10).

Despite the reduction in the number of schools adhering to the law, a strong tradition of daily collective worship remains in faith-based schools. The Church of England (CE), whose schools make up around a quarter of all schools in England, maintain the value and contribution to school life of daily collective worship.<sup>5</sup> The Church's educational leaders argue daily observance of collective worship law 'provides community, fosters respect, deepens spiritual awareness', and enables children to 'explore the big questions of life' (Church of England, 2016, 2017). CE schools draw on a

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<sup>5</sup> Precise numbers vary year on year, although in 2010 there were 4617 CE schools in England, making up around a quarter of all schools. The CE has further statistics on its website: [www.churchofengland.org/education](http://www.churchofengland.org/education)

range of methods including class-based, out of school (in a local church) and more traditional ‘assemblies’ in a school hall to carry out the requirements of collective worship.<sup>6</sup> In my school, curriculum subjects such as RE, Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), Citizenship and tutorial times provide an added place for spiritual, moral, social and cultural exploration and development. This pattern, of enabling space outside of collective worship for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, is also evident in non-faith-based schools. Local Standing Advisory Councils for Religious Education<sup>7</sup> (SACREs) also advise more creative methods for fulfilling a school’s legal requirements.<sup>8</sup>

The formalisation of laws on collective worship have led to several organisations, mostly Christian, which claim to offer support for good practice in school assemblies. The Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) is amongst the largest providers of resources and training in this area, claiming the purpose of its assembly material is to promote ‘better understanding of Christianity.’<sup>9</sup> Numerous other websites, books and resources are available to support school leaders in providing collective worship.<sup>10</sup> The promotion of these resources is led by the authors’ or organisations’ claim for speedy preparation and minimal effort required from adults. The material is easy to ‘pick up and use’ and comes packaged or from the website as ‘ready to use’ (Lamont, 2008; REBOO, 2017). The premise of such resources accepts that assembly leaders feel the pressures of time and creativity in providing assemblies. Mary Hawes, the National Going for Growth (Children and Youth) Adviser to the Church of England, in praising SPCK’s assembly resources website,<sup>11</sup> comments the material

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<sup>6</sup> Examples of collective worship not taking place in the traditional setting of an assembly hall can be found in schools’ collective worship policies. For example St Joseph’s School (St Joseph’s Collective Worship Policy, 2017), and in ‘class-based collective worship resources’ on the website: [www.rebooworld.com](http://www.rebooworld.com) (REBOO, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Each Local Authority organises a SACRE, which advise schools on Religions Education and Collective Worship.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Newham Council’s guidelines ‘Collective worship: SACRE guidelines for schools in Newham’ (2016).

<sup>9</sup> See SPCK’s website ‘[www.assemblies.org.uk](http://www.assemblies.org.uk)’ (SPCK, 2014).

<sup>10</sup> For example, [www.assemblytube.com](http://www.assemblytube.com), [www.myfishbites.com](http://www.myfishbites.com), *10-Minute Assemblies for 4-11s: 50 Ready-to-Use Assemblies Exploring Values from a Christian Perspective* (Parkinson, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> [www.assemblies.org.uk](http://www.assemblies.org.uk)

'helps hard pressed teachers deliver assemblies' (Hawes, 2017). This acknowledgement – that such material aids teachers who are under the pressure of time – brings into clearer focus the existence of a disconnect between adults leading and the children receiving collective worship. By relying on externally prepared material, adults are not considering their school children's voice in the planning, valuing, management and impact of collective worship, but rather the voice of other adults or children. The result of this can be that adults fail to appreciate how collective worship is received and experienced by the children in their own collective worship environment. Consequently, participation is reduced to a model of the child as listener-recipient, not as active contributor, which can further a child's sense of disconnection with and disengagement in collective worship.

### ***Collective worship in my school***

As noted, an absence of the child's voice in planning and managing collective worship existed in my school. The school describes itself as faith-based with a Christian ethos. It aims 'To provide a Christian environment in which young people are safe, secure, cared for and happy, and are able to develop into articulate, confident and well qualified citizens of the world.'<sup>12</sup> Approximately 1240 children aged 11 to 16 are educated at the school, coming together from a diverse range of ethnic, socio-economic and faith backgrounds. At the time the study began in 2011, the school had a student cohort as follows: in ethnicity: 31% West Indian-Caribbean, 27% White British, 23% South Asian and 14% African children; in faith background: 69% Christian (27% Church of England, 16% Pentecostal, 26% from other Christian traditions), 24% Muslim and 7% other world faiths; and in socio-economic background 50% of children were eligible for free school meals. In terms of academic ability, according to the school's OFSTED report, the 'majority of students start school with average levels of academic attainment.'<sup>13</sup> Admission to the school is based on the family belonging to a

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<sup>12</sup> More information about the school is available on the school's website: [www.trinityhigh.com](http://www.trinityhigh.com).

<sup>13</sup> The school's most recent OFSTED report can be found on the school's website.

faith community rather than by entrance examination or residing in proximity to the school. Although children may join the school from any religious background, the statistics show a clear Christian majority at the school.

Collective worship in the school, over and above compliance with the law, is based on two principles. First, as the school's worship policy states, that 'the school is a worshipping community' and as 'worship is a fundamental element of each day' there should be daily morning collective acts of worship in year or house groups, or in form groups. Second, 'worship should embrace all members of [the school]' and 'form an essential element of all major celebrations in the life of the school.'<sup>14</sup> At the start of my research, collective worship followed the following patterns. The children participated in collective worship three mornings a week either in year groups (of 250 children) or houses (mixed age groups of 310 children). During these occasions children in the school are invited to think and reflect on their life experiences, their relationships, and how their faith background informs their view of the world around them. Children are also invited to explore how their spiritual understanding shapes their thoughts and actions in the school community and to the world beyond. They enter and leave assemblies in silence or accompanied to music, in order to create an atmosphere of respect. Children are asked to sing a congregational song and listen to the adults' presentations of a story or theme, usually from the Old or New Testament. Often the leader explores the themes by using contemporary examples or a narrative from their life experience. To conclude the assembly, staff usually invite the children to join in a prayer before the assembly finishes.

My school exhibits similar practices of ignoring the children's experiences of collective worship. The adults who lead assemblies tend to pick 'ready to use' material and to make assumptions about how the children engage with and find relevance in collective worship. Having claimed there exists a lack of the child's voice in my own school's practice, and in the broader landscape of collective worship in the UK, and identified the similar issues in collective

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<sup>14</sup> These quotes are taken from the school's Collective Worship Policy, included in the Appendix.

worship law a further question remains: what is distinctive or special about collective worship?

### **1.3 The 'special and separate' nature of collective worship**

In considering literature regarding collective worship, it often presents its sacred nature as static, a concept or event which children come to, or a phenomenon in which they enter. Could the nature of a special and separate space – or a 'sacred space' – which is personal, dynamic and constructed by the child, be an alternative model for collective worship?

#### ***The static nature of 'sacred' within collective worship***

In 1994 the UK Government published advice, *The Non Statutory Guidance on Collective Worship*, on its meaning and practice as laid down in the 1988 Education Reform Act. This expanded upon the 1988 act since it reiterated the need for pupils to 'each day to take part in an act of collective worship' (Department of Education and Science, 1988, p. 16). The guidance explained collective worship as 'special and separate' from ordinary school life (Department for Education, 1994, p. 21). Furthermore, children should experience collective worship as an activity in which they pay 'reverence or veneration ... to a divine power or being' (section 57). By stating this and indicating that the experience should be separate from normal school life, as well as a special experience, the intention is that collective worship should be a spiritual and sacred occurrence.

The guidance continued by explaining that schools should arrange collective worship in such a way that children can not only attend but also participate, beyond 'passive attendance' and should elicit 'a response from the students' (section 59). Although it is recognised on particular occasions that children may not feel able to identify with an act of collective worship. The expectation of collective worship as a sacred encounter presents certain difficulties. Collective worship is presented as a static concept – an inflexible event

organised by others which the children are expected to find sacred. How children encounter collective worship as a 'special and separate' space, and the complex issues in our society around 'reverence and veneration' to a divine being or power, means that accepting collective worship as sacred is challenging.

There is a fundamental problem in expecting children to engage with adult-planned and adult-formed worship which pays reverence and veneration to a divine being or power, with the presumption that children will perceive this as sacred. My issue here is that participation does not equate to co-production in making the space sacred. In this thesis I argue that children can make space sacred – that each child has agency for constructing collective worship as a sacred experience. Therefore the nature of collective worship cannot be assumed as sacred – rather children, as I will argue, construct for themselves the sacred nature of collective worship that is dynamic.

### ***Collective worship as a sacred 'space'***

How human beings consider, encounter and engage with space, and how such space might be experienced as special or sacred, is complex. In *The Location of Religion: A Spatial Analysis*, Kim Knott suggests five terms for the analysis of space: body as the source of space, the dimensions of space, the properties of space, the aspects of space, and the dynamics of space (2005a). These give an approach which is useful as a source for analytical and interpretive examination of sacred space (Knott, 2005b). Knott uses the illustration of an British multi-ethnic urban high street to illustrate her five aspects (not dissimilar to my own context of a multi-cultural, multi-faith high school in its diversity and changing dynamic). In arguing for body as the source of space, she claims it carries a 'foundational role for the experience and representation of space' (Knott, 2008, p. 1108). This has resonance in relation to enquiring how children's sense of the physical presence of their body might shape their perception of collective worship as sacred.

The dimensions of space pertains to its physical, social and mental dimensions which enable the construction of the material and physical world. This relates to the environment of collective worship space, sacred because it is 'set apart' or 'different' than ordinary space. Knott refers to 'simultaneity, extension and power of space' as the 'properties of space' (2005b, p. 160). Simultaneity, offering expressions of development, social and physical historical layers running through space, have particular importance in relation to children and the intended sacred nature of collective worship. Children draw on various aspects of their layers of experience, for example previous religious experiences or family faith traditions, in constructing space as sacred.

Connected to this, the physical structure of a building itself can carry memories of the sacred. This suggests to me that physical space is important to collective worship, as holding special meaning and a personal connection in the present and through memory is an aspect of making collective worship sacred. Children often experience the 'event' of collective worship in a regular space – the school hall or drama studio, for example. In properties of space Knott suggests power is present. In the following chapters I argue children's perception of and response to power dynamics feature significantly in their sense of collective worship and in their experiencing (or not) of these events as sacred.

The final terms Knott offers for the analysis of space – the aspects and dynamics of space – have similarities with the project in terms of experience, and particularly in their relation to collective worship. Space, Knott argues, has special practice and social interactions, conceptions of transformations – in which a person dreams or invests in possibilities – such as the potential for change or improvement, and notions of lived experience where the performance and routine of life is located (Knott, 2008, 2009). In *Spaces for the Sacred*, Philip Sheldrake suggests that space is considered sacred if, among other things, it is somehow shapes and textures people's lives (2001b). There is an activity and engagement required for space to be thought of as sacred.

Arguments for the sacred developed by Knott and Sheldrake, for example, suggest that space must have a personal dynamic investment in order to be considered special or significant – in collective worship terms ‘sacred’. Knott further claims that religions, including Christianity, have participated in the act of constructing space (2008). In Knott’s argument, dynamism is an essential component of meaning-making in space. This, again, shines a spotlight on the issue that the government’s literature on collective worship presents space as static. My thesis shows collective worship can not be approached externally as a sacred event without children’s involvement in recognising this as sacred. I argue in chapter four that children can make space sacred, however there must be a personal investment negotiated through the conscious action of ‘permission-giving’ to consider space sacred. The meaning and process of permission-giving will be demonstrated in chapter four.

The sacred space in collective worship literature is a static concept but a dynamic approach is possible. Using Knott’s suggestions of special theory and the specialness of the sacred, the making of sacred space has much deeper and more personal aspects which can inform and shape collective worship. However, such shaping and deepening is best developed in engaging children in creating and shaping the experience of collective worship.

#### **1.4 Current research – and a missing piece**

Although researchers have been investigating the theories and practices of collective worship for decades (AHRC, 2015; Francis, 1979; Gill, 2004; Hull, 1989, 1995), there are absences and oversights, for example in research design (attempting large scale research through qualitative methods), core assumptions (linking children’s enjoyment and participation with being formational for spirituality), and sources (e.g. focussing on primary aged children whilst omitting secondary age). These gaps informed my research priorities.

### ***Current research on collective worship***

Published research offers insights into both children's and adults' perspectives of collective worship using a mixture of methods and focus. Three examples of these varied approaches follow. First, examining the understanding of religious belief underlying collective worship, Richard Cheetham argues belief in the context of collective worship is 'an individually chosen, private, practical guide to living' (2001, p. 11). Cheetham selected who he considered 'experts' in collective worship, however disappointingly he considered these to be teachers delivering collective worship, not the children engaging in collective worship. Kathryn Inglis investigated the spiritual and moral content of collective worship in non-faith schools, and how closely schools follow government guidance. She found teachers selecting common morality as a topic guide (Inglis, 2012). A review of collective worship principles and practice was carried out by John Gay, its outcome was that since practices differed so vastly across schools, no clear conclusions could be drawn as to the effectiveness of schools' collective worship practice (1996). Since the data is generated from adults, (or if children are questioned the limit of the studies is on levels of participation or enjoyment rather than the impact participation has on the children's lives), this suggests that children's experiences of collective worship are under-researched compared to adults.

Jeanette Gill's study on primary and secondary age children explore their opinions on provision for collective worship in England and Wales (2004). Gill highlights that children's willingness to engage and participate in collective worship differs across the primary and secondary divide, suggesting children of a secondary age are influenced by their 'search for individuality and independence ... and their simultaneous desire for acceptance and status amongst their peers' (p. 188). These feelings result in feelings of nonconformity and rebellion to collective worship in the children which was not present during their primary school years. However, Gill does not ascertain what kind of impact greater participation might have on children or indeed how children might use collective worship to support or explore their life experiences. These gaps highlights that research has emphasised adult

not children's experiences, and I suggest that focussing on how collective worship helps children explore and understand life experiences, spirituality and relationships is an important site through which to explore the role of collective worship in schools.

Looking beyond collective worship, some scholars in the field of children's spirituality have pursued a more child-centred approach. Brendan Hyde, in *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness*, suggests that to hear the child's voice in relation to spiritual experiences and children's world-views, one must locate the child at the centre of the investigation (2008). Hyde draws on the work of Gadamer to argue that, in particular, the metaphors of conversation and play enable the most effective method of understanding children's spiritual experiences and expressions. In 'conversation' Hyde suggests the 'subject matter of the conversation assumes control' and through 'play' – which evokes the human capacity to draw in children – a middle ground of understanding can be found (p. 65). These practices of conversation and play informed my own research. The art of conversation and play is practised in the questions I constructed, my manner of listening, in the responses I gave in interviews, and how I sought to find a middle space of understanding between the researcher and researched.<sup>15</sup>

In exploring what children thought about the existence, nature and work of God, Robert Coles advocates that researchers allow children to express for themselves their thoughts and reflections (1990). In *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Coles posits four principles. These principles inform my methodology in studying children's experiences. As such they enable me, as researcher, to begin to comprehend and appreciate what children are meaning in their reflections, and learn to understand children's experiences of collective worship. First, the meaning, metaphors and frequency of children's words are important, therefore I need to pay attention to their use of language when talking about collective worship. Second, to listen to the children for an extended period of time, pointing to the value of my

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<sup>15</sup> I will return in chapter two to describing the choices I made to construct interviews.

longitudinal approach. Third to note themes and trends in the children's words, therefore an open approach is needed rather than trying to shoe-horn children's reflections on collective worship into pre-formed categories. Fourth, to realise a researcher's analysis is one person's perspective, so being aware I am interwoven at all stages into seeking to understand what each child says.

### ***Seeking and privileging the child's voice***

Research into collective worship must appreciate how it is experienced from the children's perspective, using their own words and paying close attention to their meanings, so favouring the child's voice above any other. My quest to hear the child's voice focuses my investigation on how collective worship affects the children by comprehending the relevance to their lives of different aspects of collective worship. I look to understand the experience of collective worship from their perspective. Therefore, the methods for my project must intentionally and carefully privilege the child's voice in the research. As noted, collective worship often promotes the adult rather than the child's voice as dominant. Children can be ignored as a formational and critically reflective voice in collective worship. My research readdresses this imbalance.

Furthermore, what important 'message' an adult might consider and communicate might not be received or understood by the child. How adults understand spirituality cannot be assumed as the same for children. Considering church-based Sunday schools and RE in schools, wider than collective worship, Clive Erricker offers proposals which focus on the pedagogy of faith environments to support children's spirituality and gives relevance to the difference between adults' and children's perspectives on collective worship (2007). Children, he argues, must be given the opportunity to critically deconstruct material and doctrine: 'Timeless truths are timeless only for those who hold them as such' (p. 58). The relevance of these conclusions for researching collective worship cannot be overstated. Adults

should not assume their own faith practices and understandings are shared by children.

Additionally, privileging the adult's voice is built on the assumption that adults can communicate spiritual concepts in a manner helpful to children, or that adults understand more than children. The issue of presentation style and methods of delivery was a focus of Jeanette Gill's research (2004). Children are conscious of what they consider poor presentation. She notes, 'superficial presentation of difficult [topics] can invalidate [its] value', adding that when children perceive teachers struggling to adequately communicate concepts this 'furthers distance young people' from engaging in such topics (p. 189). This prompts the question: who should carry the role of leading collective worship? The common assumptions (Chaplain, Head teacher, Head of Year, etc.) promotes the adult's voice over the child's in leading and forming collective worship.

I have shown that privileging the adults' perspective in researching collective worship is problematic. This methods fails to adequately understand how experiencing collective worship can be meaningful for the children. Therefore, seeking and privileging the child's voice through research is vital not only to better understand the effect and effectiveness of collective worship, but also to better inform the adults charged with the responsibility of overseeing collective worship.

### ***Focussing the research***

If the principle of privileging the child's voice underpins this project, then my research methodology must be fit for purpose. Each element is working towards the goal of a deeper understanding of children's experiences and opinions, and the generation of data about children's own views on the relevance and effectiveness of collective worship. While my research privileges the child's voice, I also want to track how collective worship effects children over time. Therefore, as well as using qualitative methods, I adopt a

longitudinal approach. The longitudinal aspect will also be considered in the next chapter.

The following questions provide parameters, each undergirded by the desire to establish that the children are affected by collective worship. Wider questions inevitably arise of how participation affects a child's spiritual development. My questions are: What are crucial characteristics of collective worship that allow children to reflect on their experiences in life, in particular their relationships with other people and the world, as well as their understandings of God? How does collective worship help children explore pre-existing spiritual understandings, and are these changed by engagement with collective worship? How might collective worship help with the challenges of friendships, family and romance that children experience at high school age? Does collective worship help children contemplate various life experiences – their own, those of family, friends and other people in the world?

Although this array of questions inform and direct the project, these are condensed into one principal question which drives the research: How does engaging in collective worship help children understand, develop, explore and express themselves, their spirituality and relationships? There are two assumptions within the question: first, one of child development and secondly one of child spirituality, and these assumptions will be addressed in the next chapter as they relate to decisions forming the research methodology.

### ***Shaping the research***

In pursuing answers to the primary question, my research focuses on allowing participants to explore their own experiences, feelings and understanding of being *present* and *engaging in* school-based collective worship. Qualitative approaches emphasise children's collective as well as personal experiences, the nature of their participatory experience, how experiences change over time and activity on my part as researcher to

experience the collective worship which the children experience. In shaping the research areas of educational research and practical theology are taken into consideration.

In educational research, a child-centred approach which seeks rich engagement and conversation is esteemed as producing a deepened understanding (Dayan & Ziv, 2012). In my study, having a child-centred approach is thus vital. Furthermore, my own voice needs to be considered when shaping the research, as I am an adult and collective worship practitioner within the school. This challenge of 'outsider-insider' within child educational research is addressed by Lizzi Milligan.<sup>16</sup> From her investigation into participative research techniques in a Kenyan High School, Milligan offers the concept of the 'inbetweener', which she defines as 'a researcher located between outside and inside' (2016, p. 248). The inbetweener is not fully an outsider to the children as they are from within the school community. However the inbetweener is not perceived by the children as an insider because the adult is not a child. Inbetweeners offers the most authentic formulation of co-constructed knowledge as they gain personal insights from the children by building relationships based on trust and comradery. In achieving this goal the inbetweener also becomes a 'knowledgeable outsider' (p. 249). The adult as 'inbetweener' in child research highlights the issues of the ethics and my own voice in the research, addressed in the next chapter.

The project is also guided by practical theology. I drew on R. Ruard Ganzevoort, who describes practical theology as 'the hermeneutics of lived religion' (2009, p. 3). As practical theology elucidates the 'fundamental processes of interpreting life', I focus on the children's collective worship experiences and how they make meaning of their participation. Their engagement with collective worship is on way children can 'live, interact and relate to the divine' (Ganzevoort, 2009, p. 4). In *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, Don Browning proposes practical theology traces a 'practice to theory and back to practice' model (1991). He clarifies this pattern as a

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<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth McNess, Lore Arthur and Michael Crossley argue for the re-examination of 'insider' and 'outsider' for qualitative research to be more inclusive, collaborative, participatory, reflexive and nuanced (2015).

movement from 'present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of a more critically held theory-laden practices' (p. 7). My project started in the problems and emerging questions of collective worship practice, and then I have drawn on theories, critical enquiry and investigation in order to offer understanding of theory-laden practice. A different approach to understanding practical theology is offered by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat who suggest practical theology critically and theologically reflects on the 'practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world' (Swinton & Mowat, 2006, p. 6). It is precisely this interaction, in the setting of worship, and how this affects children's understanding of spirituality and relations within a school, where I have located my investigation, as the following chapter demonstrates.

## **Chapter 2: *Designing a child-centred methodology for analysing collective worship***

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the choices I made to design a suitable child-centred methodology to appropriately answer my primary research question. I demonstrate that, although my thesis is situated within a large body of research relating to children's spirituality, significant decisions needed to be made about which type of data collection I would capture and what method of interpretation I would use. Because I had committed to researching collective worship from the child's perspective, I decided to use the well-established qualitative method of engaging focus groups and selecting individual interviews for a longitudinal project. To effectively interpret the data, I selected thematic analysis because this enabled themes to be identified within the data. These decisions were underpinned by clear ethical considerations and practice to ensure the children's welfare was valued.

### **2.1 Decisions shaping research methods**

Since the research question driving my project intentionally took a child-centred approach to investigating collective worship, elements of this presented me with challenges. Namely, in researching how children understand, develop, explore and express self, their spirituality and relationships I needed to consider my use of the key term 'spirituality' and the specific conceptual framework for children's spirituality that would shape my research.

Spirituality is a broad and contested field, with varying arguments being forwarded by faith and non-faith groups as to the meaning and origins of spirituality, including the origin of the term. In 1966 the Oxford biologist Alistair Hardy, writing on the natural history of religion, argued that all human beings have 'the capacity for spirituality', and that this spirituality has 'positive

and practical effects by enabling survival in relation to one's environment' (1966, p. 57). Speaking against the connection of religion and spirituality, John White argues from a humanist perspective that spirituality should be placed outside organised religion (1996). However, others contend spirituality and religion need to be seen as coexisting, for example Adrian Thatcher who argues against breaking the conceptual connection between spirituality and God (1996). More recently, building on the correlation between spirituality, religion and God (or a divine source), Mubina and Sanallah Kirmani suggest there are seven spiritual identities (2009). These categories see spirituality as connected to and the expression of various aspects of person's life, including their environment, social context, sensory experiences and family upbringing. And Scott Webster argues that spirituality is, in its broadest sense, an engagement with the meaning of one's life by questioning the meaning of being (2010).

From the *Children and Worldviews Project* in the USA, Clive and Jane Erricker identify four genres which children tended to use when describing their own spirituality (2000). These are: the 'All-American Kid' – typified by consumerism and self-centredness; the 'My Little Pony' – rooted in fantasy and fairy-tale; the 'Family-centre' – adhering to familial views of faith and the world; and the 'Hard-man' – characterised by image and machoism. Although offering insight into how children approach the world and their relationships, my criticism of the Errickers' work is that children might migrate through different genres, or may not recognise any of the categories used to describe their experiences.

In his research in Australia into children's spiritual understanding, Brendan Hyde suggests spirituality is the 'realisation of self where self is moving towards being unified with other' (2004, 2008). Although Hyde fails to adequately explain what he means by 'natural movement', he strongly emphasises spirituality being as the practice and process of gaining a more comprehensive awareness of Self. Hyde posits that children's spirituality has four characteristics: the felt sense – exploring the immediacy of the 'here and now'; integrating awareness – the merging of temporal horizons in which the child develops awareness; weaving threads of meaning – making meaning of

events; and spiritual questing – exploring new ways to make sense of Self, Other (people and world) and God. These characteristics informed my research methodology as I framed interview questions which enabled the exploration of present experience, awareness and meaning.

David Hay and Rebecca's Nye's research in the UK of children's spirituality is also insightful. In researching what children understood by the term 'spiritual' and how children explored, expressed, and engaged with their understanding of spirituality, they suggest the concept of 'relational consciousness' (Hay & Nye, 2006; Nye & Hay, 1996). As relational refers to inter- and intra-personal connections (inter-personal meaning between the person and other people, and intra-personal meaning how the person relates to self), and consciousness means a distinct mental activity, these come together to suggest children knowingly explore various relationships which they experience in life, and seek to make meaning of these. Though I support in principle the notion of spirituality as relational consciousness, I am critical of their emphasis on the distinct mental activity, or that spirituality is more than just a cognitive state. My concern here is with children (or persons of any age) with learning difficulties of limiting social-interactive conditions such as autism – would that mean they are 'less spiritual'?

My research also considers the development of children's sense of self, spirituality and relationships within collective worship, such as that considered by James Fowler and Lawrence Kohlberg's and their work on moral and faith development (Fowler, 1981; Kohlberg, 1984). In *Stages of Faith*, Fowler offers his 'faith development theory' to explain the various phases of a person's comprehension of the world around them, and their sense of relation to that world-view. Kohlberg's development theory is based on stages of moral development connected to age and a person's awareness of other. In research exploring the faith lives of women, Jennifer Slee criticises Fowler's faith development model (2004). The normative account of faith development provided by Fowler, Slee argues, does not adequately account for several aspects of women's faith, for example the presence of relational faith consciousness. Whilst Fowler's and Kohlberg's representations offer valuable insight into children's cognitive and moral

development, they are also uniform and inflexible in nature. The stages follow sequential growth – the second directly follows the first – indicating no place for backward movement or making meaning across the stages. Therefore I did not include these models because of my commitment to the children's participation and self-construction of their expression of spirituality, relationships and sense of self.

## **2.2 Designing an appropriate methodology for the research**

In putting together my research design I made a number of decisions to construct a method that would genuinely privilege the child's voice. I needed to determine what qualitative methods I should use, the shape and focus of the research, how to choose my sample, methods for data collection, and interpretation. Significantly, there were substantial ethical matters to address in order to conduct safe research.

### ***Selecting qualitative methods***

In determining research methods I considered the merits of using quantitative and qualitative approaches. Colin Robson proposes quantitative methods offer the generation of a larger volume of data from a wider group of participants, as well as generalisation of findings and objectivity of the researcher (2002). However I found disadvantages in the removal of context, the deductive logic of concepts and lack of focus on meanings of what the children meant in their responses. As I wanted to privilege the children's reflections, I was intensely interested in seeking rich and descriptive analysis of their experiences. Therefore I opted for qualitative methods which allowed me to 'construct arguments about how things work in particular contexts' and is based on capturing experiences, identities, beliefs and feelings (J. Mason, 2002, p. 2). This enables the child to report in their own language and enhances my ability to focus on meanings, using inductive logic where concepts emerge, and valuing unique not generalisable results (Robson, 2002). Additionally, as a researching professional, I recognised that I was

woven into the research and could not remain at a critical distance from collecting and interpreting data. As qualitative methods are 'open to the personal commitment and self-awareness of the researcher' (J. Mason, 2002, p. 3) and objectivity is not a goal, these choices were more appropriate.

### ***Shaping and focusing the research***

I used visual methods to stimulate the children to talk about their feelings and experiences. Sarah Dunlop, in researching the spirituality of Ukrainian young people, used visual methods followed by interviews (Dunlop, 2008). She found that selecting various images then questioning the young people provided a rich source of data. However, I chose not to select images to present to the children as this would improperly lead their comments, an argument forwarded by Robson whose has concerns with researcher-generated material (Robson, 2002). I wanted to let the children speak freely about collective worship and reduce 'researcher-led' data, therefore I decided to let the children construct their own visual representations and then interview each child to investigate the meanings the children placed in the pictures. I asked children to create a visual piece which I followed by conducting an individual interview based on their visual piece. This followed Sarah Pink's suggestion that participants can collaborate with the researcher by selecting sources for the data, hence removing the researcher's preferences and controls (Pink, 2007). The dual method resulted from Sarah Dunlop and Philip Richter's suggestion that visual social data should not replace but 'complement and illustrate written text and discursive argument' (2010, p. 215).

As well as visual techniques, I used interviews. This was for a range of reasons. First, it gave the children more control in choosing the focus of the data generated, and removed the influence of my own preferences as researcher (J. Mason, 2002). Interviewing also allowed the children's evidence to be as contextual as possible, as well as enabling dialogue where the children could speak with their choice of words. As the person conducting

the interviews, I would be able to seek clarification where necessary. I was aware that the success of the interviews would be reliant on the children being able to remember, verbalize and articulate their experiences, but I considered this risk to be acceptable as collecting the data in this manner would allow me to follow the narrative sequence provided by the children in explaining their experiences.

I drew on the concept of natural conversations in my interview methods by asking broad questions and allowing the children's conversation to flow. As I saw people as my main source of data, and in particular the child's voice, I selected an interpretive approach. This enabled me to collect data which valued children's 'interpretations, meanings, perceptions and understanding' as primary data sources (J. Mason, 2002). I decided on a semi-structured approach to interviews, drawing on Tim May's suggestion that this would allow the interview to have a fluid and flexible structure and permit me as researcher to seek clarification and elaboration on answers given (2001). These features – valuing context, dialogue, narrative and flexibility – made interviewing the most effective method of hearing the child's voice for my purposes.

Next, I needed to decide the shape and frequency of the interviews. In particular, I had to choose whether to interview the children in a group or individually. Two projects influenced me in shaping my researching children's spiritual understandings and experiences. Robert Coles (1990) and David Hay and Rebecca Nye (Hay & Nye, 1998, 2006) used individual interviews to gather data from children. The researchers considered one-to-one settings beneficial because they were able to pay particular attention to children's words and colloquialisms. This concept was attractive for my project as it would allow for me to observe each child closely, however I was also aware that due to teacher-student dynamics the children might be unwilling to speak freely. Better, then, to interview the children together in order to allow the children to feel more at ease with me as the interviewer. I decided, therefore, to use a group interview to collect the data. Group interviews would allow the children to be at ease with the research and carried the added benefit of the time being more enjoyable for the participants (Robson,

2002). Additionally, my intention was to enable the children to react by agreeing or disagreeing with other comments, enabling a group dynamic to form in the interviews and empowering children to be critical where necessary (May, 2001).

### ***Establishing longitudinal techniques***

The longitudinal aspect of my method was a key part of ensuring successful research because it can identify changes in children's attitudes and reflections across the years. Although Robson (2002) observes longitudinal research projects are often complex to run, call for greater resources, and can run into trouble (such as the loss of participants), Mason (2002) suggests there is value in understanding change contemporaneously and retrospectively. Noting increasing interest in longitudinal methods from governments, academics and the private sectors, Peter Lynn suggests two advantages which prove valuable to my methods (2009). First, the ability to research the 'time-related characteristics' enables connecting events to specific times, and second, 'identifying causality' permits investigating what causes certain changes to occur (p. 6). In my project, the proposed benefits here centred around the potential to track changes in the children's attitude, engagement and understanding of collective worship as they occurred and looking back over the years. I was aware other research postulated that children's attitudes to collective worship change over time (Gill, 2004), but a longitudinal study could track the causes and influences of these changes. I wanted to explore how children felt about their collective worship experiences at different times in their school life and come to a considered understanding. Additionally, tracing how their engagement with collective worship was affected by the changing nature of friendships, opinions about God, life-events such as the illness or death of a relative, world events beyond school, or the different academic pressures associated with later school years, not to mention the children's own physical and intellectual maturity would enable the research to be meaningful. Such factors could only really be investigated through a longitudinal project.

I opted for a four-year life span for the project, which would allow me to interview the children from year 7 to 10 (the first to fourth year in high school) and that the group should meet six times a year for each year of the project – twice in each of the three school half-terms. This meant I could analyse some data in the early years and discuss this with the children in the later years, enabling comparison of thought and experience. Additionally, there was a practical issue of not going on into year 11 as the children would be taking their GCSE exams.

### ***Choosing a sample***

In choosing the group of children invited to join the project, I considered several aspects. I needed to decide the nature and size of the sample group, as well as choose a group in which the processes within collective worship being researched were likely to occur (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). I used purposive sampling to select the children – a method which critically considers the parameters of the wider population being studied (Silverman, 2010).

I selected participants which reflected the cohort of children in the whole school, as well as the 240 children in year seven. I opted to invite only children from year seven to give me the greatest chance of maintaining participants for four years. I initially invited 40 children to voluntarily respond, choosing two or three from each ethnic, faith, socio-economic and academic background. Furthermore, I selected children who would verbalise their reflections on collective worship, and chose those who demonstrated a willingness to be vocal and critical of school life.

Following the maximum number recommended for a focus group (May, 2001), I decided on twelve, aware some might opt out. In fact, the group reduced to eleven at the end of the first year, as one child withdrew. The group of twelve children was intentionally drawn from different forms (tutor groups) in school. There were six girls and six boys from a range of faith, ethnic, academic and socio-economic backgrounds. For religious diversity I

selected three children who self-identified as Christians, one Sikh, four Muslims and four children declaring no religious affiliation. I chose two children of South-Asian heritage, one North-African Arab, three Black, four white-European, one Chinese and one child of Turkish heritage. In terms of academic ability, I decided the group should show a range of abilities according to their primary school (Year 6) data and their attainment levels.<sup>17</sup> Finally I ensured the group contained members who were on the special educational needs (SEN) register to further diversify the sample group. Eleven of the original twelve focus group members remained at the end of the first year, and these eleven continued with the focus groups over the four years.

### ***Stage 1, then stage 2***

I divided the research into a primary and second stage.<sup>18</sup> Initially privileging relationships, I used the first stage – the Focussing Data Set – to understand how engaging in collective worship affected children’s sense of relationships with God, themselves, other people and the world. There were two key purposes: first, to ascertain how the group expressed themselves and their sense or spirituality, and their connectedness through the medium of relationships. Second, to begin interviewing the group about their experiences of collective worship, and how engaging in collective worship related to the various relationships they noted in the relationship mapping exercise. This phase constructed data diagrams and maps as well as interviews. It was clear that children experienced various dynamics in collective worship which shaped their understanding of and relationship with self, other people, and the world.

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<sup>17</sup> I used the school’s data system to find the children’s current attainment levels.

<sup>18</sup> Figure 1 shows the topics for data collection across the years.

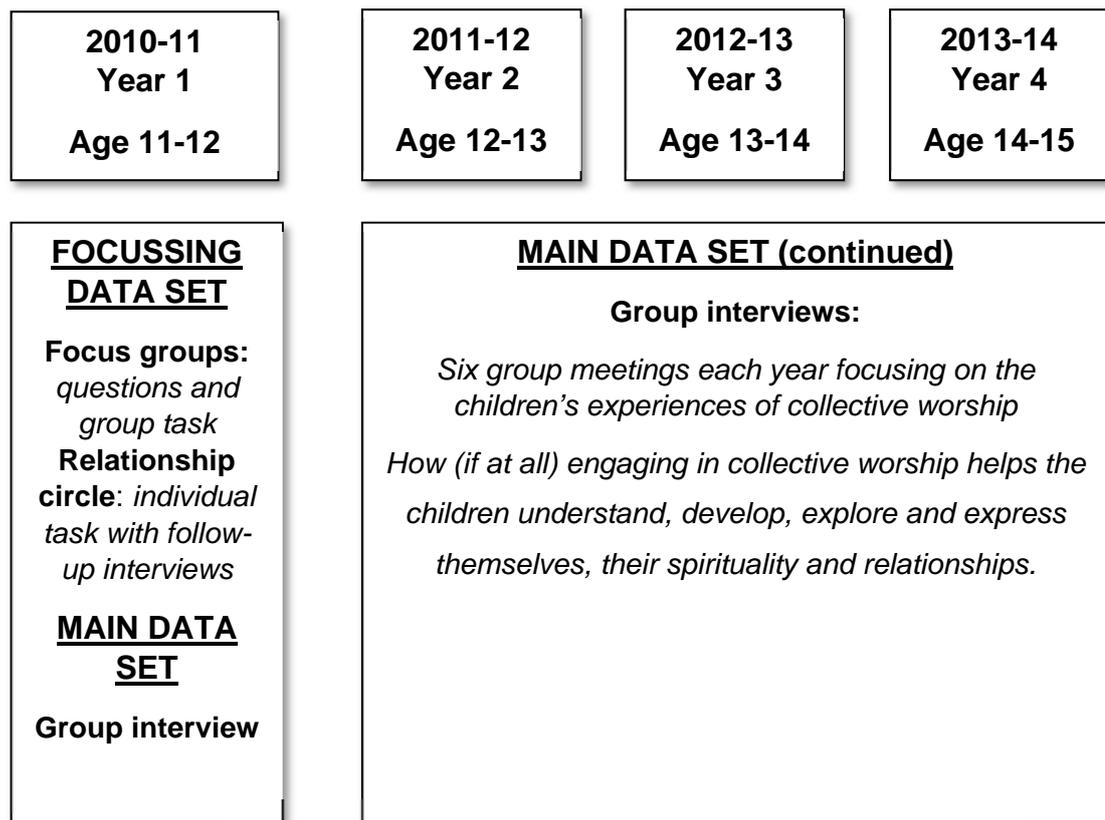


Figure 1. The long-term plan of the research

Developing this, I entered the second stage of the project – the Main Data Set – which took place in the remainder of the first year and then over the subsequent years. Here, I focused exclusively on the children’s reflections and experiences of collective worship. As the project progressed, I was able to help the children reflect back on their earlier comments by using recurrent themes in the data about collective worship. For example, they were asked to recall in year 10 how collective worship in year 7 helped them consider friendships or parental relationships, or compared two or more collective worship experiences around Advent or Christmas. Reflecting back on previous years’ comments helped the children make their own comparisons.

### ***Recognising limitations***

I acknowledge three limitations in my methodology: the choice of school, the methods for data collection, and in transcription. First, I recognise the type of school has an effect on the data. A question worth considering is whether the data would show similar spiritual engagement in collective worship if the children were at a mono-cultural school, such as an all British-Asian or all White-British school? I recognise the make-up of school has an influence on the children's reflections. For example, it might be argued the diversity of a larger city provided the opportunity for children to have a different world view. Researchers, it is recognised, seek out settings in which the best data will be produced (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). However, as a researching professional and chaplain my project is located in my context, which is multi-cultural and contains children from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds.

Second, the children responded differently to the methods of data collection. Some children found visual methods easier to communicate their understanding of spiritual, and other children preferred verbal methods. Within the verbal methods (interviews and groups) some children felt more able to speak in one-to-one interviews rather than in large group settings. Though David Silverman recognises advantages and disadvantages in each technique – for example, one-to-one interviews might allow for less-confident participants to speak, but in larger groups people can agree or disagree with others' opinions – choosing the right method of data collections was, I found, a challenging exercise (2010). Looking back on the focus groups, which was considered the most fruitful method over the four years, one lesson learned was to consider more carefully the pace and structure of the groups. Focus groups were beneficial to the project in collecting large amount of data simultaneously as well as the children becoming more confident over time – a positive aspect of the qualitative nature of the project. However I discovered whilst several children were very comfortable answering questions and 'thinking on their feet', others needed more time to process and benefitted from knowing the questions ahead of time. Additionally, certain children were stirred by others' comments on collective worship but some group members withdrew in order to not disagree or stand out. Though

focus groups, on balance, served the project well in hindsight some modifications in pace and structure might have extended participation.

Third, at a practical level, transcribing my own focus groups proved challenging. Whilst the process enabled me to embed in my mind the comments and conversations – and even visualise body language and facial expressions – the transcribing took a considerable amount of time. In the planning stage of the project it was valuable to map out the use of time for managing research, data collection, analysis and writing. However, transcribing proved to be one element which caused difficulty in keeping to deadlines and allowing objectives to be achieved. Though employing a third party to transcribe might have had drawbacks feeling more distanced from the data, the benefits of time and therefore quicker progress may have been worthwhile.

### **2.3 Research ethics**

I took great care to be attentive to research ethics and the well-being of the children. From the first meeting I put in place the child protection and safeguarding standards required by the school, Local Education Authority and academic institute, and continued to follow these guidelines throughout the project.<sup>19</sup> I ensured that informed consent was gained from the children and parents. Voluntary involvement was paramount, and the children were reminded at the start of each year that they could withdraw from the project at any time without any consequence.<sup>20</sup>

In recognising that children are a vulnerable group, I considered confidentiality, risk, and harm to the children (Liamputtong, 2007). I ensured each child understood all conversations were confidential within the usual legal restrictions and any reports or sharing of data (including this thesis)

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<sup>19</sup> The school's Child Protection Policy can be found in the Appendix. Manchester LEA's safeguarding policies for working with children can be found at [www.manchestersafeguardingboards.co.uk/children-young-people](http://www.manchestersafeguardingboards.co.uk/children-young-people).

<sup>20</sup> Copies of the Participant Information Sheet and consent forms can be found in the Appendix.

would use pseudonyms (Gregory, 2003). The data was stored securely and confidentially following school and institution guidelines (Bulmer, 2001).

I carefully considered the location and environment of meetings and interviews, and decided these should take place within the school as this provided a safe space to meet, but outside of the normal learning hours of the school day in order to separate the meetings from normal school activities. Regular updates about the project were given to the child protection officer in the school in order to ensure the children were safeguarded. Additionally, I made sure the children were aware at the start and throughout the project that a member of senior staff, unconnected to the research, was available if they wished to raise concerns or talk about issues in the focus groups they might have found distressing.

I also recognised the challenges brought by my role in school. I was aware of the influence I potentially had on the children as an established member of staff. Being a teacher and chaplain may have led to an unhelpful power-dynamic – or children saying the ‘right thing’ – in order to ‘please Sir’. However there were also advantages in being a member of staff. Having an established trust relationship with the children was advantageous in collecting the data. Fox et al assert such a trust relationship can result in greater depth of children’s reflection (2007). For my project, I hoped for these greater depths in reflection – for the children to superficially reflect on collective worship might have resulted in the failure to achieve answers to my questions. Therefore this trust relationship, within clear ethical boundaries, was key to successful research.

Another component of ensuring the research was ethical was considering potential misconceptions from among the children. They needed to be clear about their expectations of any benefits of being involved in the research. I was clear there was no financial or academic advantages in participation, and that the project existed totally separate to their school educations. Furthermore their continued involvement would attract no partiality or extra pastoral care in my role as chaplain, and conversely withdrawing from the project would not carry any penalty.

Having safeguarding practices in place, and ensuring the children were clear about impartiality and their choices, satisfied my own requirements to ensure the research project was ethical and responsible.

### ***The contribution of the researcher***

I recognise my role, as the researcher, in all aspects of the project. I made key decisions at the project's inception, when focussing research questions, forming the research groups, shaping data collection and analysis, and selecting the data which for this thesis paper would best support my argument. I acknowledged there was a degree of bias in the choices I made, and I needed to question how these choices influenced the shape of project (Fox et al., 2007). Careful attention to and inclusion of the influence of the researcher in the project, Bulmer argues, brings academic and research credibility to projects (2001).

It was important to ask questions of my own choices in shaping the research – a process termed 'reflexivity' which is an essential element of successful qualitative research (Swinton & Mowat, 2006). I asked questions of my decisions and probed the 'shaping role of my own gaze on the project' (J. Mason, 2002, p. 149). This enabled me to be sensitive to a range of voices in the project, to question my own voice as researcher. For my project, being reflexive meant critically questioning the choices I made in interpreting the data. Additionally, Ronald Walent suggests asking about one's own experiences of the phenomenon we are researching is crucial (2008). From his studies into reflexivity in researching aging, he suggests reflexivity adds another, deeper level to interpreting data. Approaching my interpretation of the project and data analysis reflexively enabled me to question how my experience of collective worship influenced my interpretation the children's reflections on their experiences. This has shaped the research by drawing out the issues of power and reluctance in the children's experiences of participating in collective worship, and enabled me to probe further in interviews into children's perceptions of power.

Finally, in terms of my contribution as researcher, I was aware as a practitioner-researcher I could not listen to the data objectively (Gilbert, 2001). Without such recognition of a researcher's personal and political principles, credibility in qualitative research is undermined. I recorded decisions made in selecting tasks for the group in the initial data collection stage, reflected on choices made preparing for focus meetings, contemplated my analysis of data, and critically questioned my choices in building a thesis argument.

## **2.4 Research in practice – methods of data collection and analysis**

Gathering useful data required several crucial decisions regarding its analysis, guided by Mason's and Robson's suggestions on interviews for collecting data (J. Mason, 2002; Robson, 2002). To ensure I collected the most relevant and reliable information, I considered the environment of the focus groups, as well as their style and structure. Additionally, I decided which method I would use to analyse the data. This section details these decisions, and their rationale.

### ***Data collection***

With the children selected, appropriate participant information sheets and consent forms were signed by children and parents. In the first meeting, we constructed a list of rules together which the children agreed to follow: honesty, respect and confidentiality. The children were most emphatic about the need for honesty, as they wanted to be able to 'speak their mind' about collective worship. They wanted to show mutual respect by allowing each person their right to speak freely, but also to be disagreed with. Finally the need for confidentiality was crucial, within the legal requirements of children speaking with adults. They wanted to ensure that no one (including me) would talk beyond the group about things said within meetings. These three rules were reiterated at the start of each interview.

For the focussing data set I used methods of collection which intentionally served to ease the children into the data collection experience. Following Robson's pattern of the initial phase being used to prepare for the main data collection phase (2002), three methods were used to provide me with information with which to develop more structured and focused interviews for the second phase. In the first meeting, I asked general questions about the children's backgrounds, spiritual thinking and current life experiences. Following this, I asked the children to perform a group task to describe their experiences of various relationships. They were to create a piece of visual data for each relationship, depicting how they felt connected to or influenced by these relationships, and how these relationships functioned and were shaped. Figure 2 illustrates this task.



Figure 2. Example of the group task in the FOCUSING DATA SET

Third, I examined children's personal relationships by collecting a 'relationship map' and conducting a follow-up interview (Figure 3). I borrowed the visual task from a PSHE lesson I had taught, which involved children locating themselves at the centre of a set of concentric circles, and being

invited to place words around outer circles. The words or pictures should be someone or something they considered to be, in some form or other, an important part of their life. These could be names of people, places, objects or experiences, and were carefully situated in reference to how important the children felt each item was – the closer to the centre indicating greater value. This provided me with information in order to focus questions in the later stage of the research.

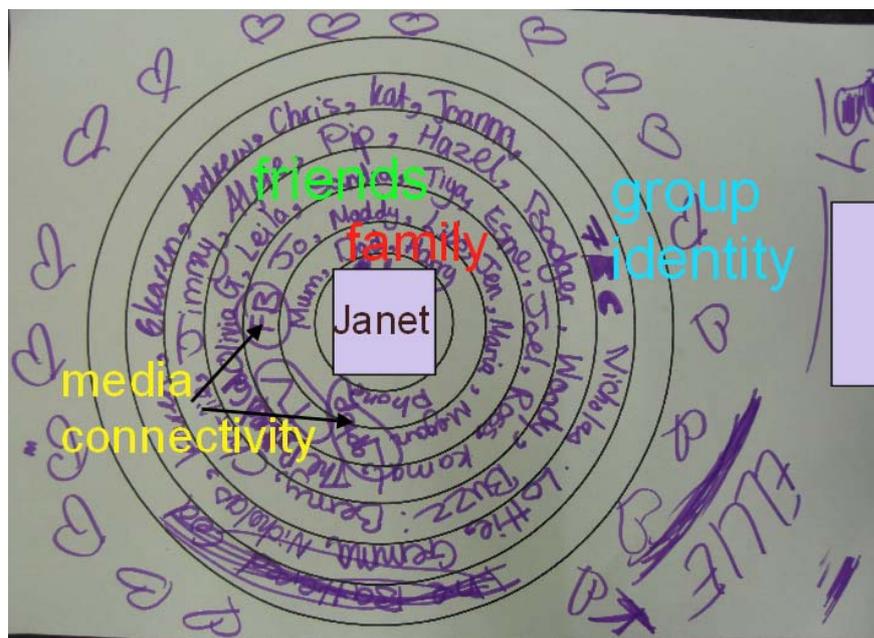


Figure 3. Janet's Relationship Circle - annotated

Following this, I interviewed the children individually to explore the items placed on the map and to seek clarification of why certain words were placed closer or further away from the circle, or how they related to other items on the map. These tasks completed the initial stage of data collection.

Next, I began collecting the main body of my data during the remainder of the first year. I chose to gather reflections in this first year so I could establish a record of the children's initial reflections on their experiences of collective worship. The second, third and fourth years followed a similar pattern of me reminding the children of their chosen rules and then asking clear questions

about collective worship. These were focussed on their experiences of and reflections about collective worship, including at times of religious significance such as Advent and Christmas, Lent and Easter, or around Remembrance.

I drew on Martin Bulmer's method for planning interviews, which followed a structure of 'introductory questions, key questions, ending questions' (2001) and prepared open-ended questions for each of the three sections. I was conscious these might not all be necessary depending on the children's answers. Examples, seen in figure 4, are taken from a group interview exploring children's experiences in a Remembrance assembly. These questions were a guide, with liberty to probe as required or to be set aside if the children's answers led me in another direction. For certain assemblies, for example a special assembly about environmentalism, I used a pre-assembly and post-assembly interview format. This was to enable the children to reflect on differences in their own feelings which they might attribute to participating in the assembly. I planned all group interviews to be semi-structured in nature, following Tim May's suggestion that this allows the researcher to seek clarification and elaboration of answers (2001). This semi-structured approach enabled me to immediately explore new angles or unanticipated responses arising in the interview (Kitzinger & Rosaline, 1999). Steiner Kvale suggested several interview skills which I used to fashion my questioning, principally planning the different stages and preparing differing types of questions (1996). Asking open questions in a semi-structured format with the children able to speak freely is key to successfully answering the research questions and securing the integrity of the data.

- What are your feelings about the Remembrance Assembly?
- What does Remembrance mean to you? Has this changed in any way due to the assembly?
- Are there any parts of the assembly which make you happy or sad? When and why?
- In the assembly do you think about other people – perhaps friends or family members? If so who?
- Do you 'bring in' some of your own thoughts or experiences to the assembly? If so what?

Figure 4: Examples of questions from a focus group after a Remembrance Assembly

Following Colin Robson, I decided to transcribe the data myself as soon as possible after each focus group. He offers three rationales: practicality, better understanding of the children, and familiarisation (2002). Robson also cautions that self-transcription of qualitative data is immensely time consuming, but I considered the benefits outweighed this disadvantage. In the latter years of the project, I was more efficient in the preparation-gathering-transcribing process.

Finally, I kept a research journal which offered the benefit of recording experience and improving reflections (Moon, 1999). It helped bring together professional observations, data, and scholarship and 'coloured in' the text of the children's data by connecting words and data into reflections and meaning. For example, one child commented that in one collective worship experience he was 'reminded of hope in the world', and in journaling I was able to link other interview comments. This formed my conclusions about how children use collective worship and how these uses changed over time.

### ***Analysing the data***

My chief criterion in data analysis were identifying themes, generating a theory (rather than testing a hypothesis), effective description of spirituality and not measurement of it. Thematic analysis, which follows a coding and categorising model and produces a set of topics upon which reflections can be made (Joffe & Yardley, 2003) most suitably addressed the questions driving the research.

After transcribing each focus group, I followed a process of textual analysis using a 'highlight-label-summarise' model to draw out the themes (Silverman, 2011). First, I identified where the themes occurred in the data; second, I named the contributor and summarised the comments or reflections; third, I analysed the comments by labelling them as positive or negative, if they evoked strong emotions, whether they led to change in thinking or an action/decision. As the volume of analysed data grew over time, I was able to identify where each theme reoccurred and compare the comments made about each theme. Additionally, I was able to trace back themes and comments across the years in order to ascertain if there had been any changes in each child's reflections (J. Mason, 2002). This perspective enabled the longitudinal aspect of the project to generate insights which would lead to valuable conclusions.

### ***Presenting my findings***

In presenting my data in the following chapters I aim to fulfil my objective of privileging the child's voice mediated through interviews, art and narrative. In *The Spiritual Life of Children*, Robert Coles uses narratives to great effect to deepen the readers' understanding of each child's context in order for the reader to not only learn something about the child but also from the child (1990). Each of my next three chapters begins with a narrative re-telling the story of one child's experiences in collective worship as illustrative and to highlight themes. Here, the stories allow me to explore the relationships between the child and parents, teachers and friends, as well as to identify the

influences these might have on the child. For my work, using narratives allows me to better understand the children's reflections about collective worship and adds value to knowledge using a longitudinal lens. This joins together stories and reflections from across the years, bringing into sharp clarity the differences in a child's understanding as well as marker points for when significant changes occurred.

## Chapter 3: *'Reluctance' in collective worship*

### Introduction

In the previous chapters I demonstrated collective worship neglected to consider its meaning for children. Responding to this, the design of my own project privileged the children's voice and I articulated how my longitudinal qualitative research and methodology focused on core questions to understand the effect of engaging in collective worship for children.

In the following three chapters I turn to my central thesis, which is that the data forms a picture of the children interviewed undergoing a series of phases in relation to collective worship: that of reluctance-permission-opportunity. This is significant in that it highlights the dynamic and multi-dimensional nature of the children's evolving sense and awareness of faith, God, relationship with other and self. It offers a three-dimensional model of spiritual reflection and maturity as it emerges out of the lived experience of collective worship. This encounter enables children to construct collective worship as sacred – meaning it is precious, set apart, revelatory, special and life-changing – and offers resources for reflecting on their relationships, values and experiences.

In this chapter I put forward the first of these categories, the ways in which children experienced *reluctance* to engage and participate in collective worship. Reluctance takes the form of unwillingness to believing in the existence of God, to participate in faith heritage and traditions, and in forms of resistance to power and authority. However, I argue that rather than acting as barrier to engagement, reluctance can be a formative influence for children in terms of understanding their own spirituality. In this way, as children navigate their experience of reluctance they can begin to construct collective worship as a sacred place where they have freedom to think and develop.

I will begin with an account of one participant, Mandy, as a way of bringing understanding and context to the idea of children's reluctance to participate in collective worship.

### **3.1 Mandy's reluctance**

Mandy is from a White-Irish background, was born in England and has lived in the same city all her life. She was brought up Roman Catholic, attended church regularly as a child and was educated at the local Roman Catholic primary school. Mandy's parents work for a charity which helps people with disabilities to access areas of life in which they find difficult to participate.

Across her high school years, Mandy described incidents of reluctance in relation to her participation in collective worship. She was positive about some aspects of assemblies, commenting that specific teachers 'told good stories' in assemblies and attached to these meaningful morals. However, Mandy found other moral lessons in assemblies more difficult to engage with, reflecting 'there are some that are just weird.' When I asked her to explain, Mandy said she often felt that Biblical application was included as an after-thought to moral teaching. She noted one assembly which, in her perception, was 'going really well until the tone changed' at the end when, in the last two minutes the teacher added: 'As it says in the Bible ...'. She saw this as negative because the moral teaching had value in its own right, without the need for Biblical support, noting: 'We can be told about lying without a need to be told Bible story with some small bit about the truth in it.' Additionally, Mandy thought some assemblies had little or no relevance to her own life – using the example of stories at Christmastime: 'Every year I get annoyed hearing about an angel appearing to people – nothing like that's going to happen to us, so why it is always a massive feature.' She reflected on the level of her engagement by saying, 'I'd listen more if it felt more relevant.' Commenting on her difficulty with assemblies she ascribed this to finding 'it harder to believe in the stories we were being told from the Bible.' Her scepticism highlighted the assumption that the content presented by an adult should be useful, relevant or beneficial to the children. Mandy was confident

in her opinion regarding the themes and topics of collective worship, and she felt the choice to listen was very much her own.

When the group was specifically discussing Christmas assemblies, Mandy remarked directly on her belief in the existence of God. She was sceptical about miraculous events in the nativity story, but also linked her disbelief to various personal changes which occurred over the past few years. One reason was particular life experiences or events which happened – not to her but to friends – such as losing loved ones or other incidents which she couldn't reconcile with her religious understanding. Mandy stated, 'things happened – not personally to me' and explained she found others' experiences had profound impact on her own beliefs. These events, she felt, led her to deeply question her belief in the existence of God, and hence shaped Mandy's reluctance to engage in assemblies.

Remembering times she reflected on her belief in the existence of God, Mandy focused on one assembly entitled 'Where is God now?' It began with the topic of the FA Cup Final and the story of traditional hymn 'Abide With Me' being sung – the leader explaining the song was asking God to stand with people in their time of need. The question was asked about how fans from opposing teams might use the song to consider whether God was going to be 'on their side'. This idea was extended to asking whether people believe God was always 'on their side' or always positively answers people's prayers. Mandy questioned, 'If God is with people who ask for a miracle or asked to be healed of a sickness – will God help them?' Her childhood confidence that 'God answers prayer' was being brought into question in Mandy's mind. 'Is this always the case?' she asked. Mandy concluded this could not always be the case as, in her understanding not everyone who asked for a miracle was healed. She connected these questions with her growing scepticism of the existence of God – if people prayed and God did not answer, 'does that mean God is not there?'

These incidents were part of a change in Mandy's thinking which she linked to her sense of spiritually maturing: 'As I grew up I got my own thoughts and began to think more for myself.' Mandy questioned the certainty of the faith

she had as a younger child. In assemblies she reflected on her religious beliefs and how she perceived these were changing. Alongside this Mandy questioned how she understood belief and if she felt a sense of ownership of these beliefs. Mandy evaluated the change in her own religious identity, explaining 'I went from being religious to being non-religious.' I asked Mandy what she meant by 'religious', and she clarified to 'believe in the existence of God' and to 'live a religious life' – which followed religious rules and practices. This sense of change to 'non-religious' led to Mandy feeling *dis*-connected from her parents' religious beliefs. In articulating she did not 'believe in God', Mandy explained that she found it hard to comprehend in the existence of a transcendent, a belief which had been instilled within her through school and family faith traditions. This experience of growing scepticism, I suggest, enabled Mandy to admit to questioning her own belief in 'organised' religion, and her sense of participation in religious life from her childhood. Undergoing reluctance to share her parents' faith enabled Mandy to gain a sense of owning her thoughts, which was revelatory for Mandy as it brought about a change in her thinking. Experiencing reluctance to believing in God, and exploring this through collective worship experiences, was for Mandy a positive experience. This sense of reluctance within collective worship, identifies collective worship as a precious place of spiritual reflection, doubt and maturation.

In the focus groups I also explored with Mandy how she understood her connection to her family's religious traditions. For Mandy, rejecting her family's religious values – and reluctance to engaging in collective worship – did not mean rejecting her family. 'I would still kind of call myself a bit Catholic, but not a proper one like others in my family. If I had to choose I'd say I'm Catholic because of my family, not really by my own choice.' A deep sense of loyalty to her family remained with her through her high school life. In one assembly, on the theme of relationships with family, children were asked to consider the support and encouragement which families or carers offer. Commenting on this assembly Mandy explained she felt a deep-seated sense of attachment to her family, albeit with differences and disagreements on many issues. She used the example of her accent – they have 'really

posh accents' – to highlight a dissimilarity perceived between herself and her family. However even in recognising this difference Mandy admitted they shared a deep sense of love and care. My interpretation of Mandy's statements about her family was that she associated with her family's values – which she understood came from their deep sense of faith commitment – but did not accept the faith tradition on which these values were based. Mandy did not reject her family's moral and ethical values but largely rejected their understanding and practices of faith.

Collective worship was a special location which was revelatory and life-changing (bringing significant change) for Mandy's spirituality and relationships. During collective worship, despite questioning her belief in the existence of God, she did make some connection with the 'transcendent'. I identify Mandy's process of questioning as reluctance not resistance. In one focus group, in their third year in high school, the children were commenting about their feelings towards prayer in assemblies. Mandy responded that at times she did pray in assemblies, recalling different responses when other people prayed from when she herself prayed alongside others. When other people led a prayer she commented, 'the prayer doesn't really go in' – there was little personal connection or participation with that form of prayer, but there was a willingness to listen. However, when time was given for silence Mandy was more purposeful, recalling at those times her 'mind flutters away ... it does make you pray – even if there is nothing up there.' She did spend time 'praying', as she understood this, to a lesser degree when other people led prayers but with greater depth when she was enabled to pray and think for herself. The space of collective worship was sacred for Mandy as it was set apart from the other parts of her school day, and was a special for a place of thinking, praying, and making meaning of life's experiences.

Mandy encountered changes in her sense of connection to God. However, despite a more general reluctance to engage with participating in collective worship – for example engaging with Bible stories and with some aspects of prayer – the sense of deeper connection to others was valued as precious and special by Mandy. She found assemblies to offer several moments of mini revelation by beginning to realise her own independent perspectives on

faith and lifestyle, and a space set apart from her normal life experiences by being a place of silence and personal prayer.

For Mandy, these aspects and reluctance – of questioning the existence of God, of God not answering prayer, of rejecting her family's faith, and yet her own practice of prayer – I suggest, make collective worship a sacred experience. These experiences have highlighted how her reluctance to engaging with collective worship enabled reflection on various aspects of her spirituality and spiritual practices. Mandy's account has brought context to the idea of children's reluctance in collective worship. I will now go on to further argue how, for the children in my study, experiencing reluctance in collective worship is one part of a dynamic which enables the construction of collective worship as sacred.

### **3.2 Encountering reluctance in collective worship**

In this section I present evidence of the ways in which children encounter multiple aspects of reluctance to participate in collective worship. I frame my working understanding of reluctance in the context of collective worship, before demonstrating three aspects of reluctance present in children's experiences of collective worship: reluctance to accept aspects of power and authority, reluctance to believe in the existence of God, and reluctance to participate in faith heritage and traditions.

#### ***Reluctance, not resistance***

Reluctance and resistance, as this chapter will demonstrate, are reactions by the children to the perceived dynamic of power and authority within schools and in particular within collective worship. Andrew Wright, exploring the effects of power on spirituality within education, argues there are two opposing philosophies at work relating to the practice of spirituality in schools which effect power dynamics (2000). First, the child-centred approach which preserves the child's autonomy and seeks to nurture a more natural

construction of spiritual values and practice, and second the imposition of adult's moral vision and authority in directing and instructing spiritual development. A similar question is raised by John Hull, who asks whether collective worship should be understood as nurture or indoctrination (1975). Reluctance resonates better with my understanding of the children. I believe they experience nurture understood as that which recognises a child's autonomy in choosing to engage in development and worship, whereas the term resistance has associations with indoctrination and connotations of pressure or coercion. I suggest that 'reluctance' is a preferable term, because as this section argues the children mostly experience power as nurture and care more than indoctrination and authority. Yet, they can be reluctant to 'traditional' concepts of believing in the existence of God, as I will be demonstrating.

A further aspect of power in collective worship, beyond that of children sensing the dynamics of power, is relevant – that of children's relationship with the perceived power dynamic identified between the child and adult. The child-teacher relationship, identified by Schuengel as key to the development of children, is a positive factor in children experiencing reluctance rather than resistance (Schuengel, 2012). Using Mandy's example, when she was asked to pray, although her belief in God was unsure, she affirmed appreciating the space which enabled her to pray. Relationality was key for Mandy being willing to pray – there was a sense of trusting other people when they prayed but also being present with her peers during silence. Relationship and trust are present in collective worship. Drawing these aspects together, my use of reluctance in this context is because the children perceive a combination of power and nurture within collective worship and respond consciously and cautiously, agreeing and accepting participation through a relationship of trust and nurture but at one and the same time reluctant to acquiesce fully in collective worship if it is framed in power terms.

### ***Reluctance in responding to aspects of power and authority***

One aspect of reluctance to engaging in collective worship is related to the children's experiences of power and authority. This was particularly important in later school years as reflections about reluctance because of aspects of power and authority were more clearly articulated. The children expressed increasing frustration and reluctance to having to gather for assemblies. Fahad commented he had to 'sit through and get over [assembly]' in order to arrive at the first lesson of the day, while Elizabeth articulated a feeling of defiance and boldness towards collective worship as she became older. Commenting in year 10 (aged 15) she expressed how the children felt 'too scared not to listen in year 7, but now we're not scared.'

Other children signalled their frustration with issues of themes and content, as well as styles in collective worship. Mandy, in her comments earlier in this chapter reflected this. Several assemblies were 'connected to the same point' according to Victoria who noted significant repetition. Every assembly came back 'being nice to people', so her general response to assemblies was to 'laugh at them and blank them out.'

However, in contrast to the other children, themes which Milala perceived as irrelevant didn't cause her annoyance. She was supportive of the content of assemblies, remarking, 'If your parents send you to a Church of England High School you have to expect stuff like that.' Milala didn't feel she needed to protest about being present in assemblies, but rather 'just get along with it.' Milala's response indicates resignation in feeling there was nothing to be done about the choice of themes in collective worship.

These reflections indicate that children sensed they had little or no control over the content, themes, and the expectation that they would participate in collective worship. They perceived a dynamic of power, a clear sense that the adults and not children have the supremacy and authority. The children identified what I describe as a coalition of power made up of the church, their parents and the school.

Aspects of power and powerlessness feature heavily in the children's sense of reluctance to engage in collective worship. In researching pupils' perspectives, Jeannette Gill found several reasons for children's opposition to involvement in collective worship (2004). Although acts of silence and some themes in collective worship were welcome, there was an overall challenge to the power of the school and parents. Complaints were that adults failed to recognise the children's doubt in biblical material, failed to acknowledge children's growing awareness of living in a pluralist society, and not recognising the private nature of children's faith. For the children in my study these were factors in their sense of reluctance, but other reasons were also evident.

Children resist engagement due to multiple 'barriers': generational – identified in the reflection that some topics are relevant to adults but not to children; power – identified in the children's language of being too scared to engage (or latterly not scared); theme – the content being considered of no value and having to simply 'sit through'; and intellectual – the sense of not being stimulated to engage mentally as the assemblies come back to the 'same moral'.

These barriers are replicated in other faith settings which inform the understanding of these dynamics in collective worship. Heather Ingersoll considers obstacles in church which separate children from adults as centring on the imbalance in adult-child power (2014). Her study investigates the perception amongst children of power dynamics in the church. Power is held by adults, Ingersoll suggests, as they deem children are unable to hold significant faith beliefs without adult intervention. Faith is portrayed by adults as something for adults which children must acquire, and participation by children is therefore of a token nature. This idea of power seems to seamlessly be replicated in collective worship in school, and is connected with the children experiencing reluctance.

The children do not think they are incapable of mature faith. Rather they consider themselves to be capable of a profound and meaningful understanding of faith. Although children might sense they hold little or no

power, this is not due to possessing 'adult-faith' and is more complex than simply dividing into child-faith and adult-faith. Indeed, the children do not feel the need to acquire the adult's faith, but rather feel their own faith and dynamic spirituality should be equally valued and nurtured. For example, Mandy's comment about 'weird moral teaching' – for her the content of some assemblies did not connect with her current moral questions and life experiences. Reluctance is experienced here, I propose, because the children feel a lack of spiritual connection with adults who engage and prepare collective worship on their own terms. The children are aware that their lives can and do have spiritual expression, but the content of collective worship is not engaging with or meeting their own life experiences.

Although children do react negatively to power, not all perceptions of barriers resulted in total rejection by the children. Some children reflected that whilst they rejected the content and themes of collective worship, they can maintain relationships with the adults. Despite Victoria's negative comment on the themes of collective worship she reflected on support by reflecting that one teacher 'listens and helps' when she experienced difficulties in school. She commented this realisation came about whilst being in an assembly led by this particular teacher, adding she 'hadn't really thought how much she helps me 'till I was sitting in that assembly.' Eddie adds, 'I always listen to what Mrs [name] says, because when she was my RE teacher she was really genuine.' The children respond more positively to the personality and person of authority figures than the themes and content of the collective worship.

The children in my study indicate subject teachers and religious leaders (Ministers/Pastors and Imams) have the greatest influence on their religious beliefs and ethics. When Keith reflected on significant relationships in his life using the concentric circles exercise (see chapter two), he placed his teachers closest to himself. Jessica commented on her appreciation of a youth leader whom she admired for being a 'good example of how to live a good life.' Accepting the person of the leader in collective worship runs counter to the children's feelings of rejection towards the content.

Children, therefore, can develop a clear sense of association to adults in collective worship. In researching influences on children's spiritual development Roehlkepartain et al suggest a strong connection between young people and their spiritual leaders (2011). Their project interviewed young people from around the world to explore how they articulated their own spiritual development. They propose children are indebted not only to parents but also to other adults for their spiritual and religious formation, with the young people's sense of appreciation being largely retrospective. However, for my participants appreciation was current as well as retrospective. For example, in Mandy's comments about a greater sense of connection to her family, and Victoria's realisation of how much one teacher helped her.

Reluctance does not always lead to rejection. As such, collective worship generates a positive sense of connection and strengthening relationship. I suggest reluctance experienced in collective worship serves as a catalyst for appreciation of other supportive relationships. Although reluctance is sometimes intense this can be productive not destructive to children's relationships with adults. Children are able – in effect – to separate the message being presented from the messenger, as seen in Victoria's comments. Reluctance to aspects of power in collective worship does not necessarily result in a rejection of adults, but can effect positive feelings towards authority figures leading to a sense that collective worship is special and revelatory (that is bringing a change in thinking) for the children – perhaps even sacred.

### ***Reluctance to believe in the existence of God***

A second aspect of reluctance to engage with collective worship was the children's growing scepticism in the existence of God. Two salient themes or 'triggers' prompt or stimulate the children to reflect on their belief in the existence of God: life experiences and world events; and the presumed existence of God in collective worship is then questioned.

First, the data suggests various life experiences and world events prompted the children to question their religious beliefs. In one focus group Milala, a girl of Arabic-Muslim heritage, was commenting about Remembrance assemblies, which are discussed in further detail in chapter four. For Milala, thinking about 'family who've died in wars', led her to question the ability of God to protect these people. And early in the project, following the Tsunami in Japan in 2011, Elizabeth reflected that during one collective worship experience she questioned if God 'had the power to stop it or is there at all.' Additionally, a sense of growing intellectual maturity stimulated the children into reflecting on and critically analysing their belief. For example, in the above narrative Mandy comments about questioning the truth of miracles during Christmas and other assemblies. She found stories of healings and miracles unbelievable in her teens, although as a child she had readily accepted these as authentic. Questioning the validity of Bible stories for Mandy also necessitated re-examining her belief in the existence of God.

Second, my data indicates that the reason why children are unwilling participants in collective worship experiences is because they do not value God and take issue with the existence of God being presumed in collective worship and therefore worshipped. Mandy's comments about her own sense of belief being different to that of her family's is one example of this. Encounters in collective worship form a different experience to other places (in school or home) where the children discuss and critically think about the possible existence of God (such as in RE lessons). Reluctance to participate in collective worship is exacerbated further by the children's growing scepticism and inability to resolve questions about belief in the existence of God, as well as recognising their own changing beliefs.

It should not come as a surprise to find that as children grow and mature their beliefs in God – both existence and the nature of God – undergo change. In his research on the development of faith, James Fowler connects the changing stages in human development to changes in understanding about God. In *Stages of Faith*, Fowler proposes that as human beings' world view expands so does their perception of the existence of God and their understanding of God's connection to the world (1981). In attempting to

reshape faith development as a series of phases, he draws on Piaget's structuralism and Erikson's psychological development, along with Niebuhr and Tillich's work on faith development, to construct periods in life in which human beings understand faith through recognising expanding relationships with the world around them. Fowler's work on stages of faith offers some insight, then, into the connections between children's development and their changing beliefs in God. As the children's experience of the world changes, so do their pre-formed ideas about the existence of God. In the children's reflections there is a direct link between questioning the existence of God and reluctance to engage in and with collective worship.

However, the link is not as simple as the children's loss of belief in the existence of God causally leading to reluctance to participate in collective worship. The connection is subtle: not that the shift in belief is linear (that is, from belief to non-belief) but rather the landscape of belief is different. These changes follow various patterns, such that belief in God as a Transcendent being can change, for example, but the perception of God being able to answer prayer might not. Changing belief in the existence of God is not necessarily about changing the content of faith but rather changing a person's underlying patterns of knowing and valuing, as well as understanding faith and self (Fowler, 1987). For Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and Ruth Webber, change in religious belief during teenage years derives from context and background (2007). Belief in the existence of God, they suggest, varies according to religious background – whether traditionally religious, non-traditional religious background or humanist – and this effects the form and level of change. For the children studied, belief in God, therefore, is not about a single aspect of conviction; rather the complexity of a child's relationships and experiences manipulates their sense of belief.

Some aspects of Fowler and Mason, Singleton and Webber resonate with my interpretation of the children's data. For them, several aspects of life are changing, including their own and others' experiences, academic subjects and their sense of knowledge, values, faith and self. Mandy's assertion that she now thinks, as an older child, 'there is nothing up there', characterises this changes and is only a headline for what is really happening. Where she

once had a confident belief in the existence of God after reflecting on life events she articulated these words. Additionally, her scepticism concerning the Biblical stories about Jesus and inability to agree with others' beliefs in God and their faith practices grew in response to world events. However, change in belief in the existence of God does not fully explain her, or their, reluctance to participate in collective worship. Some children reflected assemblies provided stimuluses as well as focal points for thinking about the changing nature of their beliefs. Simply growing up or understanding more of the world around them does not fully account for reluctance to engage in collective worship. The children experience processes and experiences of detachment from tradition and sacredness evident in growing scepticism and formative stimuli.

Reluctance to engage in collective worship has a cyclical pattern, prompting changes in how children perceive their own faith. They are conscious of this and realise that it is part of their changing faith and evolving sense of belief in the existence of God. The notion that faith might not necessarily decline or disappear but rather mutate is classically associated with the work of Grace Davie (1994).<sup>21</sup> Although levels of formal religious practice are in decline, she argues that levels of belief remained high. 'Believing without belonging' is used by Davie to characterise the persistence of the sacred in contemporary society despite the undeniable decline in churchgoing. Belief persists in a personal state, particularly in young people she argues, rather than in people's sense of belonging and connection to religious institutions (2002). Following this Davie posits the term 'vicarious religion' meaning religion is performed by an active minority on behalf of a silent majority (2010). Neither of Davie's notions are adequate in describing the children's sense of belief. Rather, reluctance produces mutation and change in belief, not believing without belonging or the silent aspect of vicarious religion. Change in religious nature and practice is a controversial area, but my interpretation of the research suggests a greater scepticism of traditional models of belief and

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<sup>21</sup> Hervieu-Leger (2000) inspired Davie, proposing young people are ignorant of religious tradition but are spiritual shoppers. Lyon (2000) also supports Davie, arguing the increased influence of the media in religious practice has dis-embedded religion from the church, relocating religion in the postmodern.

evidence of detachment from sacredness. Nonetheless there is enduring interest, as shown in Mandy's comments, in appreciating the tangibility and importance of transcendence.

However, advancements of Davie's work enables further enlightenment for my interpretation of the children's experiences in collective worship as reluctance. David Voas and Abby Day counter Davie's maxim of 'believing without belonging', with perspectives on belief. The distinctive nature of belief across the generations leads Voas to suggest a more nuanced understanding. He proposes both the context and composition of society in which young people live has changed, resulting in different values and hence perspectives on belief (Voas, 2010). Day argues that young people's belief does not increase as faith institutions decrease – rather belief is deeply associated with identity and in the social (Day, 2011). Day's research was guided by the question, 'how do people understand belief?', using qualitative methods to interview 68 people aged 14-83 in the north of England, and developed out of the 2001 UK census. This census revealed that although Christian religious participation has been declining for the last fifty years, 72 per cent of the population self-identified as Christian (Office for National Statistics, 2012).

What Day proposes from her research is, I suggest, crucial to understanding reluctance. Belief, for Day, is related to peer and social identity – young people's belief, therefore, is better characterised as 'believing in belonging'. Belief is found in togetherness and in culture identities and should be understood as belonging *to* something or *with* others (Day, 2013). I suggest that children developing a sense of communal belief, expressed with and alongside others in community, goes a significant way to identifying the transformation in belief as experiences of reluctance in collective worship.

Day's 'believing in belonging' does not, however, fully explain the children's experiences of changing belief. In their inability to reconcile collective worship experiences and their own changing understanding of belief, the children reshape or reform belief to become both personal *and* communal belief. Previously held beliefs, particularly about the existence of God, are

interwoven with the wider school community and expressed in common spiritual activity. Although belief is being explored and reshaped, there is no 'end point', as Davie and Day suggest. The process which children encounter and undertake does not have an identifiable final location of belief. New expressions of belief are deeply connected to the sense of togetherness felt in collective worship, but children retain an aspect of personal belief which matters and has meaning to themselves. The real-life experiences which often act as triggers to exploring belief are personal, and do not result in a complete rejection of belief but rather a relocation towards personal and shared aspects of belief.

Experiencing reluctance to believe in God is itself a formative and spiritual process. That this is practised in collective worship is significant. Mandy's comments indicate collective worship itself provides a place for questioning, a special and sacred location for exploring belief in the existence of God. And Milala's reflections show the connection between real-life experiences and exploring the meaning of these in relation to the existence of God. The space offered by collective worship illuminates this process of reflection encountered by the children in their experiences of reluctance. Therefore collective worship is a highly formative and transformative space by enabling and supporting changes in children's understanding of belief. The children have an active not passive part in this process of transformation, and reluctance to engage in collective worship is a form of revolution and relocation. As such the questioning and growing scepticism in the children enable collective worship to be experienced by the children as a safe place to question.

### ***Reluctance to participate in faith heritage and traditions***

In addition to collective worship as a place to explore beliefs in the existence of God, it also provides a chance to explore faith heritage and tradition. Children's reluctance to participate in collective worship is connected to a growing discontentment with their families' faith traditions. Experiences of

singing, prayer, hearing scriptures and silence all contribute to a sense of critical reflection of children's family practices and beliefs.

Some children in my research felt the messages they heard in collective worship did not relate to 'their way of life'. Paulo considered many assemblies insignificant, adding he was 'bored most of the time' as assemblies lacked relevance to his life experiences. And Keith reflected on his inability to connect with assemblies because 'not believing in God meant he had no reason to participate.' This feeling was different for Keith than when he was participating in assemblies in primary school. There, Keith explained, he was young and his family 'brought him up to believe in God and to pray.' This was compounded by talks in assemblies and primary RE lessons. He reflected that he had moved away from believing that way early in high school, and was now unable to participate in assemblies in the same way he had when younger.

There is a connection between reluctance to follow parental or inherited faith and reluctance to engage in assemblies. Children in the group directly connected their own experience of reluctance to engage with collective worship with feeling disconnected with parental faith practices. Eddie reflected often collective worship related more to 'adults' religion than to our way of life or our modern world.' They were 'about the past of something that might fit for adults.' He felt that the examples were from the adults' own experiences and not appropriate to what he encountered in life. Mandy's comments indicated she connected better with her friends' spiritual experiences than that of her family. Her sense of belief was more located in sharing faith values with her peers than with her family. Notably, Mandy was very positive towards exploring and questioning family beliefs in the existence of God, especially relocating belief with friends in common spiritual values. For the children, reluctance can sometimes be fuelled by a sense of disconnection with adult-faith issues.

By suggesting children re-think their family faith traditions alongside their participation in collective worship, I am not proposing they have a complete rejection of faith. Neither would I claim collective worship is the only location

for growing detachment. Rather, there is a subtler change in children's understanding of faith gained from their family. This is sometimes considered in collective worship, a place children see as special and set-apart from the locations where their parents' faith is practised. In collective worship their understanding of faith moves away from family-inherited faith traditions towards social and communal spiritual values. Though subtle, this change is still significant, and as there is a distinct change in thinking, is therefore revelatory.

The children's issues regarding belief in God, as described in the previous section, embody a feeling of a broader disconnection between young people and God. For the children studied a sense of detaching and detachment mirrors a more widely recognised decline in participation in organised religion. Trends in studies into engagement with formal religion, such as research carried out by Sylvia Collins-Mayo and Tom Beaudoin (2010), suggest this decline is commonplace.<sup>22</sup> Researching the legacy left by Generation X, those born in the 1960s and 1970s, Collins-Mayo and Beaudoin's findings depict a decline in present-day young people in engagement with formal ways of church. My research supports this in the main. The children in this study rarely embrace their family's faith traditions but this is not a comprehensive dismissal. For example, whilst Mandy chooses to reject the belief in the existence of God she attributes to her parents and their traditional practice of such faith, she values a sense of togetherness and shared faith practice by appreciating chances to pray together and be in silence with other children. Olive reflected that in saying the Lord's prayer out loud with other children she found praying alongside others moving, adding 'it felt powerful.'

Therefore, a refined interpretation of 'believing without belonging' and 'believing in belonging' in this context is required in relation to collective worship. The children experience a lack of belonging to parental faith

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<sup>22</sup> Bengston (2013) found that a close relationship with a father was more influential in children's retention of faith, although statistics continue to show a general decline across generations. Crockett and Voas (2006) discovered religiosity almost halved across generations in the UK from the 1990s onwards.

traditions and a shift towards a sense of communal or collective faith. I propose the children describe a conflated encounter in the emergence of a personal, current, integrated-relational belonging. This is personal in the sense children retained this with themselves, current in that it bears present and real-life expression, and integrated-relational as it finds habitus in the shared communal experiences of collective worship.

Reluctance to participate in family faith traditions is for the children life-changing by bringing significant transformation in their thinking, and they recognise the specialness of this new terrain. The traversing of this cultivates an emerging religious expression solely connected to their friends and peers – located in the feeling of friendship and community experienced in school and through collective worship. The children dismiss the stories and content of collective worship as often designed for adults or relevant only to their parent's generation. Instead they find meaning and significance in participating in faith exploration together with friends. There is a deeper sense of belonging, not to family or traditional religious expressions but in a present school- and friend-centred community.

For my children, reluctance to embrace a family's religious views and membership of a religious community does lead to a new sense of belonging to their peers, for example Keith's reflections on not believing in the existence of God, and Eddie's comments about 'adults' faith' being different to 'children's faith'. The children find a middle or collaborative way – rejecting some aspects of traditional religious belief, but not disassociating themselves totally with the social or belonging aspect of religion, as seen in Mandy's reluctance to believing in God yet a willingness to pray alongside others. Collective worship is both revelatory and special as it in part provides a space for this change to take place, as both a product of reluctance but also a provider of reluctance.

### **3.3 Towards a new expression of togetherness**

I have proposed in this chapter that children experience different forms of reluctance to engaging in collective worship. In this section I demonstrate the outcome of their reluctance is nevertheless a sense of togetherness and of deep association. Children develop a sense of commonality with the other children, a feeling of shared experience in questioning through reconsidering spiritual heritage and communal powerlessness. It is this growing awareness of togetherness, which enables children to understand collective worship as significant, if not sacred.

#### ***The nature of togetherness***

The children experience togetherness in two ways. First, togetherness is sensing mutuality and shared exploration as the children question their belief and faith practices; second, togetherness is an outcome of perceiving negative aspects of power as a collected group in assemblies. There is an awareness from the children that others are experiencing similar questions, scepticism and uncertainty regarding their faith. For example, Mandy began to sense disconnection from her family's faith traditions and a recognition of commonality with those of her friends. Victoria and Elizabeth experienced togetherness in encountering power and articulating shared incidents of vexation.

Togetherness, I suggest, has a profound meaning for the children. A sense of commonality and shared encounter brings comfort where other some aspects of reluctance bring anxiety. The move away from religious beliefs and spiritual practices with which, at a younger age, they were once at ease, is for the children disconcerting. For the children, there is security in belonging and being able to identify with their parents' faith values, and moving away from these values brings feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness.

Children value the nature of togetherness as bringing a sense of shared experience. It is feeling together or united that matters, not necessarily where

such togetherness might lead, as indicated in Olive's comments about the Lord's Prayer. The children do not see togetherness as producing an 'end product' of belief in something. Co-production – participating with family and friends in creating and maintaining belief – is how Abby Day proposes young people construct belief (2011), but I suggest co-production of such beliefs is not the characteristic of togetherness in collective worship. The primary feature of togetherness for the children is in perceiving and sensing connection. Through recognising others are encountering the same reluctance in collective worship, they feel a sharing of experience which the children consider special. Mandy's example of disconnection with traditional religion and connection to her peers is an example of the precious nature of togetherness. In the children's reflections, togetherness was about jointly experiencing new precious moments, a feeling of fresh growth and progress along with others.

A sense of growth is vital in the children regarding collective worship as sacred. Growing together through spiritual encounters was found by Alana Harris to be crucial to a sense of social and spiritual exploration. In her research with young pilgrims visiting Lourdes she finds collective experiences formed deep and significant relationships with other young people (Harris, 2010). The sense of journeying together and of navigating common challenges, she suggests, is central to the feeling of growing spiritually together. The children in my study experience similar feelings of spiritual, personal and social challenges in collective worship. The outcome of such challenges is not the prize, nor the reformed structures of belief or the new spiritual landscape at which the children arrive. What is appreciated is experiencing closeness and intimacy, feeling connections with other children around them, and traversing new paths and responding to perceptions of power along with others. Togetherness is therefore moving towards a new sense of belonging and beginning to re-construct a different identity, though the children may not be able to define or describe this identity.

I have argued the nature of togetherness, which results from various aspects of reluctance to participating in collective worship, centres on shared

experiences and growth, and brings a sense of reassurance and security for the children. I will now demonstrate why experiencing togetherness may be considered as sacred by the children and my interpretation of their experience.

### ***Valuing togetherness as sacred***

The feeling of togetherness and experiencing revelations alongside others in collective worship is valued by the children as having special status (for example Eddie's and Mandy's comments about prayer and about their family's faith). Because of this, the experience of togetherness is precious and life-changing, and an essential part of the children constructing collective worship as sacred.

Relationships with other people are key to children's understanding and expression of spirituality, and of the sacred nature of togetherness. From his research into Christian young people's faith, Nick Shepherd proposes from an early age they develop 'a habitus of faith through socialisation' (2010). He argues that participating in such groups facilitates a process of personal choosing to follow God as the young people he researched place a high value on the social practice of faith. The similarities are clear with the children in my research. The experience of questioning, challenging and struggling over faith issues alongside friends is deeply precious to the children.

The fact that revelations are experienced together by children in collective worship also builds collective worship as sacred. Significant experiences alongside other people, including spiritual experiences, are suggested by Stephen Parker to be one dimension of making space sacred (2009). His research into prayer spaces and spiritual spaces in English sixth forms led him to propose communal experiencing of sacred had a considerable impact on children's spirituality. The impression that togetherness makes on the children means collective worship is sacred by enabling a feeling of significant spiritual connection with other people. Relationship with others

formed a core component of describing spirituality for Hay and Nye (2006). In its simplest sense, the feeling of connection and interrelationship with other human beings is sacred. However, in my context the children's sacred connections are more special because of shared struggles, discoveries and new spiritual questing experienced. In collective worship we see the sense of togetherness in a sacred and meaningful way, held as different to other forms of togetherness because of the spiritual nature of relationships.

Togetherness in collective worship is also life-changing because meaningful change occurs. Collective worship provides a place for new forms of spiritual understanding and expression to be constructed. Researching the 'sacredising' of locations, Caitlin Finlayson argues energy and emotion are key factors in constructing spaces and experiences as sacred (2016). Collective emotional experiences are noted as having significant impact on a person perceiving space to be precious and revelatory (that is, to experience a clear change in thinking), and therefore sacred. I argue togetherness in collective worship is a collective experience which is life-changing and revelatory in relation to children's sense of believing in God. The profound nature of togetherness in the setting of collective worship is different from any other sacred experience of togetherness from primary school, church or mosque. The emotions which embody connectedness are more personalised to the children, having developed out of feelings of reluctance to engaging in collective worship. The effects of reluctance to believing in the existence of God, to family religious traditions, and to aspects of power and authority, are life-changing and precious for the children, and form a key part of constructing collective worship as sacred.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have demonstrated how children engage with their feelings of reluctance to participating in collective worship. I have used the children's data to argue that reluctance is experienced by the children as a process, which is not destructive, but productive and beneficial to the children. The three areas in which reluctance is experienced by the children – believing in

the existence of God, participating in heritage and faith traditions, and in relation to power and authority – provides a fresh opportunity to rethink and reconstruct understandings of relationships and of community. This combined experience of reluctance constitutes varying expressions of spiritual transformation in the children. Collective worship provides a space for this transformation to take place by scaffolding and providing the tools for the reflective process. I have shown this transformation enables children to create a connected, flexible and situational spiritual narrative which responds to and grew from the challenges of their lived experiences. Experiencing this unique and life-changing spiritual narrative enables the construction of collective worship, enabling it to be described as sacred.

## Chapter 4: *'Permission-giving' in collective worship*

### Introduction

Permission-giving is identified as the second crucial dynamic regarding children's engagement and construction of collective worship as a sacred experience. It has complex personal and social aspects and, for children, is related to perceptions of power, independence and also to reluctance. Permission-giving is observed as children giving themselves permission, rather than feeling permission is received, and is connected to children feeling a developing sense that they are gatekeepers of their own emotions and sense of self. Giving themselves permission to engage in collective worship is precious and enables children to consider several aspects of their life experiences, in particular their sense of identity. This occurs as children reflect on death, loss and on family heritage, which offers insights into questions of identity. Permission-giving requires vulnerability from the children, something of which they are acutely aware. Permission-giving is considered precious and sacred as it is life-changing in the way it facilitates spiritual reflection on children's sense of identity.

I will begin with Milala's story to demonstrate one child's experiences of permission-giving within collective worship. Her narrative gives examples of the precious nature of permission-giving and how negotiating this affects her sense of identity. Permission-giving also enables Milala to bring situations from 'life outside' collective worship to bring identity-shaping questions into her reflections on collective worship. This further enables my developing argument about permission-giving.

#### **4.1 Milala's permission-giving**

Milala was born in Libya and moved to the UK as a young child. She and her family are practising Muslims; they have continued attending mosque and retained elements of their family heritage throughout their time in the UK, such as connections to the Libyan community and involvement in cultural events. Milala was one of the more vocal members of the focus groups, often first to express her opinion and talk about collective worship. In one focus group, when the children were in Year 9 (aged from 13 to 14), I enquired about the children's experiences of collective worship at that time. I began with a general question about recent assemblies – could the children identify if any of these had an impact on their sense of spiritual beliefs and practices, or connected with their experiences of the world? One assembly Milala wanted to talk about was based on the Biblical 'Parable of The Good Samaritan'. The assembly prompted her to reflect in a more profound way than in other collective worship experiences. Milala had heard the story of the Good Samaritan before, but recalled her surprise at the method of delivery – which was to act out the story in a modern setting: 'It helped me understand it, in a deeper way,' Milala recalled, adding that she could 'connect with it better.' When I enquired what 'connecting with it better' meant she clarified, 'it wasn't boring, but nicer and much funnier.' Explaining further, she went on to say this experience of collective worship helped her 'think about my relationship with God and other people.' She connected the injured person lying in the road with people she passed on the streets. At this moment in the assembly Milala considered her own religious upbringing and the actions expected of her in such a situation: 'My religion would tell me to be compassionate to the stranger, that I would be blessed by doing that.' These experiences were special for Milala, as she contemplated what the story might mean for her beliefs and practices. The space of collective worship gave her permission to reflect, which she took advantage of and it helped transform her thinking. Milala, in giving herself permission, allowed herself to reflect on her own practices of charity and compassion, and ultimately about her sense of living out her faith.

Milala's reflection highlights several points relating to permission-giving. There is clear resistance to engaging in the themes within collective worship, for example in the way she disregarded previous encounters with the same story, highlighting her initial sense of reluctance. However Milala gave herself permission to engage more fully with this particular experience of collective worship. She felt in control of this act, and through this sense of choice began to reflect on a personal aspect of her identity. She focussed on whether she considered herself a kind and compassionate person, something which she saw as an important aspect of her Islamic upbringing. Milala compared this story of compassion, kindness and generosity to her previous religious learning on the same topic – 'my religious would teach me to do this ...' – and realised she was more open than she previously had been to the challenges presented here. I interpret this choice as permission-giving, and this enabled Milala to explore what she thought about her own identity, spirituality, relationships and experiences.

In other focus groups Milala commented on assemblies which helped her think about religious practice. In the final year of our groups, when the children were in Year 10 (aged from 14 to 15), the focus of one discussion was looking back over the four years of school assemblies. The question was asked: how had the children engaged with the different themes across the years, and if any particular theme seemed more poignant or relevant to the children at this age? Milala remembered an (unidentified) assembly which prompted her to think about a recent dilemma she had about wearing her headscarf:

In one assembly I was thinking about one of my friends who rang me and said, 'Why you doing this and why you doing that?', and she was advising me about wearing a headscarf and said that she really respected me that I used to wear a headscarf. 'But that's changed now you don't wear one.'

Milala commented that, at the time of the phone conversation, 'I didn't think much about it.' However, several days later during an assembly Milala noted 'her [friends] words were coming back into my head.' She was unsure about

her choice to not wear a headscarf and recognised her identity was embedded in her family's Islamic faith and traditions – decisions which were deeply personal and very precious to Milala. Reflecting further, she added, 'that made me think I should wear one again. Because it is part of me and who I am and that I want to show people I'm a Muslim.' Milala recalled several weeks of contemplating, both during and outside of assemblies, about whether or not to wear her headscarf. She noted assemblies gave her the time and space to think about what her friends and peers thought. She recalled, 'I realised people were treating me differently when I didn't wear it, and guys were treating me differently.' Eventually she concluded it was part of her identity and acknowledged, 'I kind of prefer to wear it now.'

In these different collective worship experiences Milala gave herself permission and a sense of autonomy to think deeply about her own character and identity as a Muslim. She connected her identity to her religious dress and engaged with how her wider Islamic beliefs were being expressed in choosing or not to wear a headscarf. She experienced, over the four years, numerous changes and re-examinations in her spiritual thinking and practice, including times of self-identifying as religious and not religious. Reflections during these assemblies included complex considerations and critical questioning from received religious teaching and through the relationships with friends. Milala's fresh engagement in assemblies with previously-heard religious teaching was enhanced by her current life-experiences and relationships. These reflections were life-changing by indicating significant personal transformation for Milala through the act of permission-giving in engaging in collective worship.

In this vignette I have voiced Milala's story to show that integral to her changing her own religious understanding and more deeply exploring her sense of identity was the sense that she had permission to do so. These processes of permission-giving were precious to Milala as they involved profoundly personal issues, and led to life-changing decisions which were carefully thought-through, an experience shared by others.

## 4.2 Exploring identity through permission-giving

Permission-giving is intrinsically connected to children exploring and forming their identity, and shares three aspects: the matter of choice; various relationships in which children partake; and crises and life experiences.

### *'Choosing' to explore identity*

Identity is complex and during childhood we see rapid growth and change in a person's physical, social and emotional state including the shaping of identity. The fluctuating sense of self-image which children experience results in a sense of struggle in forming and shaping identity (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Erikson and Erikson suggest the tension between identity and confusion are prevalent in adolescence, and often exist as alternative experiences which produce positive outcomes. This tension offers promising suggestions for understanding what children might be experiencing in collective worship.

Pursuing this idea through my research, I explored a number of questions by considering Milala's responses (highlighted above) and those of the other children (discussed later in this chapter). I asked how purposefully children engage in the activity of identity-forming? Do children consciously choose to shape and develop identity through/in collective worship or does this simply 'happen' spontaneously? Nick Shepherd proposes that the process of seeking identity is something that requires effort. It is 'not found but discovered through effort or as the result of something worked towards' (Shepherd, 2010, p.150). Other authors researched how external factors influence and shape a sense of identity. Marisa Crawford and Graham Rossiter argue educational factors should be included as influencing of identity, suggesting spiritual and moral education have positive effect on the formation of children's sense of morality (2003). Social media, Sherry Turkle suggests, can have formative influence, though arguably this might be both positive and negative (1996). These writers all suggest in different ways that for children the process of identity-forming is a complex and demanding

endeavour with multiple influences, which takes place in various contexts and situations.

### ***Relationships and identity***

Relationships are crucial to identity-forming, which is, according to Richard Jenkins, deeply affected by a person's relationships because through them humans encounter the 'same' and 'different' (2008). This is reinforced by Mohamah Shaban and Hamed Al-Awidi, who argue identity is inextricably linked to children's social and cultural worlds (2013). The connection between identity and relationality, to same and different, has correlations for children in high school, as the influence of relationships are often complicated by peer pressure and image-related concerns. However, as children's understanding of similarities and differences change over time, therefore a sense of identity will also change. To understand *how* children make the conscious choice to explore identity, and considering this exploration within collective worship, the focus question is: what prompts, stimulates or activates children to contemplate their identity?

In one focus group, Keith commented about the an assembly on family traditions and values, and in particular how this assembly related to his own sense of identity. Keith reflected he contemplated his family heritage and embraced it, unlike Eddie's reflection (in the next section) about parental influence on morality. 'The [assembly] made me realise I'm happy to be in living in Manchester but my family's Korean. That background is important to me', Keith noted. When I enquired what he meant by 'important to me' he explained his feeling about being Korean was part of what made him who he is, his sense of family and ethnic identity, and something of which he was proud. For Keith, parental influence was strongly cultural and ethnic, rather than only about morality and ethics, and their influence was integral to his understanding and perception of identity.

Exploring the formation of identity is the focus of Peter Hopkins' research with young people. By approaching identity through connections to space

from his background as a geographer, Hopkins studies how the physical experience of and engagement with place shapes a sense of identity. His work draws on research with young people in a range of contexts to reveal the ways they form engagements with difference places and identities. In his book *Young people, place and identity*, he suggests identity is not a static notion but is given meaning through activity (Hopkins, 2010). Identity is a process people engage with, and is embodied through the practice of identifying or dis-identifying in others, which echoes identify-forming through considering 'same and different' and 'identity and relationship' (Jenkins and Shaban & Al-Awidi). Hopkins elaborates, 'Identities are therefore constructed through social relations, articulated in particular ways and replicated by individuals and groups.' Researching young Muslim men in Scotland, he draws connections between how significant personal, national and international events form and effect these young people's sense of identity (Hopkins, 2004). This has interesting connections with how children respond to loss and grief which, I will argue later in this chapter, can be prompting factors for permission-giving. Hopkins proposes reciprocity between place and identity, countering the notion that place shapes identity. Rather he argues for 'reciprocal influence' – identity can shape place and place shape identity (2010). Hopkins suggests multiple frameworks exist for the understanding young people, place and identity: intergenerationality, intersectionality and lifecourse. By intergenerationality he refers to young people's negotiations of intergenerational relationships, intersectionality is identifying young people by a complex range of social issues and lifecourse is seeing young people as 'negotiators of fluid and contested' life stages.

This concept of young people negotiating fluid and contested life stages can be understood as reciprocity, which is relevant to collective worship. A more accurate picture of permission-giving relating to identity is that for children, choosing to engage with the themes of collective worship is only the primary aspect of 'choice', as shown in Milala's and Keith's examples about reflecting on their families' values. Looking further, reciprocity exists in children giving permission to themselves to enter a space of mutual and reciprocal reflection

– they choose what to reflect on as much as the theme being presented provokes reflection.

### ***Life-experiences and identity***

In understanding the causes and choices involved in forming identity, significant life events and crisis should not be overlooked. The experience of cultural and personal crisis is proposed by Claire Alexander as producing an evolving sense of identity (2004). In exploring the discourse around the 2001 UK ‘race riots’, Alexander suggests the quest for identity underpinned young Asians’ decision to join gangs. Particularly relevant were a series of transitions and crises around understanding their sense of ethnicity and masculinity experienced in different ways. For example, moving from an ‘old’ to ‘new’ understanding of ethnicity or with a growing narrative of masculinity in Asian culture. This notion of young people recognising key points of transition echoes Milala’s reflection on deciding to wear her headscarf again. The struggle Milala described in choosing to not wear her headscarf, then re-examining that decision, marked significant moments of transition in her identity. These aspects of permission-giving were formational to Milala’s identity, and became life-changing events.

In summary, the salient themes having relevance to identity and permission-giving concern practice, relationship and crises. First, the development of a sense of one’s own identity through permission-giving is a practice which necessitates engagement. Later in this chapter I suggest there is a conscious choice exercised by children in collective worship to begin to contemplate identity – a moment or moments when children give themselves permission to seek to understand their identity. Second, that identity is constructed through relationships. A key aspect of permission-giving in collective worship is children exploring their relationship with family and friends, as discussed in chapter five. Third, that significant moments and crises activate permission-giving in collective worship. Although each child’s context and experience of crises will be different, their events act as prompts or catalysts to permission-giving and so to exploring identity within collective

worship. This exploration and shaping of identity is a special, precious and life-changing (transformational) spiritual experience for the children and enables collective worship to be constructed as sacred.

### **4.3 Permission-giving and aspects of identity in collective worship**

Children consciously choose to give themselves permission to engage in collective worship, usually connected to life experiences or when prompted by assembly topics. It is not an automatic choice in collective worship. A variety of personal, social, familial and spiritual experiences create an atmosphere of disinclination towards engagement in collective worship. The intentional and conscious act of making choices is integral to the process of permission-giving, alongside careful thought and self-reflection. Certain events and experiences in collective worship act as prompts or catalysts to permission-giving. I will highlight two examples from my research – ‘identity and family’ and ‘Remembrance and loss’ – and argue that whether children are prompted by topics in collective worship or carry their own issues to consider, the act of giving themselves permission is a precious activity.

#### ***Permission-giving and family identity***

Family traditions and values are foundational in collective worship to enable children thinking about identity. A range of parental expectations are understood by the children to shape their own sense of self. These are perceived by the children as either explicitly or implicitly communicated by their parents. In collective worship, children also choose to reflect on how parental faith and values influence their sense of identity.

In one focus group, the children were reflecting on an act of collective worship about family, from the Old Testament story of Jacob and Esau, exploring parents’ values and traditions. One member of the group, Eddie, responded that for him the assembly brought a realisation that his family and not his friends influence his decisions. He commented, ‘[Family] help you to

think about if you've done something wrong ... about whether that thing is right or wrong.' He recognised he gained his sense of morality from his parents, rather than from his friends to whom he felt closer at that time. He was reluctant to acknowledge other aspects of parental influence, adding he felt needed he to be able to choose his friends and future. Eddie explained in the preceding few years his parents' separation had left him wanting to distance himself from parental influence. Despite this conflict at home leaving him feeling distant from his parents, Eddie recognised their influence on aspects of his identity.

Eddie's loyalty to his parents in this aspect surprised me, as I would have expected conflict at home to reduce Eddie's sense of respect and authority. Pursuing this, I enquired whether, in other areas of his life, Eddie felt he was obedient to his parents. Sometimes when encountering the theme of parental expectations in assembly Eddie met this with a sense of resistance: 'I'm not doing what they want.' However, this experience in collective worship prompted Eddie to evaluate what he perceived to be his family's influence on his own sense of identity.

Eddie realises identity is more profound than simply agreeing with what his parents ask of him. Despite disharmony between Eddie and his parents, and between the parents themselves, a strong sense of inherited parental identity remains. Disharmony in relationships at home, Werneck et al argue from their longitudinal research with Austrian families, has no effect on children's willingness to accept parental guidance (Werneck, Eder, Yanagida, & Rollett, 2014). Similarly, Eddie's reflections show that his experience of child-parent conflict appears to have had little bearing on his willingness to consider parental influence on his identity, for example his reflection that his parents helping him decide right from wrong.

Building a stronger sense of identity occurs in collective worship as children reflect on key relationships. The children's ability to bring together their own thinking and contrasting this to other views is, according to Howard Gardner, a critical aspect of identity-forming. His inquiries into forms of intelligence

demonstrate the evolution of the mind across a range of environments and amongst various risks:

We see ... during the turbulent years of adolescence, a maturation of knowledge of one's own person as well as knowledge of other persons. ... Adolescence turns out to be that period of life in which individuals must bring together these two forms of personal knowledge into a more organised sense of identity. (Gardner, 1993, p.252).

In the children giving themselves permission to consider family traditions they can 'bring together' forms of knowledge. In terms of what aspects of family heritage is integrated into identity, different outcomes are identified. Whether this sense of identity could be termed 'more organised' is unclear from my investigation. Researching children's concept of self, Janina Uszyńska-Jarmoc, suggests the location of children's understanding of identity is constructed mainly from external understanding (2004).

Extrapolating from this leads to my argument. A significant part of the children I researched have an understanding of identity that comes from sharing their family's viewpoints. Keith identified as Korean because his parents did, and Milala as a Muslim due to her parents. However identity is also 'integrated understanding'. The act of forming identity is not something the children automatically adopt from their parents or passively 'fall into', rather, it is constructed through careful reflection and critical processing, prompted by and sometimes focussed within collective worship. Parental influence in establishing a sense of right and wrong and in terms of identifying with ethnic heritage, are cooperative identities. Working on constructing a sense of identity, however, takes place only because the child chooses to give themselves permission to engage in collective worship.

Furthermore, children giving themselves permission to engage also leads to considering their family's religious values. Milala's narrative highlights the struggle which existed as she contemplated whether, through her clothing, to identify herself as a Muslim. The link between children's identity and their parents' religion was researched by Michael Mason, Andrew Singleton and

Ruth Webber. They propose a link between children's reluctance to identify with aspects of their parents' religion and the fragility of their own identity (2007). They further suggest that children respond to an uncertain world by moving away from traditional religious worldviews, resulting in a less stable sense of identity. However, for my participants, giving themselves permission to reflect enables children to value and recognise their own faith heritage and religious values. Meaningful questions asked by the children, such as 'who am I?' and 'what do I do?' are crucial to the children constructing a greater sense of identity particularly relating to faith and religious values.

To understand identity, Kate Adams, Brendan Hyde and Richard Wooley suggest a person must move from seeing actions as defining identity to understanding 'identity as being' (2008, p. 46). From my research, the movement towards the children's identity is more about their sense of being or personhood, rather than their actions defining their identity. For Keith, giving himself permission enabled him to ask, 'how do I feel about being Korean?' and 'what does accepting my Korean-identity tell me about myself?' For Milala, permission-giving enabled questioning whether to identify with in her family's faith traditions, and she considered, 'what does my family's faith tradition tell me about myself?' Whether responding to the uncertainty of their world experiences or being prompted by other factors, children use collective worship to reflect on identity through their sense of being and relationality to their parents and families.

Finally, in relation to identity and family, permission-giving enables reflection on children's attendance of church or mosque. In a focus group one child commented about how they formerly attended church but had recently stopped. Olive responded (at age 14) by commenting about a recent experience she had in an assembly:

I didn't used to like church, and sometimes I still don't. But in assemblies we sometimes talk about respect and because my Dad's a vicar I feel because he's put so much work into it that I want to go. I just want to be there for him and respect what he does.

For Olive, choosing to attend church was about respect, which she articulated twice in this statement, and she thought about her reasons for attending church. Olive is giving herself permission in collective worship to reflect about parental respect. She confidently connected respect to her religious activity through the medium of family values.

In recent years in the UK, children have been thought to be more likely to reject their parents' religious influences than previously. Religious involvement might have a negative effect on a person's reputation, according to David Voas (2010). Researching generational change in society, he suggests young people face different challenges to those their parents experienced at a similar age. For the children in my study however, different experiences are not taken into account when considering religious practice. Rather, stronger connections of support and care appear to cross generational divides. Cecilia Von Otter and Sten-Åke Stenberg, researching the link between the quality of parent-child relationship and children's social, academic and religious capacity, suggest that a family's religious practices comes from strong and positive family relationships (2014). In my research, strong and positive relationships between parents and children generate both emotional support and positive feedback. Regardless of harmonious relationships (in Olive's case) or disharmonious relationships (for Eddie), children reflect positively about their sense of family shaping self-identity. During collective worship, in particular, children gave themselves permission to reflect on the constructive aspects of personal identity gained from family.

In conclusion, within the permissive space of collective worship, identity is not developed as an individual construct. Rather identity is shaped through children giving themselves permission to reflect spiritually on the connections to and influence of their family. This permission-giving creates a stronger construction of identity and understanding of self by enabling personal investment in shaping identity, a crucial aspect for the children in constructing collective worship as sacred.

### ***'Remembrance and loss' as stimuli to permission-giving***

The topic of 'Remembrance and loss' provided a rich source of data relating to permission-giving and identity in collective worship. Remembrance assemblies – around November-time – facilitated highly personal reflections on the children's experiences and emotions, which the children discussed in focus groups. Additionally, assemblies throughout other times of the year, sometimes unconnected to loss, were highlighted as occasions when the children reflected on loss.

In one focus group discussion, I asked a general question about which recent assemblies helped the children reflect on their current life experiences. The group were keen to talk about Remembrance assemblies, commenting on family members who had experienced war or conflict. In one assembly, Mandy was thinking about her friend's grandparent who had recently died, and about the effect this had on her friend. Mandy recalled being 'close to tears', adding, 'I was thinking how I would feel if my own grandparents died.' I was interested if the children thought about loss in assemblies only around the time of Remembrance, or at other times. Mandy responded that only Remembrance assemblies prompted her to think about her parents' and grandparents' emotions when they experienced loss through war. Eddie commented that he was affected by death and loss 'more at these times', but added he also thought about loss in other assemblies.

Milala's comment about Remembrance assemblies moved the discussion in a different direction:

My own dad was a soldier who lost an arm and a leg from the war. It made me feel that I'm so lucky to have my dad even though I wasn't born when that happened. I couldn't imagine what it would feel like losing my dad or someone in my family or a friend or relative.

Milala's experience was of giving herself permission in Remembrance assemblies to think about loss. For her, this evoked a sense of gratitude. She thought about being thankful because, although her father's injuries affected his lifestyle, they were not as bad as others.

At other times of the year in assemblies the children also considered the theme of loss. Eddie commented about his auntie who, he explained, was ‘a double cancer survivor.’ His aunt’s experience greatly affected Eddie, and this entered his thoughts in several assemblies. Sometimes, he reflected, he found himself thinking about his aunt ‘when the topic had nothing to do with it.’ Eddie remembered asking, in the quiet times assemblies provided, ‘why did God allow her to live?’ These moments offered him ‘take time to think’, implying these silent times were missing in other parts of his life.

From the children’s reflections, the function of permission-giving in collective worship enables children to reflect meaningfully on Remembrance and loss. The children have a sense of giving themselves permission and allow personal experiences to be brought into the reflective space of collective worship. In respect of loss and Remembrance, moments of silence as well as listening to the assembly leaders both create permissive space. These examples demonstrate children choose to think about loss when it is explicitly identified, such as times of Remembrance for example, as well as at times when their life experiences stimulate these reflections. These times of reflecting on loss are special to the children. In both circumstances, giving themselves permission to engage is the catalyst for engagement and reflection.

For some children, loss can often be close to the foreground in their thoughts. In collective worship the ability to consider loss was ‘unlocked’ by particular themes or when prompted by life experiences. In reflecting during collective worship, children are allowing themselves to engage with this thinking by being vulnerable and deliberately choosing to think about their own emotional response to loss. Giving themselves permission to reflect on loss emphasises a conscious connection with a deeper, more personal and carefully-guarded aspect of their feelings. This choice is perceived by the children as requiring vulnerability, as Mandy’s reflection about her friend indicated. This choice is a vulnerable act – it can lead to a sense of sadness and sometimes physical responses, such as tears, which might be visible to others.

Vulnerability and permission-giving are closely connected, and both are precious to the children. Though sometimes upsetting in collective worship, choosing to think about death and loss is cherished. The necessity to engage with feelings about death, according to Zohar and Marshall, is crucial to engaging intelligently with spirituality (2000). An essential part of being humans they suggest is, amongst other things, being aware of and being responsive to the deep self about death. In the children's comments giving themselves permission to reflect about loss is one response to deep and personal feelings about death. There is, for the children, a conscious choice to be vulnerable in responding to their experiences of loss and the issues surrounding grief and death.

Furthermore, in collective worship children often reflect on emotions they retain beneath the surface. Eddie's and Milala's comments demonstrate that feelings about loss are present however children are find these difficult to process. In researching children's spiritual experiences, Robert Coles concludes death and loss produce strong emotions in children's lives (1990). Although recognising loss impacts significantly on all stages of life, his research highlights that serious sickness and death have a powerful and continuous meaning. I suggest the children in my research cautiously negotiate loss and hold the power to choose the degree of vulnerability. They are sometimes surprised by their own emotions when encountering loss, and would rather be in control of their emotions and choose when they reflect on loss, demonstrating a desire to control permission-giving. Nevertheless some acts of collective worship (such as Remembrance) interrupt children's sense of power and evoke reflection when and where it is not expected. In these occasions, children give themselves permission to engage with these strong emotions, a choice which is considered precious and deeply personal.

Children are also willing to think about other people's loss, for example if their experiences a death of a family member. Milala's and Mandy's comments (about Milala's father and Mandy's friend's grandparent) indicate the children can connect stories and experiences of other people's loss with those of their own. In doing this, children reach a deeper understanding of relationship with friends and family, something which brings the children a

sense of satisfaction. However, although children can reflect on their own sense of loss, there is no evidence from my data that children, during collective worship, consider their own death. It is arguable that young age meant the children avoided thinking about physicality, health or even death.

Amongst the group, some members did have physical impairments which may have prompted consideration of their own mortality. One member of the group, Olive, spent most her high school years struggling with a significant illness. On other occasions the children did speak about friends with life-changing or life-limiting illnesses. Nonetheless, the children did not describe any collective worship experiences which prompted them to think about their own sense of mortality. Researching with parents of children with life-threatening illness, Jalmsell et al found that children often initiate engagement and communication relating to personal illness (2015). Following this, I would have expected the children in my study would be willing to initiate reflection about their own physical illness. However, Olive and other children did not raise this topic when talking about their friendship. From this, I suggest children consider themselves to be gatekeepers for permission-giving particularly when reflecting on their own mortality. This further supports my argument that permission-giving in collective worship is a conscious and thoughtful choice made by the children.

Collective worship, therefore acts as a location where children give themselves permission to reflect on family and faith traditions and on Remembrance and loss. I have identified permission-giving as a conscious choice that it is often prompted by collective worship experiences and life events. Permission-giving is hence a key part of children constructing collective worship as sacred, and it is to this aspect I now turn.

#### **4.4 Permission-giving as a sacred experience**

Permission-giving offers several building blocks to children constructing collective worship as sacred. These building blocks are integral to the

children seeing collective worship as sacred because each carries a degree of personal investment in the decision-making process. These essential aspects are independence as a response to power, reflecting on identity, the social nature of permission-giving, collective worship as a 'bringing' space, and collective worship as a 'separating' space. Permission-giving, therefore, is a special, precious and life-changing (transformational) activity, and consequently crucial to children constructing collective worship as sacred.

First, I propose experiences of power and independence are one aspect of the children constructing collective worship as sacred. The children's reflections about gathering for and participating in collective worship contained elements of language relating to power. The children perceived a lack of power in adults exercising control through decisions being made about collective worship. Victoria, for example, reflected that the content for collective worship experiences was 'out of their hands', adding assemblies were repetitive, always 'coming back to being nice to people.' Children responded in different ways to this perception of power. For example, Victoria 'laughed at it and blanked it out' and others ignored the speakers and Keith 'tried to fall asleep.'

Permission-giving, in contrast, enables children to feel in control, to reject power and bring a sense of independence to collective worship. Returning to Peter Hopkins work on young people's sense of identity and interaction with spaces, he proposes multiple aspects of power are experienced in the high school environment (2010). This is due to both the physical structures and organisational dynamics of British secondary school settings. The feeling of having a choice about whether to participate in collective worship, about how they engage, and about choosing their own topics for reflection, provides children with a sense of autonomy. This awareness of rejecting power and asserting their individuality marks collective worship as different to other aspects of school life. Another dismissal of power is the rejection of 'uniformity' in collective worship – the feeling that every person should be doing the same thing at the same time. Uniformity, according to John Hull, is one objective of collective worship (1995). The sharing in a single act, Hull observes, is useful for religious instruction and spiritual development, and

brings a sense of harmony as many people are performing similar acts. However, the children contradict this by exercising individuality and autonomy. They give themselves permission to reflect in a way they choose, about a topic they select, and negotiate this choice in their own terms. Despite experiencing negative aspects of power, children are strongly independent in exercising choice in collective worship. This independence as part of permission-giving is one building block to children constructing collective worship as sacred.

Second, reflecting on understanding their own identity in collective worship is precious for the children. Engagement with questions of personal identity requires the children to feel collective worship is safe. The admission that tender issues such as death and loss are explored in collective worship is evidence that children perceive collective worship as a safe place. Choosing to be vulnerable is integral to the children giving themselves permission to explore identity. The process of building identity is one aspect of Philip Sheldrake's three-fold understanding of sacred space (2001b). Identity is deeply connected to the sacred nature of place because 'each person effectively reshapes a place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place' (Sheldrake, 2001a, p.16). I have already demonstrated children give themselves permission to reflect on identity within collective worship. Furthermore, I suggest permission to reflect generates the feeling that collective worship is a valuable and special place with meaning and memory. These times of reflection are treasured by the children, making collective worship a special and meaningful experience, and where memories are created, enabling children to construct collective worship as sacred.

Third, permission-giving has a communal aspect which also contributes to collective worship being sacred. Several reflections by the children indicated the feeling of reflecting alongside their peers was meaningful. Habib commented, 'I like that I'm there with other people who are also thinking about stuff – sometimes about the same things.' Olive also commented that practices such as choosing to say prayers with other children felt special and 'powerful in some way.' Seeing permission-giving as a shared endeavour

engenders the sense that collective worship is sacred because the children are engaging spiritually together with others. Children respond positively to others giving themselves permission and a culture of 'shared permission-giving' forms part of a process of developing or deepening engagement with collective worship. I suggest children's collective worship experiences are similar in some ways, yet different. A sense of 'giving permission together' works in favour of the children enjoying collective worship experiences and helping with a positive feeling towards collective worship. The social nature of permission-giving, therefore, is the third aspect of children construing collective worship as sacred.

Fourth, collective worship also serves a space where children give themselves permission to 'bring in' to the reflective space troubling experiences from school and wider life. Collective worship is felt by the children to be essentially useful, to have practical value in the ability to 'carry-in' their worries and difficulties. This pragmatic view of spiritual practice leads Robert Emmons, in researching spirituality as a form of intelligence, to associate spirituality with problem-solving (2000). People have the need to problem-solve the more concerning aspects of life, and he suggests spirituality could be useful to 'facilitate everyday problem solving and goal attainment'. The interpretation of my data shows that although there is some aspect of children needing a place to reflect on problems, engaging in collective worship occurs in a less clinical manner. Collective worship is perceived as a safe space to bring problems, a protected place to consider troubling issues and upsetting experiences. The sense of a safe and protected space to bring-in their concerns further helps children construct collective worship as special, precious and sacred.

Finally, collective worship is constructed as sacred because it offers a separating or 'set-apart' space. Olive contrasted the busyness of school life with her sense of peace in collective worship. This allowed her to attend to thoughts without interruption. She commented, 'In the quiet I can be with my own thoughts, or think about my family without being distracted.' Children value the practice of coming to assemblies as a separate space, a place which is distinct to the other spaces in school. Collective worship offers a

space which is set-apart from classroom or social space with a characteristic purpose. Music is playing, seating is in rows, spiritual issues are discussed, prayers said, silence kept, and so on. The sense of ritual in collective worship is also felt by the children to be special. For example, Mandy felt the peaceful nature of silence enabled her to think about her grandfather's memorial tree, and Olive felt assemblies reminded her of church because they were 'peaceful and quiet and relaxing.' As well as the quietness contrasting their experiences of a noisy school, the children connect collective worship with places the children feel are spiritual and special. This connection is a further element of children constructing collective worship as sacred.

There are contrasting views on the practice of separating spaces and the labelling these as sacred places. The tendency to seek distinction between the sacred and secular space is a concern for Joel Thiessen and Bill McAlpine. In researching religious individuals' perspectives on sacred space, they criticise the Western desire to distinguish sacred and secular, suggesting instead that sacred should be seen in all aspects of life and not only in specific elements (2013). The practice of children giving themselves permission to reflect in the set-apart space collective worship does enable the space to be constructed as sacred. However, the children do not perceive collective worship as separate and sacred because of the desire to classify life outside assemblies as less spiritual or in some way secular. Rather, the distinction is to highlight the benefits of collective worship by valuing the spiritual practices present. Collective worship is perceived by children as separate principally because it provides time apart from the busyness of school life. The ability to take time aside from 'normal life' helps children perceive collective worship to be sacred.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I set out to argue that, for children, giving themselves permission to reflect in collective worship is a special and precious process. By identifying the phenomenon of permission-giving, I have demonstrated

children are gatekeepers to exploring a sense of their own identity. I used the examples to show how permission-giving can be prompted by events within collective worship, though I noted that children are prepared to give permission for reflection in response to several different experiences. For the children, permission-giving matters and is considered a practice of independence against perceived power-dynamics. Permission-giving is a precious and life-changing act in which the children engage, leading to formative and valued spiritual experiences. As part of the 'reluctance-permission-opportunity' dynamic permission-giving forms an essential component to children constructing collective worship as sacred.

## **Chapter 5: *'Opportunity' in collective worship***

### **Introduction**

In the previous chapters I demonstrated that children's experience of reluctance and permission are central dynamics for how children construct collective worship as sacred. Here I argue that opportunity to reflect, particularly on relationships, is a further aspect to be considered. In collective worship, children find the opportunity for control precious and special, and as such collective worship becomes set apart as a sacred and spiritual experience.

I begin with Habib's narrative as he takes the opportunity provided by the leaders to reflect on key friendship relationships during collective worship. I then trace shared elements within the experiences of other children.

### **5.1 Habib's story – encountering opportunity to reflect**

Habib is from a Jordanian-Muslim background. He was born in Jordan to educated, middle-class parents and moved to Britain as a young child. He enjoys team sports – especially basketball – and takes great pride in playing for the school basketball team. He is academically intelligent and fluently speaks more than one language, although he says he prefers sport and hanging out with friends to spending time doing homework or studying.

Habib was very willing to contribute in focus groups, always enthusiastic in offering an opinion, and sometimes returned to his statements in order to correct himself. He considered a number of different assemblies and their impact on him, and was particularly eager to talk how relationships with his friends were a key focus of his assembly reflections. However, Habib's experience of assemblies was that often, whether or not the topic was relationships, friendship was a recurring focus for him.

In one focus group, Habib commented on an assembly based on the Biblical Parable of the Good Samaritan. He was in year 9 (aged 13) and the

presentation of the Bible story was focussing on the children's sense of compassion, charity and kindness. In response to the questions asked, however, instead of thinking about compassion, Habib recalled thinking about kindness though an experience in year 7: 'There was a boy in another form,' Habib explained, 'who made friends with me when I didn't have many friends.' I was keen to explore what part of the assembly in particular brought Habib to think about this event, and what his response was to the boy's actions. The connection, he explained, was that his friend was like the person in the story who was willing to go out of his way to help someone else. Habib concluded that 'without friends like that I wouldn't get far in life.' From an assembly which was intended to focus on compassion and kindness, Habib began reflecting on the ways in which friends had offered positive input into his life.

Another example where Habib thought about friendships during assemblies in which friendship was not the intended focus is the school's Easter assemblies: 'Around Easter-time', Habib recalled, 'the story of Holy Week made me think about loyalty to my friends.' The assembly was part of a collective worship sequence exploring the narratives of Holy Week and preparing for Easter. The focus of the assembly was on the contrast between the crowds supporting Jesus on Palm Sunday then calling for Jesus' execution later in the week. The issue of loyalty within Jesus' friendship groups was not raised, however Habib reflected on loyalty within his own friendship group. He especially focussed on those friends with whom he had longstanding friendships, recalling thinking about a 'friend had known for around 8 years' of which he felt a special connection: 'He knows what I feel – when I feel sad or happy or whatever.' Despite this assembly being intended to focus on people's relationship to Jesus – namely if the people would accept Jesus as Messiah – Habib used the space provided as an opportunity to reflect on the state of his own friendships. In another assembly about which focussed on the environment, Habib again brought the subject of his own reflections around to friendship. 'Sometimes I look at how my friends drop litter and feel bad for the people who pick it up,' he noted, 'but I'm not brave enough to say something to my friends about it.' The more general

issue of caring for the environment was another opportunity for Habib to connect this to his own actions relating to his friends.

In the focus group I enquired how these and other assemblies helped Habib think about various aspects of friendships. The 'silent times of assemblies', provided by the assembly leaders for personal reflection, were the times when Habib 'thought about where he shows care for his friends.'

Habib's encounter in this example, as well as others, is not as the leaders intended. Habib regularly reported using the opportunity in the school day provided by collective worship to bring his own concerns and topics for reflection. Sometimes there was no clear connection between Habib's own subjects for reflection and what was intended. At other times, themes for Habib's reflections arose from the adult's suggestion, which appear to act in some manner as a trigger for Habib's reflections. For example in the assembly during the Easter-sequence cited above, Habib commented that the theme of hope enabled him to think about how his friendships might continue beyond school. Habib came to view assemblies as a place where he could take the opportunity to reflect on problems and anxieties of friendships, along with considering its benefits his aspirations for friendships, in a space which was safe, special and set apart from normal life.

For Habib, sometimes a small comment would provide a prompt for reflection. In the Holy Week assemblies, Habib recalled the leader noting the relationship between Jesus and his disciples only lasting three years. This point enabled Habib to consider what the qualities of a 'good friend' might be – whether duration of friendships indicated friendship quality. Habib said he thought, during this assembly, that the strength of a friendship was indicated by the number of years he and the other person had been friends. His reflection developed into thinking about how friends shared difficult circumstances. He recognised when 'times got tough, that they would stick by him.' Such prompts would occur in collective worship, and Habib spoke about loyalty and the benefits of friendship as a recurring theme for his reflections during assemblies. Collective worship often provided triggers for

reflection, and as such the opportunity to reflect was valuable and welcomed by Habib in considering friendships.

Assemblies also provided opportunity to reflect by connecting themes. At various times in his high school life, Habib experienced assemblies in which the themes, stories and experiences from other collective worship experiences would return to him. Sometimes these other themes would be more pertinent than the theme of the assembly in which he was participating. As an example, Habib spoke about a time in an assembly when he arrived feeling wronged by a friend for something which had been said about Habib. He was listening to an assembly about trust which highlighted the need to trust others in order to achieve certain goals. The assembly leader talked about great human achievements, using the example of climbing Mount Everest, and how as individuals we all needed a degree of trust in others to achieve our goals. However, Habib remembered that during those moments in assembly he was not engaging with the theme of trust. Instead, he was thinking about whether or not to forgive his friend. He recalled thinking about another assembly from a few months prior, which used the 'Parable of the Unmerciful Servant'<sup>23</sup> to help the children think about forgiveness. The experience of sitting in the assembly hall, in the exact same setting as the assembly about forgiveness, was the connecting factor for Habib to think about forgiveness rather than trust.

On some occasions, Habib described completely ignoring the themes of collective worship. At times he came to an assembly with, in Habib's words, 'something weighing heavy on my heart.' He recalled one example of a falling out with a friend. The intensity of the emotions were causing such stress and anger that Habib said, 'this was all I could think of.' In fact, Habib could not recall what the leader was asking or even talking about when later, in a focus group, he recalled this particular collective worship experience. For Habib, there was an issue at the forefront of his mind, and the opportunity provided by collective worship enabled Habib to begin process, reflect on and recover the friendship situation.

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 18:21-35

The emotion of this incident was so great that this was in the foreground of Habib's thinking. Whatever the particular topic would have been that day, Habib paid little attention. However, the emotions of the collective worship experience offered both comfort to Habib as well as a constructive way forward. The effect of being present in the assembly provided Habib the conducive environment to begin to think about how to 'fix' a damaged relationship. Physically being in the assembly allowed the triggering of memories which helped Habib draw on other stories and themes which were relevant to his current predicament. As such, collective worship provided a unique opportunity to address the problems, an opportunity which was one part of enabling collective worship to be considered as special by Habib. The opportunity given to children of space and time to reflect is precious, even if the intended assembly themes are ignored.

Sometimes assemblies did encourage the children to think about what the leader intended. In the first year of the focus groups, Habib talked about an assembly focusing on the Harvest celebrations and charity. Habib was reminded of his personal commitment to 'helping people in need.' He greatly valued the principle of being charitable, adding he was 'always brought up to do acts of charity.' During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, Habib thought that kindness was 'especially important', and assemblies about charity always carried with them a special purpose for him. I was keen to discover if, in any way, the opportunity of collective worship helped him develop his own sense kindness and charity. Habib responded that the pictures shown and stories that were told made him feel 'connected in some way to these people.' Elucidating further, Habib explained that he realised 'we are all just people' and he gained a sense of association and shared humanity through the stories and pictures. Alongside the space and time provided by collective worship, the themes and stories presented on this occasion gave Habib the opportunity to contemplate his understanding of relationships with those in need. Habib found this opportunity rewarding as it supported the development of a sense of satisfaction in being kind and compassionate. As such, these opportunities also felt special for Habib, and formed part of his sense that collective worship was a precious and sacred place.

Habib's narrative shows he experienced the opportunity to reflect in collective worship in three ways. First, when the themes of collective worship acted a trigger – though often reflections took a direction different to that which was intended by the leader; second, when Habib brought concerns wholly unrelated to the day's theme; and third, when connecting themes effected opportunity to reflect on other crucial issues of meaning for Habib's life and identity. Habib's story of collective worship as giving him opportunity to reflect embodies his own collective worship experience. Reflections within collective worship were, for Habib, primarily on friendships but also about other significant relationships. He found these times meaningful and revelatory by perceiving a change in his thinking, and as such became special, 'sacred', because of their life-changing and transformational nature. These were moments where Habib created his own sacred space to consider relationships which feel strained or troubled, or those which in some way weighed heavy on his mind. These special times were set-apart from 'normal' school life. They enabled Habib to construct collective worship as sacred, and underpin the dynamic of how Habib received the opportunities provided in collective worship.

## **5.2 Opportunity for reflecting on friendships**

In these next two sections I argue collective worship is constructed as sacred by the children for two reasons: first, because children consider collective worship as special space where they can reflect on key relationships (most notably friendships) and 'bring-in' their own problems to a set-apart place where they can contemplate, repair and make decisions to act on damaged relationships; second, that even when adults prompt or provoke reflection there remains with the children a sense of controlling opportunity to reflect within collective worship. The knowledge of exercising opportunity in these two events enable children to construct collective worship as sacred.

Because children want to readdress the perceived imbalance of power in collective worship (discussed in chapter three), reflection on friendship in this space is consciously controlled by the children. When this sense of control

for reflection is in place, because friendship is the children's most important relationship, then taking the opportunity to consider this allows collective worship to be a special and revelatory experience.

### ***Friends: the most significant relationship***

For children, the significance of friendship is well documented. Children affirm that friendships 'make them happiest in life' (Sharp, 2011) and researchers argue for raising the profile of friendships in children's educational development (Carter & Nutbrown, 2016). Relationships with friends in school plays a central part in childhood life. Elaine Champagne investigated the value placed in friendships by children (2003). Studying a broad age group of children in Canada, she sought to understand children's relationships and in particular the 'relational aspects of being' for children. From her research she proposes relationships are a key mode of being for children, concluding older children in particular greatly value the sense of support, influence, knowing self, belonging and togetherness found in friendship. Undoubtedly for Champagne, friendships play a major role in the social structures of childhood.

The children in my research consider friendships to be the most significant relationship in their high school life. In the research exercise explained in chapter two, which asked the children to represent relationships and map their importance on concentric circles, friendships was the most common relationship placed in the inner-most circles, closely followed by family. Some children even considered friends of greater importance to family members, something I will consider later in this chapter.

Friendship was a principal relationship feature of children's engagement with collective worship, as Habib's narrative indicates. In addition to Habib's data, Victoria also comments directly about collective worship and friendship: 'I sit and wonder if my friends next to me are listening, but I do listen more when they speak about what it is for me to be a proper friend, as that's really important to me.' Olive adds, 'Sometimes I don't feel popular, and that I don't have like loads of good friends. The ones I do have I'm like really close with

and I know I need to be a good friend to them, so I think about that a lot in assemblies.’

Collective worship becomes a focal point for reflection about friendships, and entry into thinking about friendships during collective worship is accessed and controlled by the children. The sense of gatekeeping and control is an essential part of making collective worship a precious experience for the children. Time spent in collective worship reflecting on friendship is perceived to be special because it is time which is ‘set apart’ from ‘regular’ school life, and is regarded as precious and ‘useful’ or revelatory (my word) by the children. In particular, in collective worship children want to control when and how they choose to reflect on friendships, for example Habib’s desire to reflect on the qualities rather than duration of friendships. They control contemplation about three aspects of friendships: the benefits of having friends, negotiating the pain of damaged friendships, and how to restore and repair damaged friendships. I will consider each aspect in turn.

### ***The benefits of friendship***

Friendship is a recurring theme from the adults’ who design collective worship but these rarely affected the children’s reflections. In one focus group, the children discussed an occasion when a teacher spoke about his best friend, and in particular a highlight of the teacher being best man at his friend’s wedding. The children reported holding these stories at a distance from their own experiences. Milala commented that, during this assembly, she thought about how her friends ‘helped her be good’ and ‘stay on track,’ rather than the intended outcome of the children building ‘friendships for life’. They felt the questions from the adults in assemblies about the nature and health of the children’s friendships were often irrelevant or unconnected to the children’s experiences. Therefore children used the questions and stories not to think about what the adult was asking, but rather to take the opportunity to consider their own experiences and ‘benefits of friendships’ in school.

Each child reported experiencing different thoughts to those the adult intended, and a sense of control over their own reflections. In the assembly which featured the teacher speaking of being the best man, Eddie took the opportunity to realise how 'good friends' supported him. He explained friends 'help you decide on tough decisions' and 'help you through' difficult moments in life. Picking up from Eddie, Victoria continued the discussion on thinking about friendships in assemblies. She often thought about her best friend in assemblies, even when 'she wasn't sitting next to me.' Victoria said she thinks in assembly about her best-friend's advice, particularly when it's time to pray, but also during times when Victoria feels 'anxious and stressed about something that's happening.' Victoria considers her friend's advice superior to anything she hears in assemblies, adding, 'I tell her everything ... she's a friend that's always there to help me with advice or to back me up.' These comments indicate that children control opportunities in collective worship to reflect on friendship. The children report occasionally using the leader's stories and themes to access a time of reflection about friendships, but feel confident to use collective worship as a time to reflect on the benefits of friendships.

The children reported a number of 'outcomes' from reflecting on friendship in collective worship. These were generally uplifting and encouraging, which made reflecting during collective worship feel special. One positive result was a sense of belonging and closeness. Elizabeth expressed how a sense of belonging is an important aspect of her friendships. 'I know in school we all face the same stuff', she comments, and in addition to supporting each other we 'sometimes do fun stuff together too.' For Elizabeth, collective worship provided the opportunity to explore her understanding of friendship and belonging, resulting in a sense of connection. Elizabeth's example highlights that the children in my study use opportunities in collective worship to boost their own sense of satisfaction with and benefits of friendships, again often despite the adults' intended theme. Sylvia Collins-Mayo et al released research in 2010 on the religious beliefs of university students belonging to Generation Y<sup>24</sup> (2010). Presenting the notion of 'immanent faith'

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<sup>24</sup> Generation Y is usually taken as those born between 1980s and early 2000s

to describe how young people determine and validate belief in an individualistic society, they propose a 'secular trinity' of friends, family and the reflexive self. Young people largely define their own beliefs and look to others for validation. For the children in my research a similar sense of validation exists through friendships and self-validation. Damaged friendships and the associated difficulties were not ignored (I will address this issue next section), but the children grow in self-belief in thinking about the happiness and support that friendships can bring. Collective worship is a place where they 'feel good' about having friends and feel satisfied about own friendship abilities, in effect self-validating their own secular dynamic.

For the children, friendship and well-being were strongly connected. Feeling close to friends in school was highly valued by the children, identified particularly in collective worship by reflecting on their own friendship skills. In researching young people in urban areas, Gwyther Rees, Leslie Francis and Mandy Robbins propose that having a community of friends with which to share problems increases young people's sense of well-being (2005). Their research aimed to investigate the well-being of young people in urban areas and explore the connection between religious practice and their sense of purpose and well-being. Their findings emphasise the importance of peer support network for teenagers. As young people will more likely 'talk to a close friend than to a parent', then friendship is integral to a child's sense of well-being. The children in my study recognise these factors of support, and belonging and togetherness are associated with the importance and value of friendships. When these benefits of friendship are contemplated in collective worship, in a way in which the children feel in control, then the opportunity provided by collective worship feels special and precious. I recognise these factors may be recognised at other times in the children's lives, both inside and outside of school, however collective worship provides a special opportunity for the children to reflect on their feelings about friendships.

The sense of consent and control in managing their own reflection builds the children's self-confidence, and their sense of well-being also increases. This positive view of their ability to have good quality friendships enables collective worship to be a spiritual place for the children. It is a place where

they anticipate positive experiences, a location which is constructed as meaningful and revelatory (providing a change in thinking) due to the unique and special reflections which take place in this setting.

### ***Navigating pain in friendships***

The second aspect of friendship in which children control opportunity is reflecting on the hurt of damaged relationships. This was a highly sensitive issue to discuss in focus groups due to the need to be vulnerable in front of other group members. Milala first raised the subject in a focus group by commenting on a particular assembly which explored the theme of loyalty, through the story of David and Jonathan from 1 Samuel 18. The assembly focussed on the relationship of deep trust and friendship between David and Jonathan, King Saul's son, at the time when Saul was trying to kill David. The children were asked to consider their own experiences of loyalty, and how they might react faced with a modern-day equivalent of Jonathan's decision whether to remain loyal to a friend when faced with a difficult choice. Milala used this opportunity not to think about loyalty, as the adults designed, but rather to think about when, due to betrayal, friendships breakdown. She recalled thinking, 'I know what betrayal feels like – it feels pretty crap.' Milala explained she took a long time to recover from the pain of this experience and that she was subsequently cautious about allowing herself to be vulnerable with her friends. Keith followed up Milala's comments by saying when he hears assemblies about friendship he responds by thinking 'you can trust people – but not all the time.' Milala and Keith's experiences indicate that the children used the opportunity of collective worship to process painful and negative aspects of friendship/s which they experience. Despite the leader's intention to highlight loyalty or other positive aspects of friendship, the children feel the need to control their own access to when and how reflection takes place in collective worship, with adult's themes acting as catalysts for their own reflection.

Some children talked about collective worship as a space for acknowledging or recognising their pain, whilst other reported their growth in hardiness to

hurt in friendship. These opportunities in collective worship form part of a wider picture of how children navigate hurt in relationships, including using this to build up a sense of recognition or resilience in their 'friendship toolkit'. Researching how children develop friendship skills, Ann Taket et al suggest children from a young age build up resilience in social situations including to difficulties experienced in friendships (2014). Their research with Australian children attributed this sense of resilience to parents who assist its gradual build-up through supporting children through difficult social situations. For my participants assemblies are reflective spaces used to consider resilience in friendship. The children use these times to reflect on and develop their understanding of friendship, including displaying greater self-awareness and interconnectedness. They relate some extra-personal experiences about the Bible or other stories to their own personal experiences, sometimes following the adults' assembly design but more often retaining a sense of guardianship over reflection. Habib consciously decided whether or not to engage in thinking about the story of Peter's betrayal of Jesus featured in the Holy Week assemblies. He retained control and a sense of guardianship of his own friendship experiences at this point. Whatever the 'outcomes' of reflecting on pain of damaged friendship – whether this is greater resilience or some form of restoration of relationship – taking the opportunity provided enables children to consider collective worship a precious and special experience.

The 'total loss of friendships' was noticeably absent in the children's reflections on collective worship. This could be for a number of reasons: the children were not willing to admit such experiences in front of their peers in the focus group, or had already drawn an emotional line under the particular friendship. It may also suggest the children show little regret over friendships which they consider lost beyond rescue. In research on loss and trauma across all ages, Rich Furman examined the idea of friendship loss (2004). He suggests losing friends, which he separates from the death of a friend, are significant events in people's lives. These losses evoke feelings of sadness, shame and abandonment. Though the children in my study acknowledged the change and endings of friendships, there is no evidence

that children use the opportunity provided by collective worship to reflect on losses of friendships. However, the children's sense of pain from spoiled friendship is often emotionally close to the surface. As such, collective worship provides the opportunity to reflect on these experiences, but with the children feeling determinedly in control of how and when these opportunities are exercised.

### ***Collective worship as a place for repairing damaged relationships***

In collective worship the children considered how to mend damaged friendships. Across the years as the children grew more confident in asserting control over their experiences in collective worship, and the opportunity to think about repairing friendships contributed to it as meaningful.

The children desired to restore damaged relationships through forgiveness and reconciliation. Milala reported that in the Holy Week assemblies – intended to help the children consider the experiences of Jesus leading up to the crucifixion – she thought about 'relationships with other people'. This was not primarily the assembly leaders' design. Yet, as she clarified her thinking, Milala articulated her need to forgive friends rather than consider how the Jesus' experiences of Holy Week were relevant to her own life experiences. Thinking about forgiveness in friendships was also a priority in collective worship for Habib, as he remembered in these assemblies thinking 'some friendships are like deep enough to forgive anything.'

These comments show children value collective worship as a special space to reflect on restoring broken relationships. Despite the adults designing the assembly to pursue other topics, often the most pressing issues for the children are present in reflection during collective worship. Damaged friendships become a central focus, particularly as the children are eager to forgive friends and make the effort to reconcile. Restoration of the friendship is favoured where possible, particularly to maintain personal happiness and feel happy within friendships. In researching children's sense of life satisfaction, Arndt Büssing et al propose several personal qualities which

enhance relationships as critical to friendships (2010). Their study of 254 children in Germany concluded compassion and generosity towards others are key aspects of feeling satisfied in friendship. For the children in my study, these feelings of compassion and generosity in friendships are expressed through wanting to forgive friends. Collective worship is a place where a desire for repair and restoration of damaged friendships takes place. When children feel they are in a safe space and in control of these reflections, their own experiences of friendship can be contemplated. As such, collective worship provides the opportunity for restoring friendships and becomes a special and revelatory place.

An appropriate question is to ask if collective worship is the right place, or the best or most effective place for thinking about restoration of friendships. From their research into spirituality and relationships, Kate Adams et al argue reparation of relationships is immensely complex issue (2008). To effectively resolve conflict amongst children, they propose greater work needs to be done in understanding broader cultures of the relationship. This could be interpreted to propose other contexts might be better suited than collective worship for forgiveness and reconciliation, as the opportunity for personal reflection or thinking space offered is one-sided or too narrowly focussed. Nevertheless, collective worship, in the area of restoring friendships, does act as a catalyst for reconciliation. At the least collective worship provides the opportunity for deeper reflection on the method and practice of reconciliation. If the children can choose the opportunity provided by collective worship for one aspect within a greater tapestry of reconciliation, then collective worship can become beneficial to children's relationships with friends.

Reflecting on these three aspects of friendship – the benefits, the pain of damaged friendships, and the restoration of broken friendships – is a valuable element of collective worship for the children. Children perceive this opportunity within collective worship as having value as it deals with real-life problems. This opportunity is child-led and disrupts the normative models of collective worship. Taking the opportunity to think through friendships

enables children to consider collective worship as special and life-changing, and so to construct collective worship as sacred.

### **5.3 Normative models of opportunity**

In addition to using collective worship to reflect on relationships with friends, three other meaningful relationships are explored as children engage in collective worship: relationships with family, relationships with the 'stranger', and relationships with the world. These relationships feature on the landscape of collective worship in a different way to that of friendships, as they are entered into in a more normative manner with the assembly leader initiating times of reflection on these topics. However, as the issue of permission (demonstrated in the previous chapter) remains central, the children are aware they are in control in choosing to accept the opportunity provided.

#### ***Thinking about family in collective worship***

The children in my study considered two aspects of family relationships within collective worship: the positive and helpful aspects of these relationships, and the volatility or broken nature of family relationships. There was generally more reluctance to talk in the focus groups about which assemblies drew the children into thinking about their families.

Opportunities to reflect on families mostly came about following assemblies on that theme. Olive recalled responding to hearing about morals in one assembly, (she could not recall the topic), and thinking about her parents. The theme led her to realise she was 'brought up learning right from wrong' and that her family 'taught her how she should act.' Mandy also identified one collective worship experience when she concluded families not only 'offer support but also guidance on key life decisions.' One assembly from the Biblical story of Jacob and Esau asked the question about who the children felt they could rely on, to which Mandy thought 'thanks to my family I know who I can trust and depend on.'

When assembly leaders raised the issue of whether children accept parental guidance in making various choices, the children indicate these opportunities allowed positive feelings about parental contributions to their own lives. Children generally responded to these topics with appreciation of their parents' influence, as previously highlighted in Eddie's and Mandy's comments. In his research into faith development in children, James Fowler argues children share spiritual narratives, rituals and boundaries with their parents (1987). This highlights the influence parents have, he suggests, on children's spirituality and therefore on the broader aspects of children's lives. In collective worship, the way children access opportunities to reflect on parents shows a more nuanced understanding than simply 'sharing' spiritual, moral and ethical values. Collective worship provides, sometimes in unexpected ways for the children, a place where children consider their inherited parental values. Though recognising their own values might be different to their parents', a strong sense of gratitude for their parents' influence remains. Taking the opportunity to think about where their morals come from, and the guidance and support of their parents, is one aspect of considering their inherited spiritual narratives, rituals and boundaries. This opportunity, either prompted by assembly leaders or the children's own initiative, is a further aspect of making collective worship a special place.

Second, with respect to family, some assemblies promoted children to consider difficulties experienced in relationships with their parents. Habib commented that sometimes collective worship made him think of the times he didn't meet his parents' expectations – especially with the strict nature (in his opinion) of his own parents: 'Sometimes they get angry with you,' he remarked. Eddie added, 'I often get told off for the way I dress and what I do outside with my friends,' and about places 'I choose to go and what films I see.' Although some aspects of parental relationships are difficult to manage, collective worship provided the opportunity for the children to reflect on these experiences. This, they reported, helped them value and retain the positive features of their parental relationships. In their research into the wellbeing of families, Eija Sevón et al argue families experience multiple harmonious and disharmonious moments throughout the week (2014). From qualitative study

of 45 families' daily lives by means of diaries and interviews, they suggest the frequency of pleasant moments has little effect on a child's sense of well-being. Rather, negative events and emotions – though difficult to manage – are crucial to well-being in the family home. The children in my study reported using the opportunity provided in collective worship to address, rebalance and reconcile negative emotions from parental relationships. Collective worship benefits the children by providing an opportunity to reflect on the benefits of family relationships – whether or not they considered these relationship positive at the time. Furthermore, this reflection enabled the integration of family values into children's experiences within and beyond school. Despite teenage disillusionment with elements of parental relationships, their comments regarding the using collective worship to consider the discord between their own and parents' values has a positive outcome. The opportunity offered by collective worship is revelatory for their understanding as the children can come to value and embrace the differences between themselves and parents, resulting in a greater appreciation of relationships with parents.

What makes collective worship a special and precious experience is not the nature of their feelings towards their parents on a particular day, but rather the opportunity of a place which is set-apart from 'normal' life. Both positive and negative relationships with parents are considered by the children in collective worship, and it is constructed as a place which has special meaning crafted by this opportunity to reflect. The unique nature of opportunity provided in this setting is part of children constructing collective worship as sacred.

### ***Meeting strangers in collective worship***

The theme of how children relate to 'strangers' receives a mixed response in collective worship. Reflection mostly follows the intended pattern of the adult presenting the topic and the children choosing to engage, although the children are aware they are choosing to respond to the opportunity provided.

By 'strangers' the children explained these as people who were not known to them or in some sense were beyond their normal friendships, family or social circles. Various assemblies were highlighted as providing opportunities to think about the children's relationships with strangers. The majority of the group responded positively to such assemblies, giving examples such as the assembly based on the Parable of the Good Samaritan or those which mentioned natural disasters. The story reminded the children of situations in school as well as experiences in their lives outside school. This exchange took place in a focus group after the Good Samaritan assembly, noted by Milala in chapter four:

Olive: It made me think about moments where something's happened and I feel I should have done something about it and I didn't.

SB: What do you mean by 'done something'?

Olive: When you sit there and it's quiet and you close your eyes, things come back into your head and you can kind of see a video of sometime you could have helped someone and didn't.

SB: What do you do with those thoughts?

Olive: I imagine what I should have done instead, and think about what would have happened if I did, that it would have helped or turned out different.

Milala: I do the same but I don't like to live in the past. I was told you can't live in the past. I think about what I'll do next time.

Victoria: Yeah, I don't believe in feeling guilty ... I just tell myself to do something different next time.

The children also used this opportunity to reflect on strangers beyond the UK. Eddie commented that the Advent assemblies 'remind me that other people also celebrate this in other countries.' He spoke of the opportunity provided to celebrate Advent reminded him 'we are connected with them as we all do it together, the same way.' Mandy spoke about people suffering in natural disasters and wars, saying 'these people are exactly the same as us,

just normal people living their lives.’ She remembered during collective worship feeling an overwhelming desire to ‘get money together go over and build houses.’ Elizabeth recalled a time after the Japanese Tsunami in March 2011: ‘The assembly made me think about people looking hungry or starving’, adding, ‘if I take what I have for granted then I should feel bad.’

The children recognise the opportunity provided in collective worship relating to the developing of empathy towards the suffering stranger. Responding to the shootings at the Sandy Hook Elementary School, Connecticut, USA in 2012, Marie Masterson and Katharine Kersey argue that children identify the value of empathy in ‘eliminating the social causes that result in human unhappiness.’ They suggest activating self-reflection – the monitoring of personal feelings – as a key to successfully cultivating empathy. The opportunity provided by collective worship to consider the experiences and suffering of strangers is one example of active self-reflection. Regardless of whether this opportunity is promoted by adults or self-initiated is of no concern for the children. Collective worship offers the opportunity for the perceived differences between self and stranger to be challenged and for empathy to be fostered. As the children are conscious of these moments of self-reflection and development of empathy, collective worship again becomes a sacred encounter for the children.

There are differences across the years in how children use collective worship to reflect on their relationship with stranger. At aged 11 and 12 the children spoke of collective worship enabling them to think about the stranger in two ways: first as a person to see as ‘beyond’ themselves or perceive as distant, unrelated or disconnected – someone ‘to be nice to’; second as someone to help and with whom they can begin to empathise. The children’s thinking at a younger age (11 or 12) demonstrates this difference well: ‘We should be kind, help someone in need.’ However at aged 13 and 14 there is a marked change in perspective on empathy as well as language: ‘What if it was me?’ and ‘How would I feel?’ Children, through the opportunity of collective worship, consciously develop the ability to locate themselves in the place of ‘other people’ and empathise with them, for example the injured man in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The children make a connection with the

stranger in need – considering the stranger to share their humanity. They are undeserving of suffering, and hence see themselves in the character of the person in need. This growth in empathy is identified as children accepting the opportunity provided by collective worship to consider the stranger.

The question arises: what role is played by maturation in the children's development in their relationship with the stranger? How does children's ability change between earlier and later high school (in my study between the ages of 11 and 15) to engage in and through collective worship with the concept of a suffering stranger? I suggest maturation assists the development in how children relate to the stranger, but there is a more nuanced change than simply 'growing up'. The difference comes from holding together several concepts and experiences, often considered in collective worship: their own life experiences between 11 and 15, a broader world view from educational learning, and empathy from self-reflection and a greater understanding of the effects of human suffering. All these aspects contribute towards the development of empathy. In researching the development of cognitive and emotional empathy in children and adolescents, Christina Schwenk et al suggest there is a 'developmental maturation of cognitive, but not emotional empathy throughout childhood and adolescence' (2014, p.66). The evidence from my study directly challenges this. My research shows a difference between early and later high school years in how children reflect on their relationship with strangers and those in need. However the difference in emotional empathy is enhanced not through developmental maturation, but through engagement with collective worship. Collective worship acts as a catalyst by being a consistent and safe space where children are challenged by the suffering of others being highlighted. In collective worship, children are offered the opportunity to explore empathy and acquire a deeper and clearer understanding of their relationship with the stranger. As such, maturation is not the central part of empathy development, but rather accepting the opportunity provided by collective worship.

### ***Opportunity to reflect on the environment***

The final aspect of opportunity provided in collective worship is the children reflecting on their understanding of the environment. This aspect of collective worship also followed a normative pattern where the children responded to the assembly leader's prompting. Despite this not being child-led, the children retained an aspect of control and permission due to their perceived power-dynamics.

The children thought about three distinct connections to the physical world: their relationship with the health of the planet; their perspective of its origins, i.e. 'creation'; and to places they considered special or holy. First, in terms of the well-being of the planet, the children observed collective worship was significant as a place where they could focus on issues of environmentalism. Elizabeth commented on how clips from the film *Wal-e* were used to explore and discuss humanity's relationship to the world. In researching this topic, I arranged two focus groups either side of the assembly – one the day before and one later in the afternoon, after the assembly. The intention was to capture prior thinking and any new or changed responses after the assembly. Elizabeth's reflections were of particular interest. In the pre-assembly discussion she thought, 'one day the earth will ruin' as humans 'use electricity and washing machines and stuff and it effects global warming.' For Elizabeth, there was a sense of inevitability to the earth's decline. However, after the assembly she reflected, 'it made me realise we shouldn't take earth for granted.' When I enquired what she meant by 'take the earth for granted', Elizabeth explained she had a greater sense that the world only had limited resources, and that she felt a responsibility to not take these away from others. Keith also commented that these assemblies brought him to question his role in helping to make a difference. He added that assemblies 'made him think about litter and global warming' and about how he 'can help in the world.'

Collective worship, therefore, has an identifiable role in challenging and changing the children's thinking in relation to the environment. Kate Adams, Brendan Hyde and Richard Woolley's research into children's spirituality and

relationships, noted previously, argues that children understand spirituality as something which connects them to all beings and objects greater than themselves, including the physical world in which human beings live (2008). Therefore, for Adams, Hyde and Wooley, spirituality has an environmental dimension. For the children in my research, the opportunity provided by collective worship enables the exploration of their sense of 'being part of the world'. Their connection with the environment is a spiritual relationship – there are personal experiences, religious teaching and family expectations all working together. Thinking about personal choice and the affects of the children's actions on the environment are also considered revelatory moments (by bringing a clear change in opinion) experienced within collective worship, and as such are sacred.

Second, children find the opportunity to reflect on the perspective of the origins of the earth and universe. One key feature of this experience for the children was on the question of 'Creation and the Big Bang'. In collective worship, the children in my study considered this either through the adults asking direct questions or telling stories which related to creation. These instances, again adult-initiated, provided opportunities for children to reflect on their existing beliefs about God and creation (inherited and family beliefs) and the challenges to these beliefs brought by current life experiences. Olive commented on an assembly about creation that 'people like scientists make us question our faith.' Habib also responded that sometimes when he thinks about 'evolution and stuff' it makes him 'believe in God less.' For the children there was real and current tension between pre-existing beliefs about creation and the conceptual and intellectual crises experienced with growing scientific knowledge.

Bringing together the two sides of the creation versus evolution debate is, for the children, a meaningful intellectual and spiritual experience. In their research into children's spirituality, David Hay and Rebecca Nye suggest children's questioning of belief in God's role in creation is a positive aspect of education and mental development (2006). They attribute this, amongst other things, to an increasing knowledge of scientific evidence. The children in my study speak of the tension as a recurring experience in their high

school years. Although this tension might be expressed or discussed elsewhere, the children are searching for answers to questions and scientific challenges to faith perspectives and a space to process their evolving thoughts. The theories offered by creationism and scientism, according to Leslie Francis, produce a complex range of teenagers' religious beliefs (1992). In collective worship children take the opportunity, provided by adults, to continue exploring these questions and to reconcile newer, scientific-based knowledge with opinions and beliefs from their upbringing and faith-backgrounds. This space, considered safe and set-apart from other more hostile and intimidating places, is deemed to be precious and therefore sacred to the children.

Third, in relation to the physical environment, children reflect in collective worship about places which they considered sacred or meaningful. When the children were asked to comment about which special or holy places, Mandy responded that locations which were 'peaceful and where there are rivers and trees and blue skies' reminded her of nature and 'what God created.' As noted earlier, Mandy experienced throughout high school times of questioning her own belief in the existence of God. Despite her uncertainty in believing in the existence of God she maintained a belief that 'the universe was created by God.' Other children considered places to which they had a 'greater connection' or which they felt to be 'holy places'. Elizabeth commented she thinks about the location of her step-dad's father's grave, on a cliff looking out to the sea, a place which she feels is 'really peaceful – a special place.' Elizabeth made a connection to a sacred or spiritual place by connecting three things: natural beauty, the memory of a person, and a peaceful location.

The act of remembering physical locations as significant or spiritual places is a meaningful experience in collective worship. The natural world can allow children to engage with multiple senses, Shawn Hordyk et al argue, which provides psychological and socio-cultural benefits (2014). Additionally, some nature and locations, they propose, can act as settings where difficult emotions such as anger and agitation can be expressed in a way which gives a sense of distance to the real physical location of pain. I propose

children make connections with locations which are sacred for specific reasons and these connections are intentionally contemplated during collective worship. This enables the children to imaginatively explore places as valuable memories for loss, pain or for other reasons. The opportunity to explore relationships to these physical locations is another aspect of children constructing collective worship as sacred.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that children use opportunity in collective worship in a clear an intentional fashion to explore various key relationships: with friends, family, the stranger and the environment. I have demonstrated that, in collective worship, children disrupt the normative patterns where adult present themes to which the children respond. The desire to resist the perceived power-dynamic means the children's own sense of control is the guiding factor in crafting opportunity in collective worship.

The concern raised by John Hull that adult influence in collective worship can manipulate children's spiritual independence and formation, and that assemblies serve to indoctrinate children in the ways of religion by depriving their humanity and seeking to reconstruct self-hood, is refuted by the children's sense of control in negotiating opportunity in collective worship (1975). The transmission of information, practice, language and belief from adults to children is challenged in children seeing collective worship as opportunity. I have shown collective worship enables and empowers children to explore various aspects of relationships with their own sense of control and in management of opportunity.

By choosing to accept the opportunities offered by collective worship children become stakeholders in collective worship – they move from perceiving that collective worship is something that is 'done for them' to something they have control over with purpose and collaboration. I have argued that, from the children's perspective, the opportunities provided enable collective worship to be considered a precious place of spiritual reflection. Collective

worship is recognised as set-apart from normal life, a precious place where the children can look forward to attending and experiencing.

Opportunity, then, is the third aspect of the three-dimensional model of 'reluctance-permission-opportunity' which underpins the dynamic of children's evolving sense of, and awareness of, faith, God, and relationship with other and self. In the final part of the thesis, my conclusion, I will consider the implications, applications and limitations of this three-dimensional dynamic.

## **Chapter 6: *Where now for collective worship?***

### **Introduction**

This chapter returns to my original research question, born from my professional chaplaincy practice: how do children experience and engage with collective worship? And what happens when the child's experience of collective worship is understood as central to their spiritual journey? I will offer some conclusions regarding my three-fold dynamic model of 'reluctance-permission-opportunity', especially for those designing and planning collective worship in schools. What are the implications of my findings to my school chaplaincy colleagues and other leaders of collective worship? How does my research speak into the field of children's spirituality? These kinds of implications, applications and limitations form the basis of this concluding chapter.

### **6.1 A vision of what collective worship might look like**

In this section I indicate how a better understanding of the three-fold model of reluctance-permission-opportunity helps us to understand how children experience collective worship as sacred. I also argue that such awareness might serve to enhance children's engagement with collective worship, as well as considering what constitutes 'successful' or 'effective' collective worship.

#### ***Creating the conditions for children to construct sacred space***

In this thesis, I have argued that children can build a sense of ownership and personal investment in collective worship in such a way that collective worship can be construed as a form of sacred space. This is achieved even as the children experience the three-dimensional dynamic of reluctance-permission-opportunity. This process is woven into a narrative of spiritual

reflection and maturity which underpins their evolving awareness of faith, God, and relationships with self and the world.

Collective worship is constructed as 'sacred' whenever it becomes for the children a place of meaning, memory and purpose. For this to take place, collective worship should reflect three key elements: it must be considered special and precious, regarded as set-apart but not irrelevant to 'normal' or everyday life, and found to be revelatory and life-changing. I will address these aspects in turn, and show how my research illustrates this.

First, for collective worship to be considered sacred it should be special and precious to the child. The personal aspect of engagement in collective worship was essential to finding personal meaning for the children in my study. However, alongside the personal aspect, the 'collective' element is intrinsic to collective worship's meaning and importance. Although the dynamic of reluctance-permission-opportunity is similar for the children, each individual's experience of this dynamic is personal and supported by individual spiritual reflection (for example, Eddie and Habib explaining their consideration about different aspects of friendship during an assembly about David and Jonathan, or Mandy's and Milala's reflections differing about the same Remembrance assembly).

However, experiencing a sense of uniqueness or having a personal spiritual experience did not necessarily produce feelings of isolation. Children's reflections about personal spiritual experiences were very positive (for example, Olive's comments about how being in the quiet of collective worship enables her to think without distraction about her family).

Nonetheless, the personal aspect of engaging in collective worship also contains a sense of unity with others (for example, Habib reflects about being encouraged when realising he thinks about similar events to his friends). The experience of the reluctance-permission-opportunity dynamic is primarily personal, and has at its core spiritual reflection and critical questioning. As Milala's narrative showed, through her personal sense of permission-giving and identity, collective worship can be precious and special to her by enabling reflections on personal and private issues. When children engage in

any or all of the aspects of the dynamic then collective worship is special and precious, and is constructed as sacred.

Second, when collective worship is set-apart from what the children consider to be 'normal' life, it is valuable and distinct but not irrelevant to the children's lives. When collective worship is responsive to real life, children experience an interactive and interchangeable expression of evolving spiritual awareness. One example was Mandy's comment about collective worship being a peaceful place which gave her opportunity to think about her grandfather's memorial tree.

Setting aside special time and physical space from normal life is an important condition for collective worship to be considered sacred. Jerome Berryman's influential model and practice of 'Godly Play' contains such considerations of the importance of physical, spatial, and environmental setting. Berryman's approach is to create a sacred space of a carefully prepared 'classroom', intentionally designed and prepared for spiritual investigation and expression (1991). Careful use of the space to ensure it is intentionally prepared, managed and safe, Berryman argues, surrounds the children with the language of the Christian people (2002). How children enter and leave the Godly Play space is vital – the *invitation* to enter is significant. There is a sense of crossing the threshold into a sacred place, as entering denotes leaving the normal space of life and the reverse as the children exit the space. In my research, Olive verbalised an emotional connection she felt between being present in assemblies and in her church – both were 'quiet, peaceful and relaxing.' For collective worship, a distinction between outside and inside assemblies is helpful to children, but reciprocal benefits are included. The issue of collective worship's importance as being set-apart is particularly poignant here. In assemblies, children value time away from the world to think about the world beyond, and in the outside world children value a space on which to reflect on their experiences in that world.

The value children place on collective worship also comes from its ability to enhance their lives and help them to contemplate their experiences of the real world. When children experience reluctance-permission-opportunity in a

space which is set aside from the busyness of school life and their outside world experiences, then collective worship is considered to have real world value. The collective worship setting is intended to be a space where helpful and constructive reflection can take place, as shown by Habib's narrative and others' comments about repairing and restoring friendships. The children find the structure and patterns provided in collective worship enable them to further consider collective worship as a place set apart for a specific purpose. This respect for and value of the set-apart character of collective worship means that this is an essential aspect of making collective worship sacred.

Third, collective worship is perceived as sacred by the children when it is revelatory (bringing a change in thinking) and life-changing (having significant impact on their whole life). Collective worship must not be perceived by the child as pedagogical, but rather it should be transformational by enabling spiritual exploration and expression. The goal of collective worship should not be spiritual development per se, although the children might experience this as an outcome. Mandy's reflection on how collective worship engaged with her belief in the existence of God, which she considered to be transformational, is an example of this. Additionally, Milala's encounter of permission-giving enabled her to experience transformation regarding her Islamic identity.

Enabling the children to consider collective worship as transformational is useful. Although engagement with collective worship did not always result in deeper engagement with faith beliefs or practices – for example with Mandy becoming more certain she didn't believe in God – a feeling of transformation is a central aspect of collective worship as sacred. For the children part of feeling that collective worship is life-changing is the impression that collective worship is practical and essentially useful. In researching why young people disengage with traditional religious practices, David Voas found one issue was their perception that religion was becoming less useful for real life (2010). For Voas, over time the combination of young people's lack of interest and their parent's impressions that the 'practical utility of religion has declined' (p. 29) means that children and their parents become less inclined to value religion and consider religious beliefs as relevant to life. However,

when collective worship provides emotional, spiritual and practical support during difficult life situations for the children it becomes a revelatory and life-changing experience. As such, in addressing day-to-day and real-life problems, collective worship can be constructed by the children as sacred space.

### ***Enhancing children's engagement in collective worship***

From the research project it is possible to identify factors which effect greater engagement with collective worship as well as factors which appear to diminish it. First, living with the tension of collective worship is critical. For children, experiencing the three-dimensional dynamic creates pressure in the decision-making process about whether to ignore or engage, or commit to action or transformation. Adults must be willing to accept this tension is occurring in the children and not seek to placate children through 'entertaining' assemblies. Some observed practice suggests the latter approach is favoured, whereas a commitment to hosting the reluctance-permission-opportunity dynamic is necessary to promote meaningful engagement.

Returning to John Hull's suggestion about the diminishing relevance of collective worship in UK education, there is a further tension between worship and education (Hull, 1975, 1984, 1989). The two cannot co-exist harmoniously, he argues, as worship is instructional, confessional and sometimes includes indoctrination – elements which do not sit well with the modern education practices of exploratory and child-centred learning. However Hull has made two oversights. Firstly, by seeing tension as negative, Hull overlooks how the strain experienced in the three-dimensional model is productive and received positively. Secondly, Hull ignores the positive pressure which exists in the children in engaging in collective worship. Embracing the process of reluctance-permission-opportunity allows collective worship to be child-centred and child-driven. Enabling children to engage in this process is where the tension lies, not between worship and

education. These tensions are integral to making collective worship meaningful and life-changing.

Second, making a proposal to practitioners, there needs to be a reorientation of power-dynamics in collective worship – particularly in choosing the topics for each assembly. It should be noted that leaders of collective worship, and those writing material which adults source, do not recognise choosing the themes and topics as an exercise of power *per se* – rather a responsibility to provide guidance and furnish wisdom (Wright, 2000). Children on the other hand experience a sense of mistrust towards authority figures, as demonstrated by Victoria's refusal to participate in some assemblies in which she felt oppressed. This applies to religious leaders such as priests and imams or teachers delivering collective worship. If the adults hold the power in collective worship and the children are expected to trust the adults this can lead to frustration on both sides, and a reduction of engagement. In order to enhance involvement in collective worship in the UK it is recommended that practice should move towards a more combined model of child-participant-leader, which would enhance a sense of influence for the children and might lead to increased engagement. In Quaker-based education, assemblies are seen as acts of Quaker worship resulting in child-adult equality where any person can speak a message when so moved (Ralph & Herman, 2014). Perhaps a courageous practice for school chaplains and assembly leaders would be to reverse the power-trust dynamic and give the power to the children whilst inviting trust from members of staff. Whether the power needs to be given to the children or possibly shared, a clearer sense of ownership and influence in directing collective worship will enhance engagement.

One factor which did not appear to have an effect on children's engagement was the identity of the adult leading collective worship. From my study the children reflected that the people leading the assembly – and the method of delivery – had minimal bearing on engagement. For example, although Victoria objected to the feelings of powerlessness and intentionally rejected 'the message', she continued to respect some adults who were leading collective worship, especially maintaining high regard for one member of staff. In researching collective worship practices across the UK, John

Caperon suggests collective worship is a place of encounter with the spiritual and not with a personality (2015). What made the difference to engagement for the children in my study was how the content interacted with any external issues the children were experiencing. The content itself appeared to be of greater importance than the person delivering the content. Children have the ability to engage with the spiritual reflection through their own life experiences more than with the person delivering collective worship.

### ***What constitutes 'successful' or 'effective' collective worship?***

The issues of successful and effective collective worship are no doubt highly subjective. Throughout this thesis I have argued children can construct collective worship as a sacred space which enables them to critically reflect on their understanding of faith, the world and God, and the connection of Self to these relationships. Developing this argument, it is possible to outline some suggestions as to what effective collective worship might look like. However, it is vital to acknowledge that effective and successful collective worship will look different in different contexts. Indeed, successful and effective collective worship should not be measured in outcomes or results but rather in enabling, supporting, and effecting spiritual reflection and engagement. Below I propose three key recommendations to those charged with the responsibility of leading and directing collective worship: about the starting point, on the permissive space, and on scaffolding spiritual exploration.

First, successful and effective collective worship has to have as its starting point the child. The understanding should exist amongst collective worship leaders that children must be engaged from *their* current spiritual understanding. Where collective worship is adult-led – in terms of choices of topics, particular theological traditions being forwarded or the hermeneutics of scripture – careful attention must be paid to the children's voice. Successful collective worship supports children bringing their experiences and crafting collective worship as *their* sacred space. The difference between how children and adults experience and inhabit sacred space has been

highlighted by Sturla Sagberg (2008). From her research into the spirituality of Norwegian children, she suggests children have a difficult relationship with a culture of church and collective worship. The issue centres around approaching these from the adult's perspective rather than children's – a perspective which does not value the nurturing of what it means to be human and ignores what is important to the children. Collective worship which furthers an adult-centric narrative, or which depicts adults and the school as the focus of religious authority, acts as a barrier for children. Successful collective worship is meaningful and transformative by enabling engagement with reluctance-permission-opportunity. Adults in collective worship must not be talking *at* or *to* children but *with* children about spiritual expressions and experiences, and supporting them as they engage with all aspects of spiritual reflection from their location and experience.

Second, collective worship ought to permit, encourage and furnish resources for spiritual reflection as a shared spiritual space with the world. Successful collective worship draws children's 'outside' experiences into the reflective space of collective worship. Although the sense of separation from the world outside is sometimes appreciated, children should be encouraged to bring their experiences and understanding of the wider world into their collective worship experience. If collective worship is to be beneficial for children it needs to be a space for reflection on their current life experiences, rather than seen by the children as 'other' to their culture and experiences in the 'real world' which lies beyond.

Third, collective worship should scaffold spiritual exploration by supporting children's holistic learning and development. There should be a long-term commitment by leaders to provide the tools and culture by which children can explore within safe and conducive framework. As discussed, collective worship should be understood not as spiritual or religious education but more as pastoral care and a means of shepherding growth. In their research into the spiritual development of children, Adams et al suggest that an appreciation of the wider aspects of the person is vital to respecting and nurturing children's spirituality (2008). Focussing on religious worship by increasing knowledge of scriptures or learning liturgical or religious practices

risks neglecting the nurture of the whole person as a spiritual being. Children need time to explore their whole life through the engagement in collective worship. Additionally, successful collective worship should not be compressed into short time-slots in order to meet the constricted time requirements of the school day. Seeing collective worship as time lost for more traditional forms of education does not benefit the holistic development of children. Time for collective worship in the day or week ought not be sacrificed for other activities.

Collective worship should be understood and valued as long-term spiritual and pastoral care in order for significant scaffolding to take place. From his extensive work with children's spirituality, Brendan Hyde (2008) suggests time needs to be set aside for children to reflect on and engage in their current spiritual experiences. I propose time needs to be continually given – week on week and year on year – to reflecting on spiritual experiences through various means but certainly during collective worship. The differences identified by the longitudinal aspect of my project shows that children reflect on issues and experiences at different times in their life, as well as at a different 'pace' to other children. Collective worship can provide successful scaffolding of children's spirituality when reflection sees the child as a whole person and spiritual exploration is valued as part of broader aspects of a child's development.

## **6.2 Recommendations for collective worship**

In this section I consider what changes need to take place in collective worship informed by my research findings. I offer implications for leaders and practitioners of collective worship, before submitting recommendations for UK law on collective worship.

### ***Implications for leaders of collective worship***

Embarking on this research I found the assumption amongst adults in the school and wider educational establishment that collective worship was recognised by children and adults as sacred, particularly within faith-based schools. The adults were following UK law in bringing children together in order to engage in a 'daily act of collective worship' which was 'wholly or mainly of a broadly Christian character' (Department for Education, 1988, 1993). However, in seeking to hear the child's voice and understand their experiences of collective worship my research suggests the adults' assumption that children 'found' collective worship sacred should be challenged. There is a clear difference between what the adults assume and the reality of children's experience. Some traditional aspects of sacredness were discovered, such as the separateness of collective worship. Nevertheless, I found that children broadly accepted that, within a faith-based school, attending collective worship was normal practice.

One of the suggestions that prompted this research is that there is a clear difference between what the adults expect the children to receive from collective worship, and what the children actually experience. Therefore I ask the question, what implications should be elicited, and how should collective worship theory and practice be changed? I propose three key features should be in place for the adults, each of which are linked the children's experiences of the three-dimensional dynamic of reluctance-permission-opportunity. With these three features adults will be better able to provide collective worship experiences which are meaningful, and which can be constructed by the children as sacred.

First, adults cannot take for granted children's participation in collective worship. Rather, engagement needs to be recognised as a choice on the part of each child. Personal engagement was necessary for children to consider collective worship as sacred. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on each child's choice to engage in spiritual reflection, and consideration be taken by adults as to the ways children choose to engage. From my research, children are highly conscious of the mental activity of choosing to

engage in spiritual activity during collective worship. Chapter three explored the experience of reluctance for the children and discussed how for the children reluctance itself is a spiritual endeavour. I proposed reluctance to the sacred-ness of space is a spiritually formative activity which deepened children's understanding of self and shapes identity. Children were very conscious of when they reluctantly engaged with collective worship and when they chose to participate. For example, Paulo commented about choosing to 'watch what people are doing ... and observing.' Adults must respect the right for children to experience reluctance to participation in collective worship, as well as see children's participation as expected. The opportunity provided for children in collective worship might be different to that which adults intended. However, children are interested in spiritually reflecting on their life experiences and can be open to new and different spiritual concepts.

Second, adults need to recognise children do not necessary access collective worship from a single shared starting position. Understanding the starting-point of reflection in collective worship for the children means considering their experiences, relationships, understandings and questions. Children chose principally to reflect on personal relationships and on *their own* life experiences in collective worship. Each child brings their unique life experiences which allowed collective worship to become a significant space of spiritual reflection. Although they were invited together to consider Bible stories or reflect on current events, and often were encountering similar spiritual experiences to other children, choosing what relationships and incidents on which to reflect was different for each child. For example in the same assembly on the theme of Remembrance, Eddie spent time thinking about his aunt who was struggling with cancer, whilst Mandy spend time reflecting about her friend whose uncle had recently died in Syria. Collective worship takes on a bespoke element of sacred reflection. Collective worship was for each child a distinctive personal spiritual activity – the 'me' was the starting place for spiritual reflection; it was decidedly person-centred and self-directed. Adults planning and leading collective worship need to appreciate this principle.

Third, adults are facilitators, not teachers, during collective worship. Adults have a key role in facilitating collective worship by enabling and permitting children to participate as meaningful, spiritual discoverers. Children should be empowered to construct collective worship as personally sacred by bringing for reflection what they considered meaningful or significant. The church's intention to teach, model, shape and form children should not override children's own sense of directing their spiritual explorations. Children did speak of valuing biblical stories and life stories with meanings, and the concepts discussed by adults within the experience of collective worship. However, these need to be offered as material to support children's reflection rather than as theological standards to which children should adhere. Times of silence are valuable, even cathartic to children, and offer opportunities where children can reflect on the assembly, pray for their own needs and problems, and think about life experiences and relationships. Although children are clearly aware of their individuality in collective worship, participating together is in many ways significant for the children. Singing hymns together – though often unpopular with the children – praying the Lord's prayer and other responsive prayers, support the sense of the community as engaging together in the sacred. Adults, therefore, should welcome collective worship as an opportunity to facilitate spiritual thinking and not educate or instruct.

### ***Implications for UK law on collective worship***

My research can also inform policy makers for collective worship. The assumption at the centre of the Government's policy on collective worship – that collective worship is accepted by children as sacred, and through children's engagement it is sufficient to promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of children – has been challenged by my argument. In collective worship sacredness cannot be assumed, and children's intentionality and willing engagement should not be assumed. Rather, I have proposed, as children experience a three dimensional dynamic of reluctance-permission-opportunity which underpins collective

worship, there should be a rethink of the purpose and practice of collective worship.

In recent years the law on collective worship has come under sustained scrutiny from both leading education professionals and anti-religious groups. In 2006 the *Secondary Heads Association* called for collective worship to be scrapped, and more recently the *British Humanist Association* maintains collective worship is 'unworkable, hypocritical, counter-productive and divisive' (BHA, 2016; CYPNow, 2016). Children perceive collective worship as a valuable and formative experience, which enhances their own understanding of faith, the world, God and relationship with self. However, a reconsideration of the law is long overdue.

Arguments against the existence of the law on collective worship are often based on organisational preferences or adults' unwillingness to truly engage with the voice of the child. The BHA, for example, suggest political forces in the UK – such as the Bishops in the House of Lords – are standing in the way of reform on the law of collective worship. From my research, I suggest that the law is in need of modification rather than removal from the statute books. Currently, the law is protecting the rights of child to be exposed to spiritual thinking. The children's experience of reluctance-permission-opportunity proves the value of collective worship as a relevant and formative, albeit complex, component of childhood educational experience. The language around collective worship may require some revision, as the term 'worship' itself is a misnomer for what children experience and would be better termed 'spiritual reflection or exploration'. A middle ground is proposed by Andrew Jones, who suggests a loosening of the language in the law by advocating for assemblies which enhance spiritual and moral awareness (2014). However, protecting the rights of each child for the opportunity to create for themselves a sacred experience or set-apart place within their school experience is something I believe the law should protect. This is also important for an increasingly multi-cultural society.

### **6.3 Further implications for children's spirituality**

The intention of this study into collective worship was not necessarily to claim the findings would be wholly transferable to other contexts, even though in many aspects there are relevant concepts. Rather, other researchers and professionals are invited to 'transfer the results and arguments to their own settings' (Herr & Anderson, 2005). In this section I offer some contributions in understanding children's spirituality and contributions for researching with children.

#### ***Contributions in understanding children's spirituality***

In addition to addressing a practical problem, this project also began with an interest in children's spirituality, and specifically how collective worship affected and effected spiritual formation in children. I drew on two groups of authors in particular – Brendan Hyde, and David Hay and Rebecca Nye – to build a conceptual framework for children's spirituality to examine how this might have been explored, formed and expressed in collective worship. From my research I offer four contributions to the understanding of children's spirituality: the idea of spiritual formation being a non-linear development; the concept of Ultimate Unity; observations about context, in particular suitable environments for spiritual engagement, expression and development; and about spiritual decline in adolescence.

First, regarding non-linear development, my research challenges the suggestions of 'natural pattern' of spiritual development. The framework by which an outsider can classify or label stages of spirituality – as highlighted in James Fowler's models of development discussed in chapter two – should be questioned (Fowler, 1981, 1987). Children's evolving awareness of faith, God, other and self within the sacred space of collective worship does not fit into a normative model of spiritual development. Additionally, the three-dimensional dynamic of reluctance-permission-opportunity within collective worship are not experienced in a systematic or uniform manner. Rather, spiritual reflection and maturity are more nuanced.

From the interpretation of my group data, I conclude that the three-dimensional dynamic experienced in collective worship represents encounters which identify not a linear, but a multi-dimensional understanding of spiritual reflection and maturity. Milala's story in particular leads me to suggest that the terms 'spiritual exploration' or 'spiritual discovery' would be more reliable language than spiritual formation. The concept 'formation' as attached to a linear model must be replaced with a model of spiritual reflection and maturity which is nuanced, contextual, differentiated and asymptotic.

From my research, then, I would argue that a multi-dimensional model better typifies spiritual reflection and maturity. For children, the sacred space of collective worship does not produce 'step one leading to step two leading to step three' as a process of spiritual reflection and maturity. Rather an evolving spiritual understanding comes from the dynamic of the process itself which is a fluid, nuanced, experienced and contextual re-evaluating and re-constructing of spirituality. The model of an evolving spiritual dynamic recognises life's relationships and experiences are rich, complex and varied, and it is the process – not the result – of reflecting on these within collective worship which brings beneficial change to children's spirituality.

Second, addressing spirituality, the project challenges the concept of spirituality as movement towards Ultimate Unity (Hyde, 2008). There have been no identifiable spiritual trajectories in the children regarding any sense of *movement towards* Ultimate Unity. I suggest it is not credible to map such language onto the children's narratives. My own observations over four years of data collection leaves me in no doubt as a professional that, whilst some patterns and common experiences emerge, each child's spiritual exploration is truly unique and nuanced whilst simultaneously being complex and intense. Whilst a relationship in spiritual exploration between self and other is evident from the data, more research is called for into the concept of Ultimate Unity. The problem, from my viewpoint, lies in the notion of reaching an endpoint or goal. Whenever a target is set – as suggested by the concept of 'movement towards Ultimate Unity' – proximity or even degrees of closeness

is intrinsic. I am uncomfortable with understanding any form of scale or direction to children's spirituality which has a target or destination point.

Third, collective worship is one place where for children spiritual exploration might take place – a catalyst, one could say, for spiritual exploration.

However there is a link between children's context and the possibility for children to intentionally consider their own spirituality. Olive found assemblies to be places of peace, where she could spend time thinking about her sense of self, and Habib chose particularly to reflect in collective worship on friendships and the perception of his own friendship skills.

Attentiveness to self and other, as suggested by David Hay and Rebecca Nye, is crucial to children's spirituality (1998, 2006). Therefore I suggest collective worship, when well-organised, can provide exceptional scaffolding for spiritual exploration, engagement and expression. For the children, collective worship can be a safe and sacred space for reflection on lived experiences, on understanding the world and their place within the world. Collective worship is not the only place in their lives for spiritual reflection – however it is a focussing space due to its safe and sacred nature.

Fourth, my project offers new insight into changes in children's spirituality and spiritual deconstruction in adolescence, suggesting contributions to the academic understanding of spirituality and in particular changes in spiritual practices. The age range of the children selected speaks to the issues of childhood as a prime spiritual season or a time for spiritual deconstruction (Hay & Nye, 2006; Scott, 2001). Rather than identifying an absence of spiritual change in adolescence (or later childhood), I propose there is abundant of spiritual activity in this period of life. The children's experiences of reluctance-permission-opportunity, and of this underpinning collective worship being constructed as sacred, identify that during this stage of life there is a significant amount of spiritual activity and exploration. This consideration of the interface between life experiences and spirituality should not be deemed spiritual decline but rather as spiritual flourishing – if it is about reflection, openness and meaning-making – rather than a 'progression' model.

### ***Contributions for methodologies in researching with children***

Finally, this project has methodological implications for research into children and spirituality. In chapter two I outlined the initial stages of my methodology in seeking to hear the children's voice and understand their reflections on their own sense of spirituality. In developing David Hay and Rebecca Nye's work on spirituality as relational consciousness, my mixed approach of visual and interview methods produced significant results (2006). The use of visual methods motivated children to talk about spirituality and spiritual concepts, and is, I suggest, an under-used research method.

In the field of children's spirituality, three key contributors – David Hay and Rebecca Nye, Robert Coles and Brendan Hyde – all used interviews as their only research method (Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008). The significance of visual data in my project provided richness and depth in seeking to understand spirituality, and served to compliment individual and group interviews. In the introduction I mentioned Sarah Dunlop's work in using visual methods as one tool to study what young people considered to be sacred, including their reflections on spirituality in society, culture and their environment (2010). Jojo Oldham also used a visual method in commissioning homeless people in Newcastle (UK) to create a map of the significant places of connection, incident, and memory (2016). Dunlop's project had the advantages of reducing the impact of any language barriers, and Oldham enabled adults with additional needs – for example those with addiction or in poor mental health – to be able to contribute in a meaningful way. A child-generated topography of children's spirituality may well be similarly insightful in offering inclusion and reducing similar impacts. Including and exploring locations and experiences which children found spiritual could be mapped and identified in order to better understand children's spirituality. Looking beyond visual methodologies, Steve Dixon's research with a mixed group of children and adults enabled a significant depth of understanding to be achieved between the researcher and the children being researched (2012). However, this again used a traditional model of group interviews. Therefore, although my own approach used a different combination of existing models, I would encourage innovative

research methods in order to better understand the richness of children's spirituality.

#### **6.4 Limitations**

In this section I address the limitations of the research project as a whole, and reflect personally on lessons learned along the way. There are two aspects which I submit: the limitations of my working definition of children's spirituality and the drawbacks of focussing on collective worship.

##### ***Children's spirituality as 'relational'***

From the inception of this research project I have considered children's spirituality in dialogue with voices from academic literature, which have suggested an understanding of 'spirituality' as being the relational consciousness between self and other – meaning God, other people and the world (Adams et al., 2008; Coles, 1990; Hay & Nye, 2006; Hyde, 2008; Nye & Hay, 1996). Although a working definition was necessary early on in order to provide a conceptual framework for data collection, one limitation of the definition is the use of the term *relational*. The question arises: what about children who struggle with the ability to form and understand relationships, or who have difficulties in reflecting on the status and health of relationships? This might be children who, for example, have a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Condition (ASC). Children with ASC have a 'life-long, developmental disability that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them' (National Autistic Society, 2015). However children who have ASC find it difficult to understand their relationship with people around them and to think about how they experience the world.

This raises two key issues. First, it is important to consider whether spirituality should be understood as a purely relational concept, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. Second, and more pertinent to this study, it

suggests my project is limited in its contribution to collective worship and spirituality. Additionally, the effect of other mental and physical health conditions have not featured in the research. It is important to recognise that this project has not considered how collective worship engages or can support children with more severe learning difficulties or mental health issues than those which are present in 'mainstream' schools. It would be valuable to include this aspect to a greater extent in the understanding of children's spirituality. Further research into children's spirituality and spiritual exploration – whether including or excluding the place of collective worship – which has a more inclusive nature is therefore suggested as one area of development from this project.

### ***Focussing on collective worship***

By focussing on collective worship it is recognised this project only explores one aspect of children's spiritual experience in the secondary education environment. There are other occasions in school, such as RE or science lessons, where, for example, the issues of spiritual belief and practice and the existence of God are discussed. These can also serve as formative spiritual experiences for children by challenging or confirming existing belief systems. The whole nature of education within religious (and faith-based) schools can influence the faith development of a child (Crawford & Rossiter, 2003). Therefore, research in the wider effects of education in UK faith-based schools may provide insight how such influences affect spirituality. In my thesis I considered Jeanette Gill's research into children's views, noting that the developments in these opinions changed throughout childhood (2004). This suggests the possibility that children's engagement with collective worship may be dependent on factors beyond those considered in this study – for example family changes in faith practice, or disengagement with formal education – and this again prompts the need for further research.

Finally, focussing on collective worship has only captured snapshots of how children experience spiritual transformation. An attempt has been made through focus groups to use the children's own narratives and through

longitudinal and qualitative methods to paint a fuller picture – but gaps might exist. Collective worship only punctuates the narrative of children’s spiritual experiences and transformation due to its timing and priority within schools. Transformation can potentially take place in the fresh experiences, intellectual challenges and (theological) crises encountered by children beyond collective worship. However, focusing research on collective worship is valuable, as collective worship itself contains several qualities relevant to spiritual exploration: it presses the pause button and allows children to reflect, to take stock, and in doing so make connection between experiences, challenges and crises. Great effort has been made to piece together broader picture of transformation, one which is a narrative of transformation, but I note that while the data provided has been extremely insightful there may be gaps in the picture as a whole.

## **Conclusion**

My research project set out to take time to listen with great care to the children’s voice, with particular interest to how their engagement with collective worship contributes to their growth. The data generated by my use of qualitative methods to investigate collective worship from the experiences of some children has been designed to elicit first-hand experience over a number of years and seek to understand children as they have grown and engaged with collective worship.

Through the exploration of collective worship in this thesis I have been able to argue that children use collective worship to construct a sacred space to critically reflect on understanding of faith, the world, God and connection of self to these relationships. My discovery of reluctance-permission-opportunity within children’s collective worship experience has been a significant discovery in this work and has offered fresh insight to practitioners, researchers, and academics. It is hoped the areas for further investigation which have been suggested can be taken up by other researchers to provide more understanding of children’s spirituality and collective worship. The symbiosis of spirituality and collective worship in secondary education offers

fertile ground for practitioners and academics in the all areas of childhood development, not simply in spiritual development.

Finally, returning to the research question, I consider the original intention of the project to have been achieved. My desire to ensure careful attention was paid to the child's voice in the research has resulted in some exciting implications and applications for academic and professional audiences. It is hoped the implications and applications can be received for the benefit of children – in the present day and in the future – to participate in collective worship within secondary education.

## **Appendix A: Trinity CE High School Worship Policy**

### **WORSHIP POLICY**

#### **AIM/PURPOSE**

The purpose of this policy is to ensure that Worship at Trinity Church of England High School is clearly defined and understood by all members of the Trinity community.

#### **GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

As a church school, Trinity places a special emphasis on the development of the school as a worshipping community. Worship is a fundamental element of each day, either through a morning collective act of worship or within tutor groups by means of 'Thought for the Week'. The attendance of students to religious education lessons and worship is expected, in that parents have applied for their children to attend a church school and, in so doing, clearly subscribe to the school's ethos, values and day to day practises.

#### **WORSHIP POLICY AT TRINITY CHURCH OF ENGLAND HIGH SCHOOL**

1. Worship should embrace all members of Trinity.
2. Worship will form an essential element of all major celebrations in the life of the school.
3. Each day will begin for students with either an act of worship in the main hall or lecture theatre, or a form discussion based on "Thought for the Week". Resources for the latter will be made available by the Chaplain.
4. Regular voluntary Eucharists will take place within the school assembly pattern. Cover for staff who wish to attend will be available and all students will be free to attend, regardless of faith.
5. The school will hold an annual Christmas Carol Service at Manchester Cathedral and an Advent Carol Service at St Ann's Church, Manchester. Within school, whole school services will be held at Christmas, Easter, Remembrance Day and at the end of the school year.
6. The school will look for opportunities to share in the worship life of Manchester.
7. The Chaplain will have an active role in the worship life of the school as well as bringing pastoral and counselling skills to Trinity students and staff.
8. A 'worship' calendar will be drawn up and maintained by the Chaplain.
9. A log of worship topics, readings and hymns will be maintained by the Chaplain.
10. A worship group, chaired by the Chaplain, will meet to plan for, participate in, monitor and evaluate the worship life of the school.
11. The School Chapel is a Christian prayer room, dedicated by the Archbishop of York, and used for meetings of the Christian Union and, at times, small groups of Christian students or staff.

## **MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

The Governors' Standing Committee will have responsibility for the Worship Policy. The policy will, in turn, be and ratified by the Full Governing Body.

*Revised in the school year 2015-2016*

## **Appendix B: Trinity CE High School Child Protection Policy**

### **CHILD PROTECTION POLICY**

#### **AIM/PURPOSE**

The aim of the policy is to ensure that children at Trinity are part of a safe, secure and caring environment, and that any suspected or actual abuse is dealt with as speedily and efficiently as possible to safeguard the best interests of the students.

#### **GENERAL PRINCIPLES**

The Designated Persons for Child Protection and Safeguarding are the Assistant Head KS3, Deputy Head (Student Support) and the Vulnerable Children's Support Officer who work closely with Pastoral Managers at both a strategic level and on a day to day basis. Child abuse can be physical, sexual, neglect or emotional and recognition of such abuse can take a variety of physical or behavioural signs.

### **CHILD PROTECTION AT TRINITY CHURCH OF ENGLAND HIGH**

#### **SCHOOL**

1. If a child discloses to a member of staff that he or she is being physically abused (including sexual abuse) it is important firstly to listen to what the child has to say and, secondly, to believe them.
2. Do not promise confidentiality as it is not possible. Explain to the child that, because you care, you cannot keep it to yourself and that you have a responsibility to pursue the matter.
3. The member of staff should inform a Designated Person as soon as possible, and the appropriate procedures will be followed.
4. All staff will complete Safeguarding and PREVENT training every three years.

#### **MONITORING AND EVALUATION**

This will be through meetings of Pastoral staff, middle managers and the Deputy Head (Student Support). Changes to the policy will be the responsibility of the Governors' Personnel Committee and ratified by the Full Governing Body.

*Revised in the school year 2015-2016*

## Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Title of Project:**

Spiritual Formation: An Exploration

A research study into how spirituality is formed, developed and expressed in

**Researcher: Reverend Steve Birkinshaw, School Chaplain**

**Date: 1<sup>st</sup> January 2011**

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

**What is the purpose of the research?**

Trinity CE High School has always placed a high value on faith and valuing people. As school Chaplain one of my interests is how the years spent in high school shape and develop individuals as they mature through adolescence and prepare for life after high school.

The aim of the research is to find out how being a member of this school community (Trinity CE High School) affects your understanding of yourself and others. The research will last for four years (into Year 10). At the end of the project the findings will be written-up as part a Doctoral thesis. The findings will also be used to inform the future pastoral care of students in this and other schools.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen because you are presently in Year 7 at the school.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. A decision to withdraw at any time, or a decision not to take part, will not have any affect on your education or the care you receive from the school in any way.

**What will I be asked to do?**

If you decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and asked to sign the consent form. This will give your consent for research to begin, and you will be invited to attend a focus group meeting. At this meeting, you and other students will discuss your views and experiences. Individual interviews will also be held to give each person the chance to further explain their thoughts. There will be about ten other students taking part and the meetings, which will be led by myself, and will last about an hour. We will meet together as a large group no more than three times per school term, and no more than twice as individuals. With your permission (and that of the others in the group), the meeting will be audio taped. No-one will be identifiable in the final write-up.

**What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

There are no disadvantages or risks foreseen in taking part in the research.

**What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

As a student it is possible that you may welcome the opportunity to share and discuss your views and experiences with other students. By taking part, you will be contributing to the development of the pastoral care in school through sharing your views, which will hopefully benefit students in the future.

**What if something goes wrong?**

If you wish to complain or have any concerns about any aspect of the way you have been approached or treated during the course of this research, please contact:

Prof. Robert Warner,  
Dean of Humanities,  
University of Chester  
Chester CH1 4BJ  
Tel. 01244 511030

If you are harmed by taking part in this research project, there are no special compensation arrangements. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence (but not otherwise), then you may have grounds for legal action, but you may have to pay for this.

**Will my taking part in the research be kept confidential?**

All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential so that only I will have access to such information.

**What will happen to the data?**

The findings will be written up as part a Doctoral thesis. It is hoped that the findings may be used to improve the pastoral care at school and in other

school. Individuals who participate will not be identified in any subsequent report or publication.

**Who is organising and funding the research?**

As the research is part of a research degree there is no cost to the research. The research degree is partly funded by Trinity CE High School and private sponsorship. The University of Chester Department of Theology and Religious Studies will be involved in supervising the research, and I will carry out the research itself.

**Who may I contact for further information?**

If you would like more information about the research before you decide whether or not you would be willing to take part, please contact:

Revs Steve Birkinshaw  
Trinity CE High School  
Manchester M15 6HP  
[s.birkinshaw@trinityhigh.com](mailto:s.birkinshaw@trinityhigh.com)  
0161 2262272 (school)  
0161 2121939 (chaplain's office)

**Thank you for your interest in this research.**

**Appendix D: Consent Form for Individual Interview**

**CONSENT FORM FOR INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW**

**Title of Project:**  
**Spiritual Formation: An Exploration**

**Name of Researcher: Revd Steve Birkinshaw**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated 1<sup>st</sup> January 2011, for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
  
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected.
  
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent/Guardian                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher                      Date                      Signature

**Appendix E: Consent Form for Group Interview**

**CONSENT FORM FOR GROUP MEETING**

**Title of Project:**  
**Spiritual Formation: An Exploration**

**Name of Researcher: Revd Steve Birkinshaw**

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the participant information sheet, dated 1st January 2011, for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
  
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason and without my care or legal rights being affected.
  
3. I agree to take part in the above study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Parent/Guardian                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher                      Date                      Signature

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