Education Matters
Readings in Pastoral Care for School Chaplains, Guidance Counsellors and Teachers
## CONTENTS

**FOREWORD**

### I. HUMANISTIC PASTORAL CARE

- Pastoral Care in Schools *by Dr. James O’Higgins*  
  *Norman*  
  Page 11
- Caring as an Educational Aim *by Dr. Kevin Williams*  
  *(Ireland)*  
  Page 19
- Towards an Understanding of the Adolescent Search for Identity *by Dr. Fionola Cunnane*  
  Page 35
- The Period of Adolescence and School Discipline *by Dr. Maeve Martin*  
  Page 55
- Forging a Path through Multiplicity: A Critique of Adolescent Development *by Dr. Grace O’Grady*  
  Page 69
- An Introduction to Counselling in Schools *by Noreen Sweeney MSc*  
  Page 91
- Caring about Parental Involvement in Schools: Why, who, what and how? *by Dr. Siobhán O’Reilly*  
  Page 113
- Context of Care—Seekers and Refugees in Schools *by Dr. Patrick J. Boyle*  
  Page 135

### II. PROGRAMMATIC PASTORAL CARE

- Supporting Bereaved Young People in School *by Dr. Michelle Y. Pearlman*  
  Page 157
- Companioniing Adolescents into Adulthood *by Dr. Theresa O’Keefe*  
  Page 173
Affective Education in Post Primary Schools
by Dr. Patricia Mannix McNamara 193

Leading Inclusion by Audrey Halpin MSc 207

Playing Your Part: using drama strategies to promote well-being and self-esteem among young people
by Irene White MA 227

Relationships and Sexuality Education: From Policy to Good Practice by Edel Greene Med 241

A Pastoral Response to Adolescent Youth Experiencing Emotional Disturbances
by Dr. Ed Hall 263

III. SPIRITUAL PASTORAL CARE

Addressing Contemporary Spirituality in Education – Identifying Light and Shadow by Dr. Marian de Souza 279

The Religious Socialisation of Young People in Ireland
by Dr. Conor McGuckian, Dr. Christopher A. Lewis, Dr. Sharon Cruise and Dr. John-Paul Sheridan 297

Faith-Based Youth Work and Social Cohesion
by Dr. Nigel Pimlott 321

Chaplains in Schools: Educational and Legal Perspectives
by Dr. Áine Moran 339

Evolving Role and Identity of Chaplains in Schools
by Dr. James O'Higgins Norman 357

Chaplain and Guidance Counsellor as Professional: Some Theological Reflections by Dr. John Murray 371

Nurturing the Prayer Life of Children
by Dr Vivienne Mountain 395
Nurturing the Prayer Life of Children

Vivienne Mountain

Prayer exists, no question about that. It is the peculiarly human response to this endless mystery of bliss and brutality, impersonal might and lyric intimacy that composes our experience of life. This chapter is a brief investigation of the prayer life of children. I am conscious when examining this topic of three aspects of truth in my theological reflection. First, there is the truth from my own experience; second, the truth from my faith background of Scripture and Church; and third, the truth from our contemporary culture of scientific research. I will briefly outline some personal experiences through teaching and learning from children. Then I will acknowledge my faith understanding. The major part of this chapter will focus on scholarly research related to children and prayer. It is my hope that this work will give teachers, chaplains, counsellors and pastoral workers a greater ability to nurture and develop the prayer life of the children in their care – an encouragement to their spiritual life in relation with the Divine.

Truth from Personal Experience

From the perspective of a parent of five lively children, there is a sense of both joy and anxiety in raising them. Children are a blessing, bringing delight, creativity and enthusiasm into a family, but at the same time there is anxiety about making wise choices whilst living in an environment of temptation and the potential for immorality and misfortune. Saying prayers with children became an important part of family life for us.
Around the dining table at meal times, or on special occasions of holidays or times of trial or sadness, children and parents together searched for words to connect our lives with God. Bedtime prayers were a three-way conversation with God, using words of thanks and concern, an important ritual at the end of the day. Making the sign of the cross on a child’s forehead was my ultimate prayer without words. As the children grew to be teenagers who resisted this night time routine, my prayers continued as I stood outside the bedroom door and silently made the sign of the cross.

Moving into a career as a religious education teacher and chaplain, I found prayer to be the easiest and most comfortable part of my work. Children wanted to pray. They wanted to pray their own words, they were keen to pray for others, and they wanted me as an adult to pray for them. Prayer became a place of honest connection and intimacy: We could pray our angry prayers to God, who could understand. We could tell God stories of our confusion and fear. There was also the opportunity to express thanks and re-live joyful moments.

For young children there were many gateways into prayer: lighting a candle, taking off our shoes, controlling our breathing, centring our bodies, using our hands, singing a prayer song, or becoming still and quiet. Often prayers could be expressed more easily in art. Meditation practices and creative reflection became the flipside to our spoken prayers.

In senior school, prayer continued to be an important and powerful connection point between teacher and students. Perhaps this was because in prayer we all become equal; I am no longer the teacher marking assignments and exams but, rather, a fellow traveller with the students. Students took interest in researching prayers from the past and rewriting liturgical prayers in their own language. Prayers written by students for worship, often illustrated with PowerPoint images, provided new creative insights into faith, hope and love.
In my teaching experience with children and prayer I have been very much aware of the importance of Object Relations Theory. The child comes to me with their personal god under their arm. My task is to walk carefully – nurturing the images and awareness of God already there, whilst seeking to extend and develop new dimensions of theology and faith. This is allied to the major area of investigation into children’s spirituality. The interested reader is directed to further literature in this area of study. In the words of Jerome Berryman, children’s spirituality proposes a ‘high view’ of children; as we welcome them, they lead us to Jesus and the One who sent him: ‘The grace children so intensely reveal is the raw energy flowing out from God.’

Truth from the Tradition
When I joined the church as a teenager, prayer became a key feature of my Christian faith. As I moved amongst many churches – Presbyterian, Anglican, Catholic, Salvation Army and Pentecostal – the practice of prayer was seen as a rich and diverse resource. My experience linked with scripture; prayer is at the centre, a visible sign of the relationship between God and humans. We can stand in awe of the depth of connection in the prayers of the Psalms or consider the prayer life of Jesus. There were so many aspects of his life and ministry where prayer was a central focus, an expression of his connection with the Father. Examples abound: from the temptation in the wilderness to the prayer in the garden, both his extreme honesty and mysterious power touch us in our need. Jesus’ prayers for healing show compassion. Blessing prayers over food, bread and wine, or the blessing of the children, offer a sense of the goodness of life, an encouragement for us who follow.

The practice of prayer in private and in the worshipping community is part of the tradition. Prayer is an expression of faith that God is with us and also an expression that we rely on God’s grace as we endeavour to walk in God’s ways.
Truth from the Contemporary Culture
As a teacher and clinical counsellor, I have been influenced by a wide range of scholarly study and live within professional boundaries that are necessary at this point in time in western society. The culture of research and testing is a cornerstone of contemporary scientific thought. I contend that our personal faith life is validated as we engage in professional academic research. This is not easy; the requirements of research are strict and must be monitored with thorough ‘member checking’. I have completed two research projects concerning children that have application for this chapter both of which I will outline here.

Research 1. Investigating the Meaning and Function of Prayer for Children
Prayer is a central element of all religions. Alongside the theological notion of the importance of prayer, recognition of the psychological reality and benefit of prayer for adults has increased. My research investigated the theological and psychological perceptions of prayer held by children, through an investigation of the meaning and function of prayer.

As there is little existing literature on children and prayer, the findings of that study provided valuable new understanding and propose new aspects of theory with implication for professionals involved in the education and the welfare of children. The research reported represents the first Australian research in this area.

The choice of participants in my study reflected the diverse philosophical and religious traditions found in the Australian multi-faith society. Semi-structured interviews were video-recorded with sixty participants from primary school Year Five (10–12 years of age). Five male and five female participants were selected from each of six different schools in the Melbourne metropolitan area, namely: Catholic; Independent (Christian); Christian (Parent-Controlled or Community School); Jewish; Islamic; and government schools. Students completed a drawing exercise and a written sentence completion exercise as part of the interview and the three sources of data were analysed qualitatively using the method of Grounded Theory.
The lengthy analysis process of Grounded Theory involved extensive member checking and verification. Over thirty specialists and colleagues were used in the verification process, checking for interviewer affect as well as the reliability of the analysis. Finally, the data revealed that all sixty children were found to agree on the two categories of meaning and function. The associated properties expanded the categories; these ideas were expressed by a large number of the participants. The summary of findings is reproduced in the chart below, followed by some expansion of the main concepts.

**Summary of Findings**
The meaning of prayer is communication with the good God. The function of prayer is a personal way to perceive and respond to the experiences of life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>Meaning – Prayer is communication with the good God</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PROPERTIES</td>
<td>Understood through faith traditions with defined images of God</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

  - God above, Holy, Lord, Giver of life, and Judge
  - Personal God as: Lover, Healer, Forgiver, Guide, Protector
  - Known in the person of Jesus
  - Understood through personal images of God
  - Expressing social connection with the faith community
  - Expressing personal feelings and hopes

  - Praise – Grief – Need – Guilt
# The Meaning of Prayer

*Finding One: Prayer means connection or communication with God*

The research by Hay, Nye and Coles has suggested that spirituality – the sense of connection with the inner self, with others, with the environment and with God – is an innate human characteristic. This study supports this proposal, in that students from a variety of faith perspectives and family backgrounds report a common understanding of the meaning of prayer. For some it was entwined with their religion: ‘A very important part of Islam’; ‘Because they have faith in Jesus Christ’; ‘A religious act showing you care’. For most participants, personal prayers were seen as deeper than the formal liturgy: ‘Prayers come from within you’; ‘you just know how to pray’; ‘It’s like a baby learning to walk, you just keep trying’; ‘no one needs to teach you’; ‘thinking from your heart’. For all of the participants, prayer was recognised as part of life or a way to respond to life.
Finding Two: Prayer is related to the image of God

The participants coming from schools associated with a faith tradition showed prayer associated with the image of the god of that faith tradition. The image of God as holy and above the earth was reflected in participants from the Muslim school, while participants from the Christian school spoke of God in more familiar terms of ‘Saviour’ and ‘Friend’.

The data from those participants, who professed no religion or religious affiliation, is significant in that it identified the reality of prayer and the reality of the image of God. As the first generation growing up without a formal sense of ‘God’ vis à vis the recognition of God as an agreed cultural assumption, a sense of ‘God’ was still present. This God was recognised as good, possessing attributes of healing, guidance and comfort. This is supported in the literature of Object Relations Theory. The image of God in this case is not determined by the teaching of the faith tradition but is rather viewed as a human psychic connection, an expectation of relationship and love. This concept relates to the psychological understanding of Ulinov that prayer can be viewed as part of relational living, a primary human call to ‘the Other’.

Finding Three: Prayer continues within the secular environment

One example of this discussion was seen as participants were asked to consider the common expression, ‘Oh my God!’ This expression is heard on television and films, usually in situations far removed from experiences of faith traditions. In the case of the exclamation of ‘Oh my God!’ the reality of secular culture comes into tension with the reality of religious faith cultures. The attention participants gave to the ‘Oh my God!’ expression and how it related to the meaning of prayer could be considered an indication of the capacity to hold together the seemingly incompatible ideas of tradition and the modern secular context. Many participants regarded the possibility that the ‘Oh my God!’ expression could be a prayer if the person who utters the expression has appropriate feelings of fear or need.
Finding Four: The meaning of prayer is an inner aspect of life related to feelings and hopes
The data from individual participants show that personal feelings and hopes are expressed as part of the meaning of prayer. For all participants, prayer was regarded as an activity where aspects of personal life could be included. Expressions of need and gratitude were the common elements within confession of sins, personal prayers about problems and illness, intercessory prayer, respect for God and thanksgiving. Within the communal experiences of prayer, participants recognised that opportunity was given for their personal prayers to be offered. Even though the participants from the Jewish and Muslim schools understood the need for a strict ritual, the words and actions were supplemented by the inner intention of the participant.

Finding Five: The meaning of prayer is affected by the environment
The data on the meaning of prayer shows considerable differences between participants involved in the different schools. As mentioned above, this is a complex situation in that the school curriculum or pedagogy should be considered as only one factor alongside family teaching and other environmental forces. Within the limitations of this study, it can be stated that the religious beliefs of the child’s environment does have an effect on various aspects of prayer. Two examples can be seen in the amount of time spent in prayer, and in the type of prayer associated with the image of God as the recipient of prayer. The literature from the different faith traditions presents some variation in the perception of the being of God, which influences the type of prayer. The concept of God varies within and between traditions, including a variety of images such as transcendent and holy or accepting and immanent.
The Function of Prayer

Finding One: Prayer functions as a personal way to perceive life experiences

The word ‘perceive’ has been chosen in the final category emerging from the data, to represent the idea of prayer as a way in which life experiences can be understood by the individual. The identification of the concept of personal perception is related to the finding of the expression of personal feeling as a function of prayer. The data from participants demonstrated the expression of feelings to God in prayer as the most common response. The feelings of joy and gratitude do form part of the data collected, but largely the participants identified the expression of difficult feelings such as grief, sadness, anger, fear and loneliness. A number of participants spoke of the value of prayer as a way to talk about the difficult things they couldn’t tell anyone else. It is possible that prayer was valuable as a safe way to express needs and difficulties. One participant said that prayer was like talking to a favourite toy. Another said that in prayer you could ‘get all of the bad stuff out’. This could be related to the understanding of the developmental need to recognise and express human vulnerability and anxiety. It could also link with the ideas of Hederman, where a relationship is shown between paying attention to the ‘shadow’, that is the personal unacceptable attitudes, and feelings that need to be recognised in order to move through challenging times. Ulanov also used the term ‘shadow’, which is seen through life experiences as difficult forms of self-understanding and feeling which, when acknowledged, can lead to vitality and a new point of view. This concept is expressed in the words of Rahner: ‘Once we have opened out hearts, we no longer seek to escape from ourselves.’ It is possible that the act of praying is a form of catharsis. Prayer may provide a safe place to express strong feelings that are often considered socially inappropriate in other contexts. From this acknowledgement that prayer provides a way to perceive or appraise life experience, prayer can be called a coping mechanism.
Finding Two: Prayer acts as a coping mechanism

From the data above, prayer can be identified as a method of coping or moving through the strong emotional states of life. As stated by Lazarus and Lazarus the fifteen recognisable human emotions are all attached to a personal pattern of meaning and belief. The emotions are grouped: the ‘nasty’ emotions of anger, envy and jealousy; the ‘existential’ emotions of anxiety, fright, guilt and shame; emotions from ‘unfavourable’ life conditions, such as relief, hope, sadness and depression; and emotions from ‘favourable’ life conditions, namely happiness, pride, love and empathic emotions of gratitude, compassion and aesthetic awe. The data shows that prayer is used as a form of response to all of these emotional states. As a way of coping with the ‘nasty’ emotions there is the prayer of confession where ‘it’s like telling someone we really trust’ and a way of ‘getting everything bad out of your head’.

Participants most commonly reported the use of personal prayer to appraise and examine unfavourable life conditions and existential emotions. A few examples of this are: ‘People pray if they are upset, they want something set right or they are angry’; ‘Just talking to God helps you’; ‘They need God’s love … they need help’; ‘People with an easier life don’t pray as much.’ On the other hand, the emotions of favourable life experiences led to prayers of thanksgiving and praise. The emotions of empathy were expressed as intercessory prayer or praise. Although prayer could be used negatively as a form of denial or ‘disavowal of reality’, it seems from the data that prayer acted as a positive ‘distancing’ mechanism, through which the perceived negative situation could be reassessed. Pargament stated the positive possibility within prayer thus: ‘the religious world helps people face their personal limitations and go beyond themselves for solutions … the most central of all qualities of coping is possibility.’ The data from this study supports this concept, as participants recognised prayer as a context in which many different emotional states could be brought to God, whom they recognise as good.
The idea of God as good, as someone to be trusted, as the Creator, as the One who understands, as the One who heals and, for some, as the One who works miracles, is linked in the data. It is possible that the positive image of God in relationship with participants through prayer, led them to a new appraisal of their situation. With God present there was a possibility that be something good could be found within the difficult feelings associated with perceived negative life experiences. In this way, the old pattern of stimulus leading to response is replaced by stimulus being affected by ‘organismic variables’ before the response.” Many forms of ‘organismic variables’ are possible, leading to different levels of ability to cope with the negatively perceived stimulus. Pargament suggests that various religious activities act as forms of connectedness, enhancing the coping capacity of the individual when dealing with difficult life experiences. The experience of connectedness is complex and polyvalent; it could refer to connection to the inner emotions of the self, connection to others through the faith community and/or connection to the transcendent image of God.

It seems likely that prayer acting as a link to the good, caring God, could be one way to reappraise a negative situation, looking with a different perspective at the good possibilities within that situation. This links with the major thesis of Hay who defines spirituality as ‘relational consciousness’. In prayer there is awareness of a relationship with the transcendent and a sense of connection that helps to reappraise the challenging experiences of human existence. All of the sacred texts from the traditions involved in this study make reference to this aspect of faith in the God who is there and who cares for ‘his’ human creatures (the Bible, Torah and the Qu’ran). The participants made many references to this thinking pattern throughout the interviews, for example: ‘Behind every bad thing there is always a good thing … keep praying’; ‘God has a plan … the cycle of life … God knows … in safe hands’; ‘When I do it quietly to myself … it gives me a good feeling, thinking that you are really next to God … talking to him’; ‘They pray because they think … I am a person, no one can take that privilege away from me … God is there to help me … to love me … He’s a father’.
Finding Three: Prayer functions as a personal way to respond to life experiences

As an extension of the concept that prayer acts as a way to perceive and understand, prayer was also understood by many participants as a way to respond to life experiences. These were usually the uncontrollable experiences of life; the most common experiences expressed in the data related to issues of illness, death and separation. When a participant’s mother had cancer, prayer was used; when a pet dog died, the participant prayed; when a participant was injured, prayer helped. As one participant said, prayer was something to do when there was nothing else to do. This could be linked to the concept of prayer in Godin, who claims that prayer can hold both a ‘manipulative aim’ and an ‘expressive aim’.

Many prayers from the participants had the manipulative aim of changing the circumstances of life, asking God to do something. This was shown through the many prayers requesting healing for family members, or the prayers from one participant who asked God to prevent his parents from separating. However, other prayers were linked to the ‘expressive aim’ of linking to God who could understand and in some ways share the experiences of life. One participant spoke of prayer that ‘keeps me going’ through his struggle with asthma, and another saw prayer as taking him through the gates of heaven to be close to God. A third participant, when talking about ‘unanswered prayer’, said that life ‘comes from God … we can’t do anything about it … just praise to Allah’.
Finding Four: Prayer has a community building and identity formation function

Prayer was shown through the data as a community activity in the majority of cases. As discussed earlier, many of the subjects from the independent and government schools indicated that they had very little contact with any form of organised religious worship, and yet these children recognised prayer as part of Church life. For the participants from the Catholic, Christian, Jewish and Muslim schools, the experience of prayer within the worshipping community was expressed in all of the interviews.

The place of the community in defining and endorsing prayer was most obvious in the data from the participants from the Jewish and the Muslim schools, as they considered communal prayer as the ‘normal’ way to pray. The Jewish ritual was always conducted in Hebrew and the Muslim prayer ritual was always conducted in Arabic. The participants from these two schools expressed awareness that they were learning the language, and could only join in prayer to the degree to which the language was known. There was a common understanding that the prayers of children needed to be supplemented by the adult community, as children’s grasp of the language was limited. Some participants from these groups were aware of other forms of prayer, but the family, school and worship centre combined to encourage the traditional rituals for the group. This did not mean that the prayer ritual was considered complete in itself, for individual prayer in the heart or in the mind and the proper intention were understood to be important parts of the formal ritual.

Finding Five: Expressing praise and thanksgiving is a function of prayer

Asking and thanking have been considered from the literature of the faith traditions to be two aspects of the relationship with God expressed in prayer. Thanksgiving and praise were mentioned by all participants from the schools of the Muslim and Christian traditions, with particular reference to the appreciation of the faith tradition. The idea of Jesus’ love and salvation were dominant aspects of praise amongst participants in the Christian school, while praise and thanksgiving were given to Allah in his high position as Creator in the Islamic tradition. These findings agree with the literature reviewed by Rahner and Abdalati. For a large number of participants from all school groups, thanksgiving formed a part of the function of prayer. A selection of quotations shows some of this understanding: ‘Rich people pray for ... like thanks’; ‘You feel joyful inside’; ‘Like talking to one of your friends ... just talking to God and Mary’; ‘I love Simhat Torah ... the men dancing
and singing'; 'Just thanks for the gift of life'.
It is possible that the use of thanksgiving in prayer could be associated with the coping theory. As the God to whom prayers are addressed is recognised as the good giver of life, so the prayers in times of distress (when addressed to this same God) can be appraised more easily as having some good purpose or hidden meaning. The thanksgiving function of prayer in this way fits with the perception and response to life as a totality, and both good and seemingly bad experiences can be brought together in the prayer relationship with God.

**Recommendations arising from this study**

i. Prayer should be taught and practised in religious education.

ii. Prayer should be taught with a multi-faith awareness.

iii. Pedagogy should reflect an awareness of children’s spirituality.

iv. Children should be involved in aspects of ritual and symbol.

**Recommendations for professionals involved in the helping professions related to resilience in children – teachers, child psychologists, welfare workers**

i. Prayer is a coping mechanism.

ii. Prayer should be given greater recognition as an activity with psychological importance.
Recommendations for those involved professionally in the development of children’s spirituality

i. A relationship with God through prayer is part of children’s spirituality.  
ii. The religious community and communal prayer are part of children’s spirituality. In closing this section, some of the words of children demonstrate their sincere and often creative ideas (with one quote from each of the different school groups).

What is prayer?
‘[Like] walking into heaven … a special thing you can do.’ ‘Like telling something to someone you really trust.’ ‘It brings you closer to your God … great feeling of contentment … you feel like a good person.’ ‘You can’t exactly compare them [different religious traditions] … they are completely different … I think all prayers are the same, except they just say it in a different way – this is my God, I love him, he’s the only one – that’s what they all probably say.’ ‘It’s something everyone does and religious people do more.’

What does prayer do?
‘When you open the Sidur … prayers float into your mind … they hover there, then they float up to heaven.’ ‘Prayer probably comes off you like a thought ray … a sixth sense … like sharks have electro-sensitivity.’ ‘Prayers help you spiritually … not on the outside but on the inside, like if someone teases you that’s on the inside.’ ‘If we pray, our God builds up palaces for us in heaven.’

‘With your problem, he just gives you a hint of how to fix it up.’ ‘Eyes shut helps you get close to God.’

Research 2: Children and the Church
This study sought to assess aspects of the Child Theology Movement that are considered relevant to those in leadership with children in selected churches in Melbourne, Australia. The Child Theology Movement” has arisen from the words of Jesus, ‘Except you change and become like a little child you will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven’, and the associated action of Jesus placing a child ‘in the midst’. The child in the story is not special in any way; it is a child alone without family or religious context, without reference to special need, ability or gender. The image of Jesus with children is one of the most common depictions, celebrated visually in paintings and stained glass; this thesis questions the relevance of this image in the contemporary Church. In the face of the current child abuse scandal and the falling number of
children reported as attending churches, the Child Theology Movement stirs new interest and questioning. As White suggests, this story of Jesus with the child is a possible ‘seed’ in scripture whose time has now come to shoot and grow as a new focus of theology, in some ways similar to Feminist Theology or Liberation Theology.
In the design of this study the churches selected were those who employed a specialist children’s pastor. These pastors came from eight churches representing various protestant traditions: Anglican, Assemblies of God, Baptist, Churches of Christ, Christian City Church, Salvation Army and Uniting Church in Australia. It was hoped that these selected leaders would provide a fundamental understanding of the place of children in the Church. The senior ministers in these Churches were also interviewed. The viewpoints of the senior ministers were considered an extension of the views of the children’s pastors, and provide a wider perspective of care for the whole Church. Using Grounded Theory, the data was collected and analysed. The individual participant checked each interview summary, and the final analysed data was presented to a Focus Group for further correction, extension and interpretation.
Findings
Again using the careful analysis process of Grounded Theory, three findings were identified from the data:

Finding One: The Child Theology Movement has relevance for personal discipleship.

Finding Two: The Child Theology Movement has positive significance for the Church.

Finding Three: The blessing of children should take higher priority than the teaching of repentance.

Summary of Finding One
The following six supporting properties explain and amplify the category. The numbers associated with each property are an indication of the number of participants who identified this property. For example, in number 1, 2 and 3 all participants recognised some of these properties. The final numbers on the list contained properties that were identified by the majority of participants but not by all:

1. Children recognise the centrality of relationship
   – Friendship, acceptance of others, caring, getting over it (forgiveness), relationship with God, spiritual connection of empathy with others.

2. Children are open to the new – showing qualities of trust, humility, questioning, willingness to learn, simple faith, open-hearted, accepting, readiness for life, courageous, capable.

3. Children are open to mystery – awe, wonder, presence of the Holy Spirit, wisdom, miracles, joy, insight.

4. Children are honest – natural, simple, naïve, not cynical, innocent, focused, gifted, curious, questioning.


6. Children have imagination and creativity – seeing spiritual connection, fun and experimentation.
When considering the reported properties of this first finding the sense of connection with God and connection with others is central. Although prayer was not mentioned specifically by all participants, the link can be seen with relationship to God, the attitude of openness to the new and openness to mystery. Many stories of children praying were related by the participants, often confounding adults with their honesty and insight. As a conclusion to this section, some of these stories are related below:

‘We have time for “God spacing” (like Christian meditation) – children are encouraged to take time for quiet and listening to what God wants to say to them. They draw and write and it is exciting when they know that God speaks to them – this is different from just telling them. It gets me.’

‘I can also sometimes see children genuinely joining in worship – not contrived or forced but a real, natural worship from the heart of the child, connecting with their creator.’

‘I am noticing my RE kids and after-school club – we are in an unchurched area – but children just make the links; they put together the faith ideas, the whole idea of God, they can accept the unexpected or unusual – they say “wow, I get that”.’

‘One of our boys in Grade One said quite simply, with no doubt, “God spoke to me and after tonight I don’t have to worry about my wheat allergy.” This obviously meant I had to talk with the parents – it was a significant allergy. He tested it out with his parents’ permission. God had spoken to him, there was no doubt in his mind that God heals (I didn’t influence him, didn’t speak about it). It was quite amazing – he was convinced that God spoke with him.’

“We were fiddling with the TV antenna (we wanted to watch the footy) my youngest went to the toilet and prayed – sure enough Channel 7 started working. He didn’t tell me till bedtime “I said a prayer, Mum, that the TV would work”.

‘Sunday night we had testimonies and praise. It was slow. I was wrapping
up and then a young brother and sister came up [in front of ] three hundred people, big lights, up on stage. The eight-year-old told how she had asked God to show her at school who she should pray for.

Then the eleven-year old said he was afraid of things and anxious. He said God told him not to be afraid, that he can do things, even get up here and talk like this. Everyone just went nuts, who could say anything in church after that. I learnt a lot from that, the reality of God’s activity. I just shut up and was challenged with my lack of faith.’

(These stories show the children’s perception of the power of pray that in turn can be associated with the beliefs of their church community.)

Conclusion
This chapter has looked at the place of prayer for children from three perspectives: the personal experience of the author; some understanding from the Christian tradition; and from two research projects.

The first research study into the meaning and function of prayer for children led to recommendations for those teaching religious education, for those working in the secular sphere with children and for those interested in developing children’s spirituality. This research highlighted the very common use of prayer by children. Of the sixty participants, twenty came from homes and schools not associated with a religious tradition, yet all of these children had prayed and all spoke quite easily and naturally about prayer. The other highlight was the use of prayer to help in the difficulties of life. Some children said, ‘I don’t believe in “God” but there is something up there’. Before this study commenced, the researcher had anticipated that in the increasingly secular society some children might view prayer as old-fashioned or an activity for the religious. But this was not the case.
The second research project was not specifically focused on prayer, but prayer was part of the assessment of childhood life. Relationship with God was considered a special part of childhood, and prayer was part of this relationship.

There is much further discussion possible, but these research findings awaken in us, as adults, a respect for the possibility of prayer in the life of children. The seemingly natural ways in which children reach out in communication with God could be viewed as relational consciousness in a similar way to the child reaching out to parents. We are left with the question: Is prayer an overlooked natural resource for children.

Notes
16. Ibid., 166.