

## ARTICLE

## What Do Children Think of God?

### New Data on Childhood Images of the Divine

#### I. Introduction

Many individuals have been interested in the ways that children make sense of their faith. James Fowler<sup>1</sup>, whose stages of faith were based on theorists such as Piaget<sup>2</sup> and Erikson<sup>3</sup>, and his interviews with individuals of various ages, is particularly noteworthy. Reasoning that children would make sense of their faith much as they make sense of the world, Fowler incorporated Piaget's stages of learning and Erikson's stages of relationship building, relationship to self, others, and the world. Other investigators, such as Sofia Cavalletti<sup>4,5</sup> and Jerome Berryman,<sup>6</sup> sought ways to use children's increasing awareness of the world and the message of the Gospel to promote better understanding of their faith and its application to their lives, even at young ages. In her book *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, Stonehouse<sup>7</sup> provides insights to both parents and teachers on how they nurture faith in childhood.

The various Christian denominations emphasize different aspects of their faith. After children have been taught in their denominations' religious education programs, they would be expected to articulate the basic tenets of their tradition. It is not known if, at certain ages, Christian children will respond to various questions in a similar manner, regardless of denomination, especially if the questions are not those which are routinely presented or asked in their respective religious education programs. This could have important implications

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<sup>1</sup> James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: the Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1981).

<sup>2</sup> Dorothy G. Singer and Tracey A. Revenson, eds. *A Piaget Primer: How a Child Thinks* (New York: New American Library, 1978).

<sup>3</sup> Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child: 6-12 Years Old* (Oak Park, IL: Catechesis of the Good Shepherd Publications, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Jerome J. Berryman, *Godly Play* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998).

for interdenominational or ecumenical projects in which children could be involved, projects that build on what Christians have in common.

The Roman Catholic tradition, for example, has a long and rich legacy of religious education for children. There are multiple curricula from which directors of religious education can choose to help even the youngest children learn the basic tenets of the Catholic faith. Although children might be formally tested to assess their knowledge about Catholicism, their own beliefs might be elicited only informally, if at all. Many catechists feel that they have more information to present than they have time to do so. Children's own ideas about God, themselves, or God's relationship to the world might be elicited as a by-product of a discussion about Catholic tenets, but are usually not specifically sought on their own merit.

This current study is one of the largest surveys to date of children's ideas about God and God's relationship to people and the world. The purpose of this article is to present the views of approximately 7000 children with regard to God and God's relationship with the world. The working hypothesis was that Christian children and teens respond to non-denominational questions in age- and gender-specific ways that are more alike than dissimilar. These responses have implications for (1) the way teachers and catechists instruct children of various ages, and (2) the opportunities that children of various Christian denominations might have to learn together or to work on service projects together.

## **II. Methods**

The questionnaire was initially developed as part of the author's doctoral work in ministry. As a pediatrician, she was interested in the spiritual beliefs of all children, especially those who are ill, grieving, or suffering any kind of loss. An ecumenical (Christian) panel worked with her as she developed seven questions which, the panel agreed, would not have been directly presented in their denominations' religious education classes. A draft of the original questionnaire was given to several elementary school-age students for their feedback. Based on their suggestions for clarification and rewording, the final questionnaire was approved by the panel.

Since almost nothing was known about how the children would answer these questions, it was decided to present the questions in an open-ended fashion, rather than giving students forced options to choose for answers. In that way, the unrestricted ideas of the children surveyed could be elicited.

The seven questions follow.

**Q. 1. "When you hear the word 'God,' what do you think of?"**

This question sought to evoke a child's spontaneous word or thought association with the word "God."

**Q. 2. "If you had to explain God to someone who never heard of God, what would you say?"**

This is an exploration of a child's description of God to someone who did not know God. In other words, what is God's most important attribute?

**Q. 3. "If you were God, what kind of prayer would you like to hear?"**

This question served as a proxy measure about the child's own favorite prayer.

**Q. 4. "Jesus told the grown-ups who lived when he did that they would not get to heaven if they were not more like children. What do you think Jesus liked so much about children?"**

This question examined what each child thought Jesus' words meant. This was important in examining a child's impression of being a child, especially how God regarded them.

**Q. 5. "Is there a special secret God is trying to tell people? If so, what is it?"**

This question was meant to see if a child believed that God was trying to tell human beings something important, and if so, what it was.

**Q. 6. "What do children know about God that grown-ups have forgotten?"**

This question sought to elicit a child's ideas of what, in his or her experience, he or she knew about God that the grown-ups in his or her life did not seem to know. The question does not imply that adults never had this information, but only that they had forgotten it.

**Q. 7. "If you could get God to answer one question, what one question would you ask God?"**

This question sought to elicit what one thing was so important to a child that he or she wanted an immediate answer to a question about it. (N.B. Because of the great variety of responses to this question, it will be discussed in a separate article.)

Because the author of this article does many presentations on the spirituality of children, she requested that each school or church for which she offered the presentation have their students complete the questionnaire before

her presentation to parents and / or teachers. In this way, she could make the presentation personal for each audience, by using the words of their own children to illustrate points on development. To avoid having to ask young children what denomination they were, the different denominations had different colored paper assigned to them (i.e., green for Lutheran, pink for Presbyterians, white for Catholic, and blue for Pentecostals). As an aside, initially, only Catholic parishes and schools participated, but as word of the survey spread, educational establishments of other denominations asked to participate in preparation for the author's presentation to them. Even so, over 80% of the responses are from Catholic students.

The survey was self-administered when children were in first grade age and above. For younger children and first graders whose reading and writing skills would not permit them to complete the survey themselves, the questions were asked of them by either an adult (not a parent) or an older student (not a sibling), who recorded their answers faithfully. This faithful rendition included writing "I don't know" or no answer, if that is what the child responded. Teachers and the aforementioned scribes were instructed not to coach students in any way, and, for the most part, teachers had not seen the surveys until the time when their students received them. Parents were informed (ahead of time) that their children were completing an anonymous questionnaire about their ideas about God and God's relationship to the world, but they did not see the actual questions to avoid any temptations for them to coach their children. Teachers were instructed not to permit the students to complete the questionnaires as a group, and students were instructed to do their own work on the survey. Although questionnaires were completed anonymously, information on age and gender was requested.

One individual coded each answer on the questionnaires for inclusion in the data base. A second individual spot-checked about 20% of the questionnaires. Inter-coder reliability was >90%. Tables of responses were prepared by grouping similar responses together.

This article describes approximately the responses to approximately 7000 questionnaires. Only the top five responses at each age will be mentioned for each question for the four groups (Catholic, Lutheran, Presbyterian, and Pentecostal). Since there were so many Catholic students, their responses will also be highlighted separately. Miscellaneous, idiosyncratic answers were commonly seen throughout the age range, without any gender differences.

As mentioned earlier, the question asking what one question the child had for God will not be discussed in this article. The questions that children have for God are so varied that they were much more difficult to neatly categorize than were the responses to the other questions. For example, although children might

be interested in what happened to a deceased loved one, the question will be different for a deceased parent versus a deceased classmate. An another example, although children who are ill ask God why that must be so, children whose illnesses are terminal ask different questions than do children with chronic, ever-present illnesses, and these are different than those posed by children with chronic illnesses that are episodic.

### III. Results

#### Q. 1. "When you hear the word 'God,' what do you think of?"

##### i) Overall

##### a) 5 to 8 year olds

*Examples of the most common responses: "Love, love, love;" "Forgives us;" "Jesus."*

The most common answer was "love" or "forgiveness" across denominations. All four groups were likely to have "Jesus" or "heaven" as one of their leading responses, and this did not vary by gender.

Presbyterian children were the only ones to respond with "church" as one of their top five responses (16%), while Catholic children were the only ones to respond with "holiness," "special," or "creator" as one of their top five responses (12%). A significant percentage (21%) of Pentecostal children mentioned "power", "king", and the "cross" in their responses, which were given by almost no other children in this age group. With regard to this last finding, virtually all the "cross" responses were given by girls, and virtually all the "power" or "king" responses were given by boys. There were no other marked gender differences for this age group.

##### b) 9 years and older

*Examples of the most common responses: "The creator;" "Love, because God is love;" "Forgiveness, when we do wrong."*

There was no single most common response across denominations, although "love" or "forgiveness" was given by 25% of both the Catholic and Pentecostal children, with girls more likely to do so than boys. Other common responses across denomination included "church," "religion," "heaven," or "creator."

Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Pentecostal children commonly responded with "power," "king," or "ruler," while almost none of the Catholic students gave that response, and with regard to gender, girls were less likely to give such

a response than were boys. Girls who were Lutheran were much more likely to note that God was someone who “helped,” “watched over,” or “took care of” them than were girls from the other denominations (12% vs., 5% Catholic, <3% Presbyterian, and 0% Pentecostal) or boys from any denomination.

ii) Catholic students only

*Most common responses: “He’s holy;” “He made everything;” “He’s perfect;” “Jesus.”*

Overall, Catholic students were likely to respond with “creator,” “holiness,” or “perfection.” “Jesus” was a common response for Catholic students (13%), as it was for Pentecostal (15%) children, but it was an infrequent response among Presbyterian (<5%) and Lutheran (6%) children. There were no striking gender differences.

iii) Implications

Educators are wise to solicit children’s ideas about God, encouraging speculation and not just the expected answers. To teach students about the breadth of God’s attributes and to avoid any gender-specific themes, it is good to encourage discussion of God’s great love with boys as well as girls, and God as creator with girls as well as boys. Perhaps boys could be asked to name ways that God shows love, and girls could be asked to identify particularly magnificent examples of God’s creation. Teachers might ask students to give word descriptions of God, and ask them to explain (or draw in the case of younger children) any that seem unusual. As teachers, we are called to be open to new ideas, but we should also be ready to inquire about associations that children volunteer. For example, the association between God and “church” can be positive (e.g., we worship God in church) or negative (e.g., God has a lot of rules, and so does the church).

**Q. 2. “If you had to explain God to someone who never heard of God, what would you say?”**

i) Overall

a) 5 to 8 year olds

*Examples of the most common responses: “He’s always there to help us;” “He loves us very much;” “He always forgives us;” “He is holy/special.”*

The most common answers were someone who “is always there to help us,” “loves us,” “forgives us,” or “is holy or special” across denominations.

Although 16% of Catholic, 9 % of Lutheran, and 11% of Presbyterian children were likely to respond with “creator,” less than 4% of Pentecostal

children of this age gave this response. In contrast, they were the only group of children who responded with “Jesus,” “power,” or “king of the world” to this question in percentages greater than 10% (compared with approximately 5% for the other groups), while (a few) Catholic children were the only children to respond “the father of us all.”

b) 9 years and older

*Examples of the most common responses: “He is always there when we need him;” “He loves us – always;” “He forgives us, even when we do wrong;” “He is holy.”*

The same trends held, except that “creator” was now mentioned by 14% of Pentecostal children.

Like the younger children, “Jesus” was not provided as a leading answer by the Catholic, Lutheran, or Presbyterian children. Except for Pentecostal girls, no other group of girls mentioned “power” or “king of the world” (14% vs. approximately 4%), while all groups of boys did so. In fact, it was the most common response (22%) of Pentecostal boys. For both Pentecostal girls and boys, “power” was more frequently given than “someone who helps us” as an answer to this question, although it was more common among the boys (22% vs. 3%) than it was for the girls (14% vs. 11%). “Power” was not a more frequent response than “help” among the other children.

ii) Catholic students only

*Examples of the most common responses: “God made us and everything around us;” “God loves us always;” “God is always with us; he never goes away.”*

God as “creator” was the one of the most frequent response for Catholic children 8 years and older, with the percentage of boys outnumbering that of girls before the teen years. On the other hand, God as the One who “loves us all” was the other top response for all age groups through 13 years old, with the percentage of girls always outnumbering that of boys for each age group.

God as the One who is “always there” was a very frequent response of girls (but not necessarily boys) across all age groups, while God as a “powerful” being or “king” was a very common response of boys 9 through 14 years old (and rarely by girls of any age). God as “special” or “holy” was a response given mostly by 6 to 8 year olds, with no gender difference.

iii) Implications

As was true with the previous question, we are wise to encourage children and teens to be creative when they think about who God is, especially when they think of God in terms of love, holiness, power, and creative ability. As teachers,

we are called to emphasize the vastness of God's being and that we can never completely name all God's attributes. For children old enough to do so, perhaps a good class assignment would be for students to write their own descriptions of God.

**Q. 3. "If you were God, what kind of prayer would you like to hear?"**

i) Overall

a) 5 to 8 year olds

*Examples of the most common responses: "The Our Father;" "grace;" "a nice/good prayer."*

The most frequent responses were "Our Father," a standard prayer (e.g., grace before meals), a "nice" or "good" prayer, a prayer of thanksgiving, a prayer for others, and a prayer expressing love for God. Children of all four denominations noted that God would want to hear a prayer for other people.

Pentecostal children were more likely to respond with a prayer of "sorrow" or "adoration / praise" to this question than were Lutheran or Presbyterian children (13% vs. 0%). Although the "Our Father" was mentioned by all children, it was the leading response (27%) by the Catholic children. Although it was rare for Catholic (4%) or Pentecostal (4%) children to respond "I don't know" to this question, it was very common for Presbyterian (22%) and Lutheran (16%) children to do so. There were no obvious gender differences in responses.

b) 9 years and older

*Examples of the most common responses: "Praying for other people;" "praying to say thank you;" "Our Father;" "it's up to the one who's praying"*

The "Our Father" was mentioned infrequently by children other than Catholic children, for whom this was their leading response (24%). Common responses were "praying for others" and "prayers of thanks." Instead of preferring standard prayers, children of this age group were more likely to respond "it's up to the one praying" than were their younger cohort. The percentage of children responding with "nice" or "good" prayer decreased sharply, as it also did for prayers for oneself. In terms of gender, except for Pentecostal boys, girls from the other three denominations responded with a prayer of love twice as often as did the corresponding boys. Almost no one responded "do not know" to this question.

ii) Catholic students only



*Examples of the most common responses: "Our Father;" "Sign of the Cross;" "Hail Mary;" "a nice/good prayer" (younger children); "a thank you prayer."*

The "Our Father" was the number one response for Catholic children 7 through 12 years of age (and the number two response for children aged 5 and 6 years), with the percentage of boys outnumbering that of girls across age groups. A standard prayer (e.g., grace, the Sign of the Cross, the "Hail Mary") was the most common response for 5 and 6 year olds, and the second most common response until age 9; it was also a common answer for 10 and 11 year old boys (but not girls or children older than 11 years).

A "nice" or "good" prayer was a frequent response of children 8 years old and younger, but was given rarely for older children. The same was true for a prayer expressing "love" for God, which was seen commonly in 5 to 8 year olds, especially girls. This response was very uncommon among children 10 to 14 year of age.

Prayers expressing thanks were more frequently mentioned as children aged, with a steady increase from the youngest to the oldest. Prayers for others were mentioned after the age of 7 years across the remaining age groups, with a roughly equal gender balance, although for some ages, there were a slightly higher percentage of girls giving that response. Prayers expressing sorrow for doing something wrong appeared only after age 10 years, with no gender difference. Finally, "it's up to the one praying" was a frequent response only after the age of 8 years; the percentage of girls outnumbers that of boys in this response until the teenage years, when the gender percentages are equal.

### iii) Implications

It is imperative for all teachers – regardless of denomination – to encourage children and teens to think about their own prayer lives. When teachers and catechists talk about prayer, they can highlight prayers for others, prayers expressing thanks, and prayers expressing sorrow for wrongs done for all age groups, explaining why these prayers are important. Teachers and catechists can encourage children and teens of both genders to express their love of God in prayer, emphasizing that there is nothing wimpy about doing so!

Catholic teachers can celebrate not only the formal prayers of the Catholic tradition (which children certainly need to learn) but also the children's and teens' spontaneous prayers. Catholic teachers should not forget to mention the Mass as the most excellent prayer; **no** respondent out of nearly 6000 Catholic students mentioned the Mass (or any part of it, except the "Our Father") as a prayer that God would want to hear.

Since prayers of adoration or praise were rarely mentioned by the 6000 children and teens, teachers are wise to include them in the repertoire of class

prayers, perhaps even having an assignment that encourages students to devise their own prayers of praise and adoration. Above all, encouraging spontaneous prayer of all kinds in students will help them to become more comfortable with communicating with God about a variety of joys, sorrows, needs, and concerns. This will serve them well throughout their lives.

**Q. 4. “Jesus told the grown-ups who lived when he did that they would not get to heaven if they were not more like children. What do you think Jesus liked so much about children?”**

i) Overall

a) 5 to 8 year olds

*Examples of the most common responses: “We’re good to other people;” “We are happy/fun;” “We like to play games;” “We want to learn from/listen to/believe in/obey him.”*

Common responses across denominations were that children “are good to others;” “are happy” “fun,” or “playful;” are willing to “learn” or “listen” to him; “believe in” or “obey” him; and “God loves everybody.”

The leading responses from the Pentecostal children centered on love – their love for Jesus and God’s love for people (44% combined). Twenty-one percent of Lutheran and 26 % of Presbyterian boys wrote “don’t know” to this question, compared to 7% of Catholic and 7% of Pentecostal boys. Interestingly, 9% of Presbyterian children responded that Jesus liked children so much because “they were not sinners yet,” a response not given by other children this age. There were no marked gender differences in responses.

b) 9 years and older

*Examples of the most common responses: “They are happy;” “They like to play;” “They are willing to learn from him;” “They listen to him and obey him;” “They’re not yet sinners;” “They’re innocent.”*

Responses of “not yet sinners” or “innocent” were common and appeared across denominations. Responses were otherwise very much like those given by the younger children, except the love theme figured much less prominently (8%) in the older Pentecostal children than in the younger ones. There were no other substantial differences across denominations or gender.

ii) Catholic students only

*Examples of the most common responses: “They are good to other people;” “They are nice and happy;” “They like to laugh and play;” “Children want to learn from him;” “Children believe in him;” “They’re not yet sinners;” “They’re innocent.”*

Children are “good (or nice) to others” was the leading response across all age groups until the teen years; there was no gender difference. A common response until the teen years was that children are “happy,” “playful,” or “fun,” and there was no gender difference. “Children love to learn” was a common response for children from 7 to 13 years of age, without any gender differences. “God loves everybody” and “children love Jesus” were common responses among 5 to 9 year old children (no gender difference), but very uncommon thereafter.

As for the older children and teens (who, parenthetically, always referred to children in the 3<sup>rd</sup> person, while children younger than 10 referred to children in the 1<sup>st</sup> person), “children believe in him” was a common response, especially among girls. However, the top answer among older children and teens was that children are “innocent” or “aren’t sinners yet,” with the percentage of girls outnumbering that of boys. As with other questions, “don’t know” was almost always given by boys, across all age groups.

iii) Implications

Religious educators are called to encourage children’s sense of fun and playfulness; after all, if children believe that these are the reasons that Jesus likes them, we should, too! Teachers can capitalize on the children’s love of learning, especially as it relates to God. As we emphasize God’s love for them, we can ask them about the ways that they show love to God and other people.

Because the notion of childhood innocence was so frequently noted by older children and teens, teachers are wise to permit older children and teens to discuss their ideas of how their peers have lost their innocence or how they have sinned; it is especially important for teachers to refrain from judging responses that are given. In particular, Catholic teachers and catechists can compassionately ask if there are ways to regain that innocence, encouraging them to reflect on that idea and the meaning of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

**Q. 5. “Is there a special secret God is trying to tell people? If so, what is it?”**

i) Overall

a) 5 to 8 year olds

*Examples of the most common responses: “Love other people;” “God loves us;” “Be good.”*

The most common response for Catholic (25% of girls, 20% of boys), Lutheran (28% of girls, 21% of boys), and Presbyterian (41% of girls, 13% of boys) children was to “love others” compared with 5% of Pentecostal boys and girls.

For the Pentecostal children, the most common response for boys was “listen to” or “believe in” God (19%) and for girls “God always loves us” (25%) the latter a common response by other children as well. “Listen,” “be good,” or “believe” was given by few other children in this age group from the other denominations. A number of Presbyterian and Lutheran children responded “yes” (i.e., there is a special secret), but did not reveal what that secret was. Interestingly, approximately 5% of girls and 7% of boys responded “no” or “nothing” (i.e., there is no special secret), some even writing that God loves us too much to keep secrets from us. There were no obvious gender differences.

b) 9 years and older

*Examples of the most common responses: “Love others;” “God always loves us;” “Listen to him; believe in him.”*

“Love others” was given by a significant proportion of Catholic (24% girls, 21% boys), Lutheran (26% girls, 22% boys), and Presbyterian (14% girls, 9% boys) children, but by very few Pentecostal children (6%).

In contrast, Pentecostal children were still more likely to respond with “listen” or “believe” (19%) than were Catholic or Lutheran children, although the percentage of Presbyterian children making this response (16%) made it their second highest choice. “No” or “nothing” as a response was more common among Pentecostal and Presbyterian children. “God always love us” was more often given by girls at this age. A small percentage (6-7%) of Presbyterian and Lutheran boys of this age felt that the special secret was to “treat the earth well,” a theme that came up only rarely for Catholics and not at all for Pentecostal children. There were no other obvious gender differences.

ii) Catholic students only

*Examples of the most common responses: “Love others; be nice to others;” “God always loves us;” God always forgives us;” “Do the right things;” “Stop hating and hurting each other.”*

“Love others” or “be nice to others” was the number one response across all age groups, with the percentage of girls outnumbering boys for each age group. “God always loves us” or “God always forgives us” was a very common response for all age groups; up to age 12 years, the percentage of girls outnumbered that of boys, while in the teenage years, there was no gender difference. “Be good” or “do the right things” was common across all age groups; prior to the teen years, there was no gender difference, while in the teen years, the percentage of boys outnumbered that of girls. As had been the pattern

for other questions, “don’t know” was given by a much higher percentage of boys than girls.

iii) Implications

The amazing thing about these answers is that *none* of them are “secrets” in any denomination. In fact, they should be pretty well known! Children might think they are secrets because they do not see everyday evidence of adults living according to them. Teachers and catechists are wise to encourage discussion by all students about God’s message to us and highlight God’s love for us and God’s desire that we love each other; since these are the most common responses provided by children and teens, the discussion should be rich. Teachers and catechists can remind students that although God will always forgive, it is important for us to be good, not so much to avoid punishment but to show God how much we love him. This would be a good opportunity for Catholic catechists to highlight the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist, as examples of Christ’s love, asking students how they reciprocate that love.

**Q. 6. “What do children know about God that grown-ups have forgotten?”**

i) Overall

a) 5 to 8 year olds

*Examples of the most common responses: “God loves everybody;” “God is always next to us;” “God made everything in the whole world;” “We should talk to God and not just in church.”*

Common answers were that “God loves everybody,” “God is always with us,” “we should talk to God,” “God created everything,” “Jesus is real,” “Bible stories” or “hymns.”

Except for Catholic children, “don’t know” was a very common response to this question; between 20% and 26% of boys said “don’t know”, as did 38% of Presbyterian and 19% of Lutheran girls). A number of children wrote as an answer: “How can kids know something grown-ups don’t?” There were no obvious denominational or gender differences in terms of response.

b) 9 years and older

*Examples of the most common responses: “God is always with us, no matter where we are;” “God loves us always, and I mean every one of us;” “God forgives us – all the time;” “God made everything that we love.”*

God’s love, God’s creative ability, and God’s ever-presence were, again, common responses. The older group, across denominations, noted another of God’s attributes, God’s forgiveness, which the younger children did not mention.

In fact, God's forgiveness is comfortably in the top answers of all groups of children, especially highly placed among the Pentecostal children.

Girls of all denominations and Catholic, Lutheran, and Pentecostal boys were likely to speak of God's love for us, while Presbyterian boys rarely mentioned it. The response that "we all God's children" was very uncommon in this age group. Boys of all denominations were more likely to respond "do not know" to this question than are girls.

ii) Catholic students only

*Examples of the most common responses: "God loves us all – no exceptions;" "God is always with us – no matter where we go;" "God never leaves us;" "God made all the beautiful things in the world and all the people we love."*

"God loves us" was a very common answer for all age groups, with the percentage of girls usually outnumbering that of boys. For children 8 years and older, "God is always with us" was very common, with the percentage of girls always outnumbering that of boys for every age group. "God made everything" was a common response for 5 to 9 year olds, with the percentage of boys outnumbering that of girls; "Bible stories" or "hymns" was a very common response for children age 8 through 11 years, with the percentage of boys outnumbering that of girls. "God forgives us" only appeared after the age of 10 years and was more frequently given by boys. Regardless of age, "I don't know" was always more likely given by boys than by girls of comparable ages.

iii) Implications

We can encourage children and teens to think creatively when they think about God and their own relationship with God, carefully (and non-judgmentally) eliciting their insights about God. As teachers and catechists emphasize God's love, omnipresence, creative ability, and forgiveness for all, they can highlight biblical stories and hymns that present these themes and permit children and teens to discuss them in terms of their meaning for them. Educators are wise to ask children and teens what they *really* know about God – and not just what others have told them. Listening is an important skill for teachers, as we seek to understand our students' perspectives and build upon them. Such listening will also let the children know that they have something to teach us, just as we have something to teach them.

#### **IV. Discussion**

In terms of the ways that they think about God, children of the same gender and age are more alike than dissimilar, regardless of their denomination.

For the most part, girls tend to focus on themes of love and caring, while boys tend to focus on themes of power and creation. It is important that teachers not buy into these gender differences, because God is all of these things, and children of both genders need to appreciate that.

Because boys were much more likely to respond “don’t know” to the various questions than were girls, teachers and catechists can make an effort to elicit more spontaneous responses from boys. Frequently, in religious education classes, the girls are far more verbal than the boys, with teachers rewarding them for their participation. In some cases, boys might take the easy way out by shrugging their shoulders or saying “don’t know,” if they think that they will look foolish if they respond with the answer on their minds. Teachers can try to minimize that bias by focusing on their students’ views.

The questions in this questionnaire found some age-specific responses and some stereotypically gender-specific responses. As far as age-specific responses, teachers and catechists can always strive to have children to respond beyond what they think is expected by encouraging and rewarding creativity. Children might be more likely to think in a concrete fashion in their early elementary school years compared to an increasingly abstract fashion as they mature. Although teachers must respect that, in calling forth answers that are less concrete, teachers and catechists permit children to expand their understanding of God and God’s ways with the world. Because this was a common theme for older children and teens, teachers and catechists can spend some time on the sinfulness of human beings and lost innocence, helping their students to *really* believe that all is not lost, since God’s love never fails.

As far as some gender-specific responses (e.g., girls tend to emphasize God’s love and care, while boys tend to emphasize God’s power and kingship), teachers can encourage all children and teens to appreciate God’s love and power (or creative ability) simultaneously, since they really are not at odds with each other, as some stereotypical responses might lead one to believe. For example, God’s love is demonstrated through God’s creative ability. Again, teachers can listen to students’ own ideas, permitting those ideas to evoke discussions or act as lead-in points to certain lessons. Even as we lead children, they can lead us to become more committed to our faith.

As far as some denominational differences, there were more commonalities than differences, but two differences bear mentioning. First, although most children, especially the younger ones, were likely to mention the “Our Father” as one of the prayers that God would most want to hear, only Catholic children mentioned other standard prayers, such as the “Hail Mary” and “Glory Be.” This is not surprising because of the importance of such prayers in the Catholic tradition.

Second, although for most of the children completing the survey, themes of God's love and care were highly prevalent, for other children, themes of God's power and reign were mentioned more frequently than love and care. In addition, while most children felt that God's special secret was to love God or each other, some children, especially many of the Pentecostal children, felt that the secret was related to the need for us to believe in or listen to God and to obey him. These differences can be especially confusing for children from bi-denominational homes, as one parent emphasizes one image of God, while the other parent emphasizes another. Teachers and catechists can help children understand that God's attributes are not at odds with each other, even though it seems so.

Such denominational differences do not necessarily interfere with engaging in ecumenical activities. This study demonstrates that, although there are differences in responses among the children, most children understand God's love, and most can articulate that we should all be good to others. What perfect motivations for engaging in service to others! Projects that enlist children's sense of God's love and how we love God and others in return are likely to be successful. Such projects can include bagging groceries for the poor, drawing cards for shut-ins, reading Bible stories into a tape recorder for those who cannot read, visiting residents of a senior housing facility, cleaning up the neighborhood, among others. The world and all the people, animals, and things within it belong to God, and we belong to each other, as well. That message need not have any denominational overtones, especially if we begin such activities with the "Our Father," a clear reminder of our membership in God's family. The earlier we can give our children the message that we belong to God and to each other, the more likely they are to grow in their love of God and others, to experience security in their faith, and to become ecumenically sensitive adults.